



# INDIE

## A History

The Interdependence  
of Independents

Celia Pearce

with photos by Scott Chamberlin & Friends

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For my play guru  
Bernie De Koven



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# Introduction: One of Many Stories

This book, much like IndieCade itself, has been a labor of love. The task of trying to capture the first dozen years of IndieCade was far more daunting than I’d imagined—so daunting, in fact, that this book surpassed its original deadline by two years. As both a participant and a scholar, I found surveying the massive amount of “lived data” that comprises IndieCade’s history to be an epic undertaking. Combing through the thousands of games and hundreds of people who have contributed to IndieCade was a reminder of how much we have grown: from early brainstorming sessions in Stephanie Barish’s parents’ living room to the one-room gallery exhibition that marked our first juried Festival to the exponential growth of the “indie bubble” to the current shifts taking place as of this writing.

It’s also reminded me that IndieCade is, first and foremost, a community. There are hundreds of people who have poured their hearts and souls into IndieCade, including individual gamemakers taking risks to push the boundaries of their medium, presenters sharing their ideas and experiences with the larger IndieCade brain trust, and collaborators whose (mostly volunteer) labor in organizing events has matched the level of innovation and attention that they put into creating their own games. IndieCade exists today because of those people and their creativity and commitment. After all, IndieCade is an “all boats rise” enterprise whose goal is to reward and cultivate innovation—something that requires a lot of people and a lot of heart.

Before diving in, I want to introduce a few caveats and clarify my authorial perspective. As one of the founders of IndieCade, I have a biased perspective of its history. However, I am also a scholar of games. For the entirety of my involvement in IndieCade, I’ve had a “day job” as a university professor who is known for creating unconventional collaborative games and conducting ethnographic research of game communities. As such, I am keenly aware that my research and knowledge are highly situated.

All that said, I’m also certain that this particular book could only have been written by an insider. It offers an “under the hood” perspective of IndieCade that is informed by my experience as a researcher of play communities (or, as I like to say, a “fan fan”). Although there are plenty of game scholars who could have written a book about IndieCade’s history (and I hope others attempt to do so), this story includes both the front-of-house and behind-the-scenes aspects of its evolution. I also have a personal interest in placing IndieCade within a larger context, including assessing its role in the indie game ecosystem at large.

When I first started working with Stephanie Barish in 2005, we took a field trip to E3, the Electronic Entertainment Expo. As game industry professionals and many fans know, E3 is the behemoth annual expo where game publishers advertise and sell their wares to distributors. E3 has always been a source of angst for me. As someone who started designing digital games in the mid-1980s, I vividly remember the sinking feeling in my chest when I attended the first E3 in 1995. It was loud, hypercommercial, hypermasculine, and violent. What had my industry become? I wondered. The diversity and heady “anything is possible” excitement of the early years had given way to an unrelenting focus on profit. But a decade later, when Stephanie and I visited E3 together, I felt a renewed sense of hope. We talked about how we wanted IndieCade to be the opposite of E3 in every way. How could we have anticipated that just years later, along with Sam Roberts, we would launch our first IndieCade prototype exhibition inside of E3 itself? Ten years later, at our last Festival in Culver City, I told Stephanie, “This is the video game industry I want to be a part of.”

This book charts the history of IndieCade, largely from the perspective of its founders, and the larger ecosystem into which it fits. In this examination, I draw from my own scholarly work studying online play communities (Pearce 2009) to argue that IndieCade is a hybrid community of both play and practice. This is because, for game designers, play is an integral part of practice; unlike most other media, games must be playtested with audiences and critiqued repeatedly during the development process. Designers play one another’s work for inspiration, and sharing our work with peers creates the impetus for improving it. We learn from one another, share tricks of the trade, and evolve both individually and collectively through play. In fact, many games appeared at IndieCade in multiple versions after designers amassed feedback that helped improve the final product. This feedback loop taking place within a “community of play and practice” is key to IndieCade’s role and is perhaps the most difficult aspect to codify.



In *Communities of Play* (2009), I described the virtual world inhabited by players as an “ecosystem.” In this book, I analyze the larger indie game ecosystem through which gamemakers circulate, the interdependency of its various elements, and IndieCade’s role as a cultural intermediary that brings these elements together. The indie ecosystem is complex and in flux, with a constantly changing center of gravity. Here, I attempt to describe this ecosystem and its components in terms of their interplay with both one another and IndieCade itself. I also attempt to capture the character of each IndieCade event—38 in all, over 12 years—as well as the prevailing trends of each year.

Although this book covers a lot of information, it is still narrow in scope. Because I wanted it to be accessible to a broad audience, it isn’t particularly theoretical, though it does draw on contributions from indie game studies (those interested can find their way to that excellent work via the references throughout this book). Additionally, this book doesn’t capture the hundreds of stories from individuals and teams whose career trajectories intersected with IndieCade. While many of these narratives are touched upon, it became clear early on that these stories warranted a book in and of themselves. (The IndieCade Alumni Committee is currently collecting material that will be integrated into this book’s sequel: *IndieCade Stories*. Stay tuned, and if you have a story to contribute, let us know!)

The main takeaway I hope readers garner from this book is that, despite its rapid growth over the past twelve years, IndieCade continues to be an independent enterprise. We still work out of our kitchens, have few paid employees, and struggle with the same sustainability challenges as the developers we represent. We are not owned by a giant corporation, and we are not in it for the money. We have had to weather the same ups and downs as our peers, and we have no exit strategy. Through the ebbs and flows of the indie ecosystem, IndieCade remains a labor of love—and we expect that to continue for decades to come.



# The Evolution of the Indie Ecosystem

**In the beginning...** In the 1970s and early 1980s, it can be argued, all video game companies were independent. Atari and Nintendo were the Lumière brothers and Mélièses of their day, inventing the technology and content simultaneously (Murray 2011). But by 2005, when IndieCade was first conceived, the video game industry had become a victim of its own success (Juul 2019). Resembling the film industry of the 1930s, the standard career path was to sign on to the staff of a major studio, where all intellectual property was studio owned. There was little of the talent-driven free agency we see now in films, where creators work on a contract basis and some get a stake in the revenue that their work generates.

Due to the physical nature of CD-ROMs and console games, video game distribution depended on limited shelf space in brick-and-mortar retail stores, giving studios a tight grip on both content and delivery platforms. Console companies, followed by gaming PC companies, were engaged in an ongoing war for improved graphics performance, often at the expense of evolution in other areas, such as gameplay and interface design. This was partly due to the fact that, as gaming technology became more sophisticated, games were more expensive to produce, resulting in a culture of risk aversion with occasional bursts of innovation in software (e.g., *The Sims*, *Katamari Damacy*, *Guitar Hero*) and hardware (e.g., PlayStation Move, Nintendo Wii). The skyrocketing costs of software development resulted in a kind of inverse of Moore’s Law: the smaller, faster, and cheaper computers became, the longer, more expensive, and more labor-intensive the software development process (Pearce 1997; Jenkins 2006a).

By 2000, “with global annual sales approaching \$20 billion and wide public awareness leading up to the PlayStation 2 launch . . . many game developers shared a belief that the video game industry had failed . . . become altogether too large and unwieldy, too dehumanizing of its workers, too anonymous, too narrowly masculine, incapable of creating even modestly interesting video games” (Juul 2019). It was against this backdrop that the move toward a new kind of independence began to take shape. In *The Scratchware Manifesto*, first published anonymously in 2000, developer Greg Costikyan criticized the game industry:

*Instead of serving creative vision, it suppresses it. Instead of encouraging innovation, it represses it. Instead of taking its cue from our most imaginative minds, it takes its cue from the latest month’s PC Data list. Instead of rewarding those who succeed, it penalizes them with development budgets so high and royalties so low that there can be no reward for creators. Instead of ascribing credit to those who deserve it, it seeks to associate success with the corporate machine. It is time for a revolution.* (Costikyan 2000)

This sentiment was by no means exceptional, even from within the industry. In response to a call for the video game equivalent of Sundance by Alex Dunne, editor in chief of *Game Developer* magazine, the Game Developers Conference launched the Independent Game Festival (IGF) in 1999 (Juul 2019). In 2002, the Experimental Gameplay Workshop was introduced at the conference, the same year that saw the inaugural Ludum Dare, the forebear to the modern game jam, where people come together in a compressed time frame to create games. In 2003, Valve launched its Steam online video game distribution platform, whose success was fueled in part by mods—games created from other games—like *Counter-Strike* and *Narbacular Drop*, which became *Portal*. Two years later, Costikyan launched Manifesto Games, a kind of United Artists for game developers. All of these emancipatory moves served to free game creators from the yoke of hegemonic capitalism. At the same time, they also recapitulated some of the same industry problems from which they strived to be free. (Lipkin 2013; O’Donnell 2014; Browne 2015)

Around the same time, the “Casual Revolution” took off (Juul 2010), fueled partly by studios operating outside of the mainstream console industry. In the spirit of perhaps the mother of all casual games, *Tetris*, these games reminded players that simple experiences could be both appealing and addictive, while significantly broadening the audience for games. Players no longer fit into the classic stereotype of teenage boys; older women soon became the fastest-growing gamer demographic (Pearce 2008). It’s important to note that this particular flavor of revolution came from *within* the game industry. But there were also simultaneous stirrings in other fields, notably fine arts and academia.

Since then, there have been as many debates on the meaning of “indie” as there have been on the word “game.” The simplest definition is the original put forth by the Independent Game Festival when it was founded in 1999: “An indie game is one that was made without funding from a major publisher; in other words, without help from a member of the Entertainment Software Association (ESA)”. As broad as this definition might seem, it soon became supplanted by unwritten rules of exclusion from within the larger community. At various points, casual games, artgames, mods, student games, games made by professors, documentary games, and even mobile games did not somehow count as indie (Jenkins 2006a). Meanwhile, many indie games were excluded not because they weren’t indie but because they weren’t “games.”

Some argue that indie has become a stylistic conceit: a euphemism for games broadcasting a low-budget focus on gameplay or narrative innovation through low-fidelity or highly stylized graphics or novel uses of technology (Juul 2014, 2019). To some extent, this is correct. Many people consider thatgamecompany, creators of *Flower* and *Journey*, to be an indie studio even though the company launched with an exclusive three-game deal with Sony. Overall, consumers seem to understand indie more as an ethos than as a business model. However, it’s important to understand that indie is a constantly changing concept and more of an ideology than a destination. As activist game designer and scholar Paolo Pedercini of Molleindustria described it in his 2012 IndieCade talk, indie is “not a status but a tension and a direction to pursue” (Pedercini 2012).

Regardless of how anyone defines indie, it’s undeniable that there is now a full-fledged independent game movement. In fact, according to multiple surveys, close to half of game developers self-identify as indie (Edwards et al. 2014; Legault and Weststar 2016). In a relatively short period, there has been a major move away from the studio-based model that dominated during IndieCade’s inception. Despite recent anxieties about the so-called “indiepocalypse,” the indie game scene has taken as much of a central stage as the indies of the music and movie industries. As with film and video, we are also witnessing creators move among different modes, genres, and contexts—mods becoming mainstream, artgames being published on consoles, indie games getting acquired by big studios, and so-called Triple-A developers “going indie.”

All of these developments—the evolution of the definition of indie, the relationship of indie developers to other stakeholders in the game industry, and changes in economic and funding structures, distribution channels, and creation stories—have all driven the growth of a larger and more dynamic indie ecosystem, which has, in turn, served to propagate the indie game scene. It would be impossible to tell the IndieCade story without taking this larger ecosystem—with which it is inextricably interwoven—into account.

In essence, we are seeing the emergence of an indie history of sorts, of which IndieCade is an integral part. On the journalistic side, accounts of this history tend to focus on the heroic narrative of the lone, white male auteur suffering for his art (Juul 2019). This storyline is typified in documentary films such as *Indie Game: The Movie* (Pajot and Swirsky 2012) and *Surviving Indie* (Cook 2016), as well as in books like Cara Ellison’s *Embed with Games: A Year on the Couch with Game Developers* (Ellison 2016). These narratives have been key in raising awareness of indie games and highlighting the accomplishments of influencers in the field, but they have also been criticized for glossing over the larger techno-cultural frameworks in which independent games are made, and for reinforcing stereotypes (Keogh 2015; Juul 2019). Scholars have pointed out that the precarity and paucity of resources available to indies propels them toward “cultural intermediaries” and communal frameworks of mutual support (Bourdieu 1984; Parker, Whitson, and Simon), a category into which IndieCade clearly falls. Interestingly, films that *do* show gamemakers in a community context—such as *GameLoading: Rise of the Indies* (Brady and Francois 2015) or *Game Jam: The Movie* (S. Conditt and Tremp 2018)—depict developers as happier and more satisfied than those focusing on lone-developer narratives. This may be because stories about lone creators fit into classic suffering artist tropes and provide more narrative drama, even if they only represent one facet of the indie gamemaking experience.

Crucially, the story of independence is also one of interdependence. Independent games form a counterpoint to the capitalist mainstream, which values secrecy and proprietary intellectual property. In contrast, indies rely heavily on community for both survival and inspiration, and, more broadly, are entangled in a larger web of interdependencies, which have enabled their craft to become a major force in the video game and media industries. This interdependence is central to the story of IndieCade, which has served a vital role in integrating and amplifying the various contributing factors of the indie ecosystem.

## Indie Ecosystem: Contributing Factors

It’s much easier to tell a story about individuals than one about systems, and harder still to tell a story about the connection between the two. This book aims to chart the history of IndieCade within the larger evolution of indie games: one of many contributing factors to a radical change in the landscape over the past decade-plus. This collage of interdependent subsystems (Deleuze 1987; Joseph 2013; Parker 2013) operates in a synergistic fashion to create a larger ecosystem in which indie developers circulate. The IndieCade story cannot be told in isolation since its role has largely served to bring together and bolster other parts of this ecosystem. Although IndieCade falls within one of the ten contributing factors below, it also intersects with *all* of them, as well as facilitating intersections *among* them.

### Games as Art

“Art” is a subjective term that hovers somewhere between personal taste and cultural cachet. The mid-2000s saw a debate—tellingly, among film industry luminaries—as to whether video games were an art form. In a 2004 *Time* magazine article, Steven Spielberg was quoted during a talk at USC’s Game Innovation Lab, saying, “I think the real indicator will be when somebody confesses that they cried at Level 17” (Grossman 2004). Film critic Roger Ebert famously—and repeatedly—asserted that video games as a medium could never be an art form (Ebert 2005). He later admitted to having little exposure and perhaps being unqualified to critique video games, but continued to defend his position nonetheless (Ebert 2010). It’s important to note that neither Spielberg nor Ebert provided a clear definition of the word “art” or made a distinction between “art” and “art forms.” It seems shortsighted to assess the artistic merits of a medium independently of its content, especially considering that cinema met with similarly dismissive attitudes in its infancy.

The term “artgames” has been widely adopted to describe games whose primary purpose is expression rather than commercial gain (Pearce 2006a; Bittanti and Quaranta 2006; Schrank 2014; Sharp 2015a). These differ from what John Sharp calls “game art” (2015a), or media art practices that use game tropes and technology but are not themselves games—such as Cory Arcangel’s widely exhibited *Super Mario Clouds*. While both artgames and game art appear in galleries, museums, and alternative exhibition spaces—in turn bestowing them with cultural cachet—artgames are intrinsically *games*. They are interactive and dynamic (whereas *Super Mario Clouds* is experienced as a passive installation). The position of artgames is not unlike that of video art from the 1970s in that both use a popular medium for artistic ends. In both, the merger of low culture and high art creates an avant-garde confrontation within a unique cultural context. Notably, some video art practices, such as Nam June Paik’s video walls—originally created as art installations—have been adopted for a variety of entertainment and commercial uses.

The earliest artgames have been traced to the mid-1980s (Sharp 2015a), but it wasn’t until the late 1990s that a generation of art school grads who identified games as their medium of choice built enough momentum to create a movement. Online collections started popping up, including 1998’s *Select Parks* by Australian artist/curators Julian Oliver and Rebecca Cannon, and 1999’s *Cracking the Maze* by Anne-Marie Schleiner. As curators and art historians took interest in games, they began appearing in digital art exhibitions, such as The Whitney’s *BitStreams* and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art’s *010101: Art in Technological Times*, both in 2001. Games even garnered their own exhibitions, such as the Cannon-curated artgame exhibition *Trigger: Game Art* in Melbourne, and the Barbican’s *Game On*, which mostly focused on mainstream games (King 2002). Other cultural institutions such as the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Museum of the Moving Image in New York, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), Canada’s Banff New Media Institute, ZKM in Germany, and the Ars Electronica Festival in Linz, Austria pioneered bringing games to the art world.

At the same time, a handful of museums and historians, notably New York’s Museum of the Moving Image and Stanford University’s video game history project (led by Henry Lowood), began collecting and archiving video games. These trends, along with the coming of age of game players, contributed to broader general acceptance and positive perception of video games.

### Policy and Public Perception

The advancement of the public perception of games has been no trivial endeavor. Since their inception, video games have faced constant political and legal assault, usually serving as a straw man for concerns about gun violence. Prominent US politicians from all sides have called for government censorship of games, even for a time placing them under the purview of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives. With each new mass shooting, American game scholars have found themselves countering disproven anxieties (The Bronfenbrenner Center 2018; Associated Press 2019; Markman 2019), often fanned by the National Rifle Association, that video games cause real-world violence.

The Interactive Digital Software Association (IDSA) formed in 1994 as an advocacy and lobbying group for the video game industry to shield games from censorship. Its impetus and role were similar to those of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), which formed in 1922 to protect the film industry from censorship. Six months after it formed, the IDSA—later renamed the Entertainment Software Association (ESA)—launched the ESRB rating system which now emblazons all commercial video games. In 1995, the organization launched E3, the Electronic Entertainment Expo, the largest industry convention devoted solely to game software and technology.

To improve the public perception of video games, the ESA enlisted the aid of academia and became the first industry organization to sponsor academic game conferences in the United States, in addition to being an early supporter of IndieCade. Reframing video games as a relevant art form worthy of academic study and public exhibition elevated games’ status while placing them in the legal realm of protected free expression. Academics also lent their expertise to this fight by contributing to amicus briefs and other legal documents used to stave off game censorship in a number of court cases.

Generational shifts have also been a factor in the evolving indie ecosystem. Baby boomers both invented and (ironically) fueled anxiety about video games, Generation X grew up playing them, and millennials and Generation Z grew up playing them with their parents. Nevertheless, it wasn’t until 2011 that the US Supreme Court protected video games as free speech under the First Amendment. Still, it’s a fairly quick turnaround considering that films didn’t earn that status in America until 1952 (Jowett 1996)!

### Games and Academia

As maligned as it often is, academia has been as crucial to laying the fertile ground for the indie boom as it was to the film industry of the 1960s and 1970s. The early years of game academia reflected the interdisciplinary nature of the field, emerging through domains as varied as games, film and theatre, computer science, literature and humanities, and fine art, sometimes combined with design.

The first group (a category in which I count myself) saw a dearth of innovation and chose to pursue game design within academia to strategically advance the field. In fact, many academic labs were established for the explicit purpose of creating an independent arm for a stagnating industry; for game industry veterans, academic spaces provided a stable base of operations, an enthusiastic community of practice, and a training ground for the next generation of gamemakers. In this way, academia served as a radical intervention from creators who had access to professional technology but none of the trappings of commercial pressures—all within a discourse of critical thinking around genres of play, representation, and inclusive practice. Due to the fact that games did not exist yet as an academic discipline, these individuals tended to embed themselves within established disciplines, often through connecting some of the domains mentioned above.

Schools of cinema seemed like a natural home for game design (after all, they were already in the business of training content creators). In fact, many scholars with film backgrounds consciously modeled their programs on the academic insurgency that took place in their home discipline a half-century earlier. USC’s Interactive Media Program, which grew from and alongside cinematic arts, is a prime example. Nevertheless, embedding games within a film department was often met with cultural resistance from the old guard, who saw game design as a low art, or worse, a computational skill.



## The Indie Ecosystem: Contributing Factors (Con't)

The third group, computer scientists, tended to have fewer moral objections to games and instead focused on computational innovation—including artificial intelligence, procedural content generation, computer graphics, interface design, tangible media and mixed reality, and virtual reality (VR). Some also came from industry backgrounds, and many helped forge interdisciplinary labs, such as NYU's CAT Lab and Interactive Telecommunication Programs (connecting computing and the Tisch School of the Arts), Carnegie Mellon's Entertainment Technology Center (a joint project of computing and theatre) and later, the Expressive Intelligence Studio at the University of California, Santa Cruz. These settings spawned new practices and initiatives that could not have been achieved without a convergence of domains. For instance, the rebirth of VR that resulted in Oculus Rift was seeded in interdisciplinary work in film and computer science at the University of Southern California.

A fourth group emerged from literary and humanities studies; their focus was primarily critical theory and history of games, as well as narrative. IT University of Copenhagen, Georgia Tech, and MIT were among the first universities to host game programs based in these disciplines in the late 1990s. Henry Lowood of Stanford University was also key in advancing video game history as an academic discipline. These scholars were joined by social and behavioral scientists who focused on studying players themselves ("player studies"). Although some were makers, by and large the earliest thinkers in this realm came out of academia. They focused on elevating the discourse and cultural cachet of games, in turn making major contributions to the evolution of game criticism while deepening our understanding of the behavioral side of play.

Finally, the fifth group's origins were based in the arts school context. These individuals were inspired by game-related avant-garde art movements, such as video art, and were trained by luminaries of video, electronic, and so-called "intermedia" arts. This group was distinctive in that, although they were practitioners themselves, they operated as outsiders who eschewed and critiqued the mainstream game industry, even while adopting some of its tropes. Importantly, this group perceived their work as fine arts rather than commercial design, which greatly influenced its direction. Though not the first such creators, artgame practitioners such as Anne-Marie Schleiner, Mary Flanagan, Julian Oliver, Rebecca Cannon, and Eddo Stern drove the emergence of the artgames movement of the early 2000s (Schrank 2014; Sharp 2015).

Crucially, the rise of game academia was fueled by a generation of so-called digital natives, young people who grew up with computational media as a shared cultural reference (Barlow 1996; Prensky 2001). Hungry for a deeper level of analysis and practice, they fueled demand for such programs, which exploded in the mid-2000s. Even as institutional frictions made for a rough ride for many early-game academics, market factors were in their favor. Students flocked to classes and community events, with a subset becoming the next generation of indie developers and game scholars.

The growth of academia had several tangible impacts on the game industry. First, it cultivated creator communities by rewarding risk-taking and innovation. Second, it became a safe harbor for industry refugees who sought an alternative career path to the mainstream industry, providing them with a new framework for their own practice and positioning them to mentor the next wave of gamemakers. Third, it unleashed a new generation of highly trained, critically thinking game designers and scholars who wanted more from their gaming experience and its discourse. Fourth, between faculty and students, it produced a labor pool to support the growth of independent game festivals and exhibitions. Finally, it elevated games from a low form of pop culture (mostly for kids, and bad for them at that) to a legitimate form of artistic expression.

Ironically, the role of academia in the indie ecosystem—beyond student games—has been grossly underrepresented, not only by journalists and documentary filmmakers but also by game scholars themselves (Simon 2013).

## Game Journalism and Criticism

Critical writing about games has evolved alongside indie games and enabled their advancement. However, as Nieborg and Sihvonen (2009) have observed, the phrase "game journalism" is fraught. They point out that traditional so-called game journalism has consisted of noncritical reviews operating in a vacuum with respect to the larger media trajectory and even games themselves. Furthermore, the field seems to lack any relationship

to generally accepted standards of journalistic practice. Scholars such as Mia Consalvo have noted that game journalism's lack of critique and the presence of commercial ties call into question the veracity of the term "journalism" (Consalvo 2007). Additionally, the demographics of mainstream game journalism tend to reinforce the status quo that many indie developers seek to eschew. This perception has been further exacerbated by industry scandals that beg the question: "Game journalism has ethics?" (Colbert and Hoskinson 2014).

At the same time, the growth of alternative forms of game writing, such as blogs, Let's Plays, and live and prerecorded streaming, have increasingly blurred the line between fans and critics. Twitch celebrities and social media influencers have played a growing role in the discourse alongside academic authors and critics. Importantly, the indie ecosystem *needs* contributions from members of the game criticism community, who often circulate at the boundaries of academia, public intellectualism, professional journalism, and player/user content creation. From blogs and highbrow game journals to academic publications and popular streamers, influential thinkers have elevated game discourse—largely through online channels—by creating a more critical and satisfying environment for both players and creators, who see games as "the medium of the 21st century" (Zimmerman and Chaplin 2013).

Early journals such as *Game Studies Journal* and *Games & Culture*, and more recently, Carnegie Mellon University's book series and subsequent academic journal *Well Played*, represent a paradigm that has helped position games as a cultural force, along with publications such as *Edge* magazine, websites and video series like *Feminist Frequency*, and blogs by academics and non-academics alike, such as *Grand Text Auto* and *Critical Distance*. Video game criticism also intersects with game academia in that it provides an educational path for aspiring game critics as well as a home for academics who write and talk about games.

## New Tools

In the nascent game industry of the 1980s, game creators had to code everything from scratch—from graphics rendering to physics to interfaces. There were no game development tools; instead, each studio had to build its own proprietary software from the ground up. The 1990s saw a number of developments that eased the bar on game creation. These included authoring tools such as HyperCard (used to create the first *Myst* game), Macromedia Director, and Adobe Flash, as well as "moddable" first-person shooter game engines like *Doom*, *Quake*, *Half-Life*, *Unreal*, and *ZZT*, the latter of which became popular in the queer modding community (Anthropy 2014). Indies, students, and fine artists alike played with modding in a similar vein as early video artist experimenters such as Nam June Paik, who placed magnets on televisions. Artists like Anne-Marie Schleiner, JODI, Brody Condon, and Julian Oliver hacked game cartridges and exploited glitches (Pearce 2006a; Poremba 2010; Schrank 2014; Sharp 2015a), and modding has been used strategically by numerous others to produce fine art.

By 2000, a sufficient market had emerged to support an entirely new kind of product: game engines decoupled from individual games. Garage Games' Torque, and later Unity, provided low-cost options for video game development with nominal programming skills; Epic Games' Unreal engine continues to cater to indie developers. Over time, additional tools became available, such as RPG Maker and Twine, which increased access to game creation further by removing programming as a required skill. This led to more people with an artistic or literary background creating games.

Both Garage Games and Unity made overtures to academia early on by offering their products at prices that universities and students could afford—much like lower-cost and easier-to-use film and video technologies (e.g., Super 8 film) opened the door for individuals wishing to work in those mediums. Unity, through a series of clever and strategic moves driven by an underlying ideology to make game creation affordable and accessible, has emerged as the leader in 3-D and 2-D game engines. They offer the cheapest and easiest-to-use tools while supporting cross-platform development between PCs and Macs, as well as emerging technologies such as iOS, Android, and Oculus Rift. This makes it easier for nonprogrammers, be they students or artists, to create games across a wide range of platforms. Today, Unity has been adopted as a standard in mainstream games, along with Unreal, Source (launched with *Counter-Strike: Source*, a game that had itself originally been a mod), and CRYENGINE, to name a few.

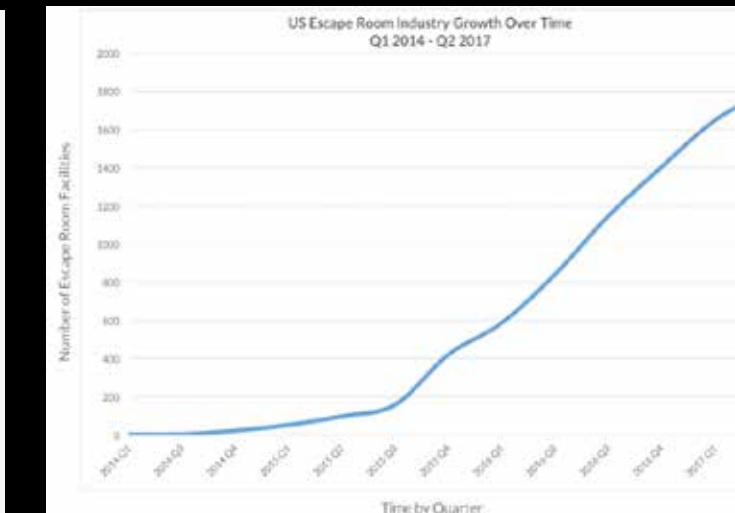
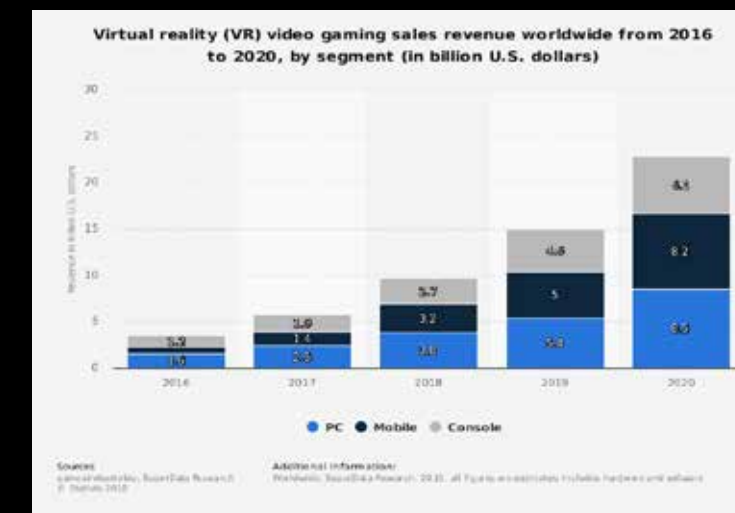
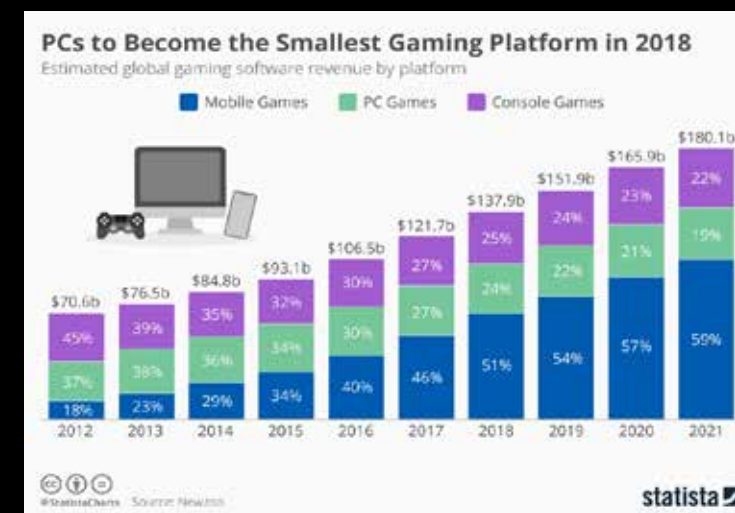
## "Tectonic" Shifts: Changing Platforms

One of the biggest drivers of innovation in the indie ecosystem has been the shifting terrain of new platforms. The biggest game-changer has been the iPhone. Launched in 2007, the year that IndieCade hosted its first Showcase at E3, the impact of the iOS Software Development Kit was felt immediately; by 2009, IndieCade was awash in iOS submissions. The relative ease of publishing in the App Store, the irresistible creative allure of its unique affordances (such as an accelerometer and GPS), and its eventual integration with Unity resulted in a recipe for indie success. Because it was not exclusively a gaming device, iOS also brought indies to new audiences. Additionally, Apple's direct publishing model was advantageous to developers as it removed the publisher-as-gatekeeper model. As of this writing, games continue to be the top category in the iOS App Store, and Apple has (finally) jumped into the pool with its Apple Arcade subscription service, taking a role in both publishing and funding games. The chart at left below provides a snapshot. While games are on a continued growth curve, with revenue more than doubling between 2012 and 2019, the bulk of that growth is in mobile, while console and PC gaming are on a steady decline.

The second major game-changer in terms of platforms was the rebirth of virtual reality (VR). VR's prior business cycles in the 1980s and 1990s had failed to produce any traction in terms of widespread adoption. At that point in time, the hardware was too expensive and the interface too clunky. One of the things that sets apart the current growth in VR (illustrated by the center chart below) is that it is largely fueled by a shift in focus toward content.

In this regard, Oculus Rift has led the charge by taking steps to assure early adoption by content creators on its platforms, including providing actual funds to developers. This has included partnering with IndieCade for both indie evangelization and content creation and partnering with Unity to make VR content creation more accessible. This has also fed VR's mainstream adoption as developers who cut their teeth on Unity for the early Oculus Rift development kits later published games on Sony VR and other proprietary platforms. New platforms also provide indie developers—who tend to be early adopters—with new creative playgrounds, in addition to diversifying audiences, funding, and publishing models.

Gesture-based and embodied interfaces have also been a major trend. Indies, who were already experimenting with machine vision (video-based motion capture), immediately jumped on Xbox Kinect and PlayStation Move controllers when they came out in 2010. Gesture interfaces such as Leap Motion also became an integral part of VR. Going back to IndieCade's first Festival, which featured Julian Oliver's *levelHead*, indies have consistently been ahead of the curve on mixed and augmented reality (AR), and AR continues to be an area of innovation.





## The Indie Ecosystem: Contributing Factors (Con't)

In 2006, as planning for IndieCade was underway, a small team of students from the University of Southern California (USC), aided by professor Tracy Fullerton, landed an unprecedented three-game deal with Sony to form thatgamecompany. This meant they could pursue their artistic aims, reach a broad audience, and potentially have financial success. Although Sony's deal with thatgamecompany is a rare example of a new, untested studio landing a contract with a major publisher, it created an aspiration for many game developers to make a living doing what they loved.

Thatgamecompany's arrangement with Sony was an outlier. Indeed, by definition, indie games must be independently funded. In the US, it has been nigh impossible for indie developers to get the kind of venture funding that is often lavished on other types of tech companies. But as far back as the 1990s, regions with art support infrastructures like the United Kingdom and Australia began supporting artgames and documentary games. Studios like pervasive game pioneers Blast Theory in Britain and Tale of Tales in Belgium (creators of *The Path*) were able to sustain themselves at least in part through government funding. The Australian government was among the first to support artgame exhibitions and edgy art projects like 2004's *Escape from Woomera*, a documentary game about a detention center for illegal immigrants (until controversy later erupted over its government-funded, anti-government message). In the more culturally conservative US, private foundations like the MacArthur and Knight Foundations have played a major role in supporting documentary and activist games, including the Games for Change Festival. Eventually, the US federal government came on board by funding "serious" games through the National Science Foundation, documentary games through the National Endowment for the Humanities, and artgames through the National Endowment for the Arts, a move that also connects back to the Public Perception and Policy dimension of the ecosystem.

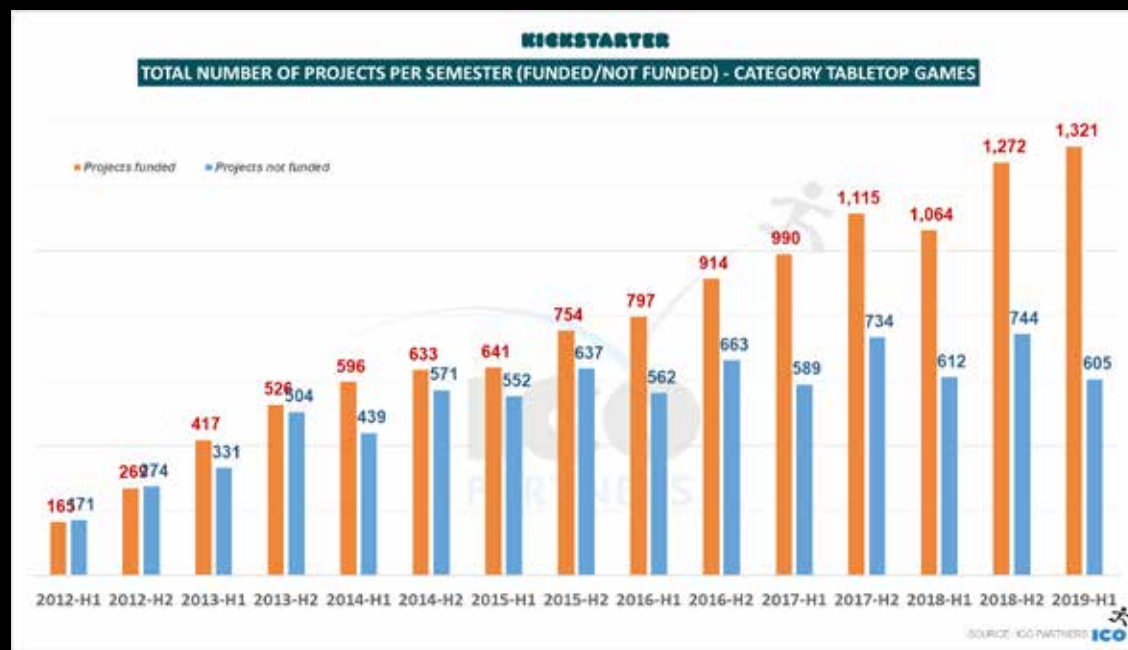
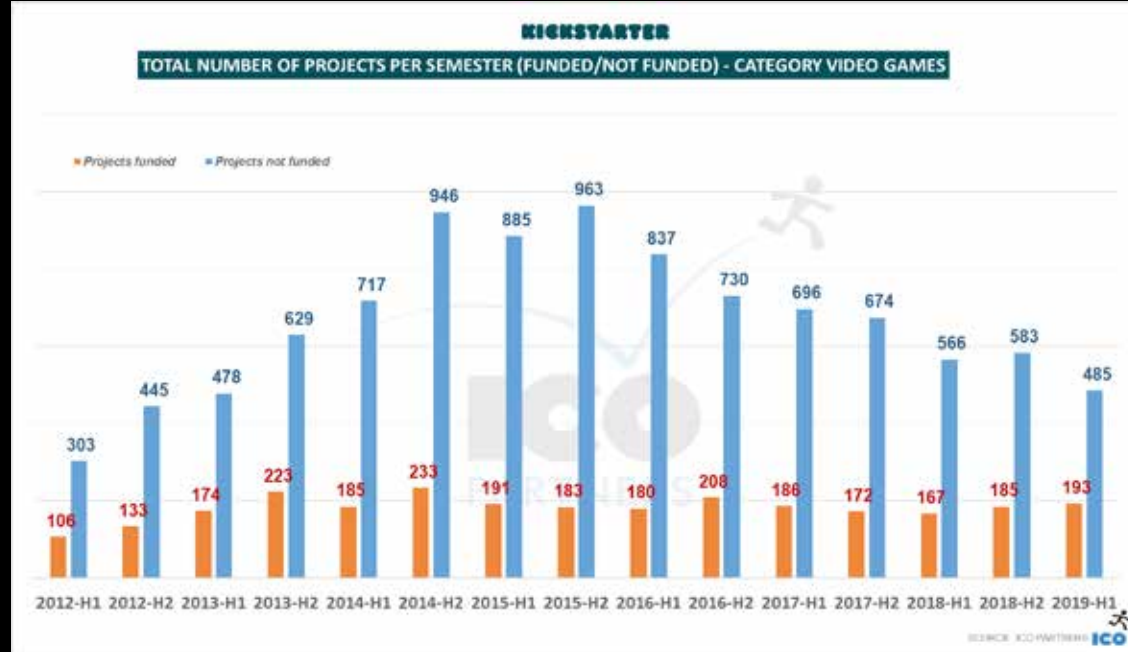
Perhaps the biggest game-changer in the funding landscape has been the emergence of crowdfunding websites. After the launch of Kickstarter in 2009, games quickly became its largest funding category, opening up a new funding avenue for indie developers. Major success stories on the Kickstarter platform include *Double Fine Adventure*, which raised \$3,336,371 (nearly 10 times its original goal of \$400,000), and alternate reality game (ARG) pioneer Elan Lee and Matthew Inman's wildly successful *Exploding Kittens* card game, which raised \$8,782,571 to become Kickstarter's most successful campaign of all time. While these examples are exceptions—both developers have strong fan bases and long track records of success with other games—they created similar hopes to those surrounding thatgamecompany's Sony deal. While crowdfunding sites help with marketing and building a fan base, some have argued that the time-consuming nature of this approach mimics self-inflicted labor abuse found within the mainstream industry (O'Donnell 2014).

The charts at right (Bideaux 2019b) show a few interesting trends. First, note the total increase of video games funding from 2009 to 2018: this represents a 44-fold growth rate. At the same time, the low success rates are clearly out of sync with what I will call the "rate of aspiration," which has risen at a much more rapid rate than actual funding. While game funding campaigns on Kickstarter seem to have peaked around 2015, the number of projects that actually get funded seems to have plateaued in 2013 and remained fairly steady every year since. The dissonance in this aspirational arc maps to talk of the so-called "indiepocalypse," and suggests that, while the number of projects funded had not changed, the relative success rate has decreased due to a major bump in submissions. Notably, a comparable chart shows that board games have a much higher rate of success, and have been undergoing a steady rise over the same period (Bideaux 2019b).

Increasingly, indie gamemakers (including artists) are finding a path to sustainability through diversification of income sources. This includes a combination of contract work (sometimes with one another), grants, crowdfunding, self-publishing revenue, part- or full-time teaching, day jobs, and large contracts or licensing deals with mainstream publishers. Although far less common, an example of the latter is the *King's Quest* reboot by The Odd Gentlemen, creators of *The Misadventures of P.B. Winterbottom*. By leveraging a variety of revenue streams, it has become at least somewhat feasible for indie developers to maintain sustainable careers—although the financial status of indies remains precarious.

In just the period this book was being completed, a shift occurred in which some new players not previously associated with video game funding emerged, including Google and Apple. The case of Apple is particularly interesting because, although games have been the largest category on iOS, the launch of Apple Arcade in 2019 marked a notable shift in that Apple actually began funding games published on its platform.

While a handful of smaller venture groups, such as The Indie Fund, have sprung up, games have yet to build the kind of "angel investor" culture that has enabled the growth of indie films, which are often funded by doctors, entrepreneurs, and small business owners through increments as small as \$5,000 (Sullivan 2016).



### Creator Communities

Although often downplayed in the news media, the communal ethos of the indie scene is attributable, at least in part, to economic precarity (Parker 2013; Whitson 2013; O'Donnell 2014; Keogh 2015; Parker, Whitson, and Simon 2017). Some scholars point out that "emancipation" from hegemonic capitalist structures can lead to a culture of self-exploitive labor; this is played out in documentary films opting for the lone-hero narrative (Pajot and Swirsky 2012; O'Donnell 2014). Many developers have found that joining forces is a good strategy for countering the isolation of independence. Underpinning all game creator communities is an ethos of "autodidactic communalism" (Pearce 1997) in which creators share information and knowledge to support one another. This is the antithesis of the highly competitive, corporate ethos of intellectual property.

On one end of this spectrum are coworking spaces and collectives, which are prevalent worldwide and often produce high concentrations of noteworthy work. Such communities and collectives often have ties to academia. For instance, USC's Game Innovation Lab, founded in 2004, evolved out of the USC Game Design Community of 2002, one of the earliest indie game communities in Los Angeles. The community, and later the lab, hosted early play events like new games days, Surrealist game days, collegiate eSports events between university teams, and Playthink salons that invited industry guests to discuss deconstructions of games by students. New York University's Game Center also sprouted its own community, in turn hosting an incubator, weekly playtest sessions that included local indies, and artist residencies.

Others operate independently but may have loose ties to universities. Glitch City is a collective of independent artists and gamemakers that lunched in Culver City, California, the home (at the time) of IndieCade. The collective is home to a number of USC grads, and has produced multiple award-winning and acclaimed works including *Skulls of the Shogun*, *Quadrilateral Cowboy*, *Donut County*, *Infinite O*, and *Threes!* Others include Boston's Indie Game Collective, Austin Game House—which was featured in the film *GameLoading: Rise of the Indies* (Brady and Francois 2015)—Portland Indie Games Squad (PIGSquad), Gamma Space in Toronto (formerly Bento Miso), and All Day Breakfast in Melbourne.

Wider community hubs have included the Hand Eye Society, Dames Making Games in Toronto, and Montreal's Mount Royal Game Society, which have influenced game discourse and creation, especially around issues of inclusiveness. The Canadian-based Feminists in Games, a community of gamemakers and researchers, publishes the peer-review journal *Loading...*, which featured a 2013 special edition on indie games (Simon 2013). The arts-friendlier climate of Europe has produced venues and groups such as the Dutch Game Garden, Copenhagen Game Collective (whose affiliated studios produced *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, *Sportsfriends*, and *Where is my Heart?*) and Watershed, a UK hub that pairs academics and artists to create new works (Crogan 2015). In the US, artist residency programs such as New York's Eyebeam have also provided infrastructure and support. These collectives share resources and labor, and members often work on one another's projects. Even for developers who work alone, collectives can create a sense of camaraderie and support, and provide feedback and playtesting. On a practical level, shared space is also a way to lower overhead costs and accommodate the cyclical nature of game development.

On the other end of the spectrum is the game jam, an ad hoc, time-compressed creators' event where provisional teams form to build game prototypes. Game jams have surfaced as a kind of flash incubator for new ideas, games, and teams as they throw people together in a highly concentrated time frame—from a single day to a couple of weeks—usually with constrained goals. Game jams can be used to brainstorm ideas around a specific topic, bring together people from different backgrounds and disciplines, or introduce developers to a new platform. They sometimes include awards ranging from money to hardware and software to exhibition, and many games that originated in this fashion have made it to the festival circuit.

Game jams exist at a variety of scales, but the largest one internationally is the Global Game Jam, which has existed for about as long as IndieCade. It brings together tens of thousands of people annually from hundreds of locations across the globe for a weekend of intensive game creation. The jam featured in the documentary *Game Jam: The Movie*, which premiered at IndieCade, included as its reward a trip to IndieCade for the jam winners to show their games (Condit and Trempe 2018).

### Festivals, Exhibitions, and Awards

Festivals, exhibitions, and awards have played an increasingly important role in the indie game ecosystem over the past decade. Loosely speaking, there are three different types, which fulfill distinct but synergistic functions.

**Industry-embedded** exhibitions and awards are juried or curated and typically take place within a larger industry-focused event. The Game Developers Conference's Independent Game Festival (IGF) typifies this category. Founded in 1999, the IGF gives indies an opportunity to be seen by both developers and publishers and to win a prestigious award from the mainstream game development community. Interestingly, over its twenty-year history, IGF games have increasingly found themselves winning mainstream Game Developers Choice Awards, which were previously given only to Triple-A games produced by major publishers. Other industry examples include D.I.C.E. (a mainstream award that includes both indie and mainstream games). The Indie MEGABOOTH, which presents at both industry and fan events such as PAX East, is kind of a hybrid of the ecosystem factors of Community and Events, serving not only as a cultural intermediary, but also as an aggregator to create an economy of scale (Parker, Whitson, and Simon 2017). These events typically have a high ticket price and often require professional credentials to attend.

This type of event has also become embedded within broader media festivals and awards. The Slamdance Guerilla Gamemaker Competition, for example, was briefly part of the Slamdance alternative film festival. Fantastic Arcade was originally launched within Fantastic Fest, an Austin-based film festival. The UK's BAFTA Awards—Britain's media-wide equivalent to the Oscars—also includes games in its purview. Sheffield Docfest, a documentary film festival, also has a special section devoted to interactive works, many of which can be classified as games. These events provide an on-ramp to the mainstream and bring awards and press, as well as exposure to publishing and employment opportunities.

**Art exhibitions** are typically curated in a museum, gallery, or alternative art space by an individual or team with cachet in the art world. These tend to target a fine-arts audience—one that might not be familiar with video games. Often, art exhibitions focus on artgames that are not sellable in the traditional sense and leverage funding through grants or corporate philanthropy to show these works. Early examples include 2000's SHIFT-CTRL: Computers, Games, and Art at the University of California, Irvine (curated by Antoinette LaFarge and Robert Nideffer); the Barbican's Game On and Game On 2.0, which includes both mainstream and indie games; and Trigger, an Australian exhibition of artgames. Key exhibits include the Kokoromi Collective's GAMMA events (short for "Games as Art"), launched in 2006 (Zebrowski-Rubin 2010); NYU's annual *No Quarter* exhibitions, which began in 2010; and Babycastle's experimental game exhibition space in New York. IndieCade has also co-curated or co-located with several exhibitions at the Museum of the Moving Image in New York in conjunction with IndieCade East, including 2014's long-running *Indie Essentials: 25 Must-Play Video Games*.

**Stand-alone indie game festivals** such as IndieCade bridge art and industry by bringing developers directly to audiences, thus spanning the gap between commercial viability and cultural cachet. Festivals of this sort are typically juried and open to the public, unlike industry-embedded events. These festivals can last for a week or a weekend, focus exclusively on games and interactive media, and are untethered to any other type of event.

The mid-2000s saw an explosion of stand-alone game festivals, IndieCade among them. They include ALT+CTRL at the University of California, Irvine in 2004, a one-off festival that I co-organized with Robert Nideffer and Antoinette LaFarge; Games for Change, devoted to activist games, also in 2004; Come Out & Play, a New York-based festival devoted to physical games that launched in 2006; the UK's variant, the Hide & Seek Festival, launched in 2008; and A MAZE, in Berlin, also founded in 2008. Others include BostonFIG (founded 2012); Playpublik, a physical and outdoor game festival in Berlin (founded 2012); Vector Festival in Canada (founded 2013); and the Smithsonian American Art Museum's SAAM Arcade in Washington, DC (founded 2014). Some of these could also be classified as Art Exhibits due to their venues.

Although these three types of exhibitions have distinct cultural roles, it's important to note their mutual influence. Artgames were rarely seen at the Independent Game Festival (IGF) during its first few years, but in 2009, IGF introduced the Nuovo Award to honor quirky, less-commercial indie games and artgames. Over the past few years, games originating at the Independent Game Festival have won awards at the more mainstream Game Developers Choice Awards, advancing the overall visibility of indie games and showing the fluidity of their independence. Other fringe events have similarly blurred the boundaries between more commercial and autonomous events, including alternative game parties such as the Wild/Mild Rumpus event series, Venus Patrol, and alt.ctrl.GDC, launched by John Poulson, a showcase of alternative controllers that takes place as part of the Game Developers Conference.

The influence of festivals and exhibitions has been largely underreported by journalists and understudied by academics. The oversight by game scholars—even those studying indie games—is somewhat baffling since academics often organize these events. The notable exceptions are Parker et al.'s study of the Indie MEGABOOTH (Parker, Whitson, and Simon 2017), and Juul's *Handmade Pixels* (2019), which actually uses festival recognition as a lens for analyzing and defining the properties of indie games. This oversight is due in part to the difficulty of both narrating and quantifying the role and impact of such festivals and exhibitions, the lack of a comprehensive method for assessing them, as well as a lack of both funding and impetus.

Festivals have important characteristics, filling discovery, vetting, and inspirational roles. They are tastemakers that raise the bar on both quality and innovation; provide motivation and spur creativity; serve a market-testing function, reducing risk for publishers who can quickly assess if a game has traction based on festival queues; and bring together individuals and communities to network, collaborate, critique, share, and learn. On a larger scale, festivals, particularly IndieCade, have become a fulcrum for all other components of the indie ecosystem.

*Importantly, the rise of indie games cannot be attributed to any one of these factors, but rather, to the complex circuits of interdependencies among them.*



# IndieCade: Origins

The seed for IndieCade was planted over a decade before the festival launched, when IndieCade CEO Stephanie Barish worked with Steven Spielberg as producer and creative director for an interactive documentary project focusing on the stories of Holocaust survivors conducted by the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation (now called the USC Shoah Foundation). When it was complete, Stephanie began to research possible outlets for the project. At the time, the World Wide Web was fairly new, and most interactive media was still distributed via CD-ROM through retail outlets.

She quickly discovered that, even with its Hollywood pedigree, an interactive documentary project was ineligible for most festivals and awards, which focused exclusively on mainstream entertainment and games. At her next position, as the founder and head of USC's Institute for Multimedia Literacy (IML)—funded by George Lucas and the Annenberg family—Stephanie encountered the same dilemma. “We’ve made innovative work, how do we get it seen? Where is the Sundance of interactive media and games?” she wondered. Stephanie also cites her children, Milo and Thea, as major catalysts for IndieCade. When she set out to launch the Festival, Stephanie was pregnant with her daughter; she remembers feeling a responsibility to future generations, especially girls, to do something to move the field forward.

A collaborator by nature, Stephanie began to enlist the help of her peers to launch IndieCade: colleagues at USC, game industry luminaries, game scholars, curators, and so forth. This group evolved over time but comprised early advisors from her Shoah and IML/USC teams, including Janine Fron, Sam Gustman, Eileen Barish, Kirsten Paul, and Aaron Zarrow; game industry veterans such as Hal Barwood and Noah Falstein (veterans of LucasArts); Philo Northrup (Foundation 9 Entertainment); Jon Goldman (Foundation 9 Entertainment and Skybound); Hal Josephson (founder of 1996's The Interactive Media Festival, one of the first such event in the US); and longtime supporters Tracy Fullerton (designer of *Walden, a game*), Robin Hunnicke (thatgamecompany, Funomena), Kellee Santiago (former President of thatgamecompany and co-founder of the Indie Fund), Carl Goodman (Executive Director of the Museum of the Moving Image), and Robert Nashak (Survios, Inc.). Wearing many hats throughout IndieCade's duration, Scott Chamberlin, a nonprofit fundraiser and Stephanie's husband, took on a variety of roles ranging from financial management to copywriting and editing, to graphic design and photography.

Stephanie and I first met in 1998 when we were both working at USC, where I helped launch the Interactive Media program at the School of Cinematic Arts. Prior to that, I had been designing interactive theme park and museum attractions since the mid-1980s. My 1993 VR theme park attraction *Virtual Adventures* (designed for Iwerks Entertainment and Evans and Sutherland) had won multiple awards, including Best VR from the program that would eventually become D.I.C.E. I left USC in 2001 to work at the University of California,

Irvine, where, in 2004, I co-chaired with Antoinette LaFarge and Robert Nideffer a small juried festival of artgames called ALT+CTRL (not to be confused with the Game Developers Conference exhibit alt.ctrl.GDC), a spinoff of a prior artgame exhibition they had curated there called SHIFT+CTRL.

Although I had since left USC, I reconnected with Stephanie through IML's Janine Fron and Tracy Fullerton, the ringleaders of the USC Game Design Community, which hosted a variety of events there. These included discussion salons and play sessions exploring the “Big Games” movement of the 1970s facilitated by Bernie De Koven, author of *The Well-Played Game: A Player's Philosophy*, who became the group's mentor (De Koven 2013). Inspired by these interactions, Janine, Tracy, VR art pioneer Jacki Morie, and I co-founded Ludica, a feminist game collective. Ludica's philosophy of broadening both playing and making, as well as redefining terms like “game” and “gamer,” became foundational to IndieCade's approach to inclusiveness. The first ideas for IndieCade went through several iterations and proposal phases. Some sources of inspiration included *The Games We Played: The Golden Age of Board and Table Games* (Hofer and Jackson 2003), an exhibition catalog on the history of board games, and the MIT Press book *Supercade: A Visual History of the Video Game Age, 1971-1984* (Burnham 2003), which served as an inspiration for this book and was an early contender for IndieCade's name. Other ideas included hosting the festival at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium and laying the event out like a giant board game. Around this time, Stephanie and I took a field trip to E3 to wrap our heads around current trends in the mainstream game industry. We came away resolved to create something that was the antithesis of E3, with its massive theme-park-style booths, shooter games, loud music, and booth babes. We wanted to create an event that focused on games and creators rather than marketing.

Sam Roberts, who would become IndieCade's Festival Director, had a background in theater as a writer, director, and actor. He had always loved video games, and while studying theater at Northwestern University, he took an artificial intelligence class with then-faculty member Robin Hunnicke. Robin was influential in the indie game scene as a member of the Experimental Gameplay Workshop at the Game Developers Conference. She also went on to serve as the producer of thatgamecompany's award-winning *Journey* and co-founder, along with Martin Middleton, of Funomena with Keita Takahashi, creator of the *Katamari* series.

In 2006, Sam had joined the team at Slamdance, an alternative film festival founded in response to the growing commercialization of Sundance, to launch its Guerilla Gamemaker Competition. Though short-lived, this highly influential showcase introduced landmark titles such as *Braid*, *Cloud*, *Steam Brigade*, and *Everyday Shooter*, whose developers went on to become integral to the IndieCade community. It also contributed to relationships that would prove instrumental in the formation of IndieCade itself.

Sadly, the Guerilla Gamemaker Competition was thwarted in its second year by an incident that came to be known as “Slamgate.” It revolved around *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*, a game by Danny Ledonne that told the story of the 1999 high-school shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, from the viewpoints of its perpetrators. The game became a lightning rod for controversies surrounding games and gun violence, including a growing conversation among academics about game literacy. In spite of the fact that *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* was not only accepted by Slamdance's game jury but also recommended for a prize by its *film* jury—and that the festival also featured a documentary film about the shooting that same year—Slamdance founder Peter Baxter decided to pull the game from the showcase. Immediate backlash ensued. Many finalists backed out of the festival, and a number of sponsors, including USC, withdrew their support (Chaplin 2007; Juul 2019). Although it managed to hobble along for another couple of years, the damage was done, and the Guerilla Gamemaker Competition was essentially eviscerated.

Although IndieCade was, at this point, in nascent form, Stephanie felt it was important to issue an official statement in response to the Slamgate controversy affirming that IndieCade was committed to a fair process respecting the input of its jurors. This perceived criticism of Slamdance upset some people in the festival circuit, so Sam—who was also unhappy with his employer's decision—contacted Stephanie to iron things out. This soon turned into a conversation about Sam joining the IndieCade team, bringing with him the expertise and nascent network he built during his time at Slamdance.

In March 2007, the three of us met in person for the first time at the Game Developers Conference. Our complementary backgrounds and shared commitment to promoting the potential of games as an expressive medium made for an instant rapport. All three of us were admirers of the conference's Independent Game Festival but agreed that there was room for a different, more public-facing event tied neither to the game industry nor to the indie film scene. We wanted something truly independent to provide an outlet for those unique and groundbreaking works that often fell through the cracks at traditional media festivals and game awards. All of us agreed that media literacy, an issue with which we had been engaged at various levels, was of paramount importance.

While at the Game Developers Conference, I was in the midst of organizing another conference called Living Game Worlds II: Playing with Reality, focusing on documentary games, as part of my day job as a professor at Georgia Tech. On short notice, I invited Sam to participate in a discussion there about the Slamgate affair and its implications for media literacy and the current and future state of documentary games (Georgia Institute of Technology, n.d.). Other participating academics included Georgia Tech faculty member Ian Bogost and Tracy Fullerton (both of whom would go on to win multiple IndieCade awards).

The timing and positioning of Living Game Worlds is an indicator of the integral synergy between game academia and the growing game festival and exhibition culture. Tracy Fullerton discussed a principle that had begun to circulate among indie game designers and academics: the idea that “the Mechanic is the Message.” Drawing from the work of media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964), Tracy argued that the core message, idea, or emotion of a game should be expressed primarily through its game mechanic (what players are actually *doing* through the rules and affordances of a game) rather than its narrative and representation (i.e., the pictures on the screen). In the best of circumstances, the narrative, visuals, and gameplay should work in concert, with the mechanic foregrounded as the most important factor. By way of example, she analyzed the highly acclaimed activist game *Darfur is Dying*, created by her student Susana Ruiz.

The game was about the conflict and humanitarian crisis in Darfur, and Tracy pointed out that it used a mechanic similar to the classic 1980s video game *Frogger* to convey the anxiety of running across the desert to get water while avoiding assault by militia members. The experience was altered by the visual representation, but the mechanic itself conveyed the experience. *The Mechanic is the Message* also became the title of a series of games on human tragedy by Brenda Romero (then Brathwaite), starting with *Train*, a game about the Holocaust, in 2009. It was also foundational in Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum's multi-year research project *Values at Play*, funded by the National Science Foundation, which explored how game mechanics convey values (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014).

In the meantime, I put Stephanie in touch with Carolyn Rausch, then vice president of the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), and its president, Doug Lowenstein. Three months later, in July 2007, with funding from the ESA, IndieCade launched its inaugural event: the IndieCade Showcase @ E3, a curated exhibition within the larger expo showcasing the types of games we had envisioned for juried events. The IndieCade Showcase @ E3 became an annual event, and from that point forward, IndieCade expanded to encompass a variety of regular events, including its annual juried Festival (which launched the following year), IndieCade East (launched in 2013), IndieCade Europe (launched in 2016), and a spate of other showcases and partnerships.



Independent gamemakers, like their counterparts in film, make products that can be a lifelong passion, that rely upon the creative inspiration of innumerable collaborators, and that often deplete a life savings or run up credit card debt to create and promote. Like independent filmmakers, they compete for support, publicity, and distribution against established producers and productions that can cost millions of dollars.

An independent work that breaks through can have a powerful creative impact on either industry. But the game industry, unlike cinema, has no comprehensive, public venue to introduce, explore, and celebrate groundbreaking independent work. Worthy independent games, prospective funders, and players hungry for new experiences rarely find one another.

Imagine an annual global crossroads and marketplace, open to the general public — a yearly celebration of this community's new voices and their trailblazing work. Imagine an online community dedicated to the exchange and match making of these innovators. Imagine incubating and producing some of the very best ideas. Imagine thousands of independent creators, developers, thinkers, players, and fans, traveling from across the world to be at the same place at the same time both virtually and in reality ...

Where are all of the independent games?





# The IndieCade Way

## Redefining Games, Redefining Indie

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

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

—IndieCade’s first Festival press release, 2008

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

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

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

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

## A Community of Play and Practice

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

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

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

## Curating Community

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

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

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

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

## Exhibition

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

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

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

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

## Programming

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

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



Photo by Kurt McDonald



## The IndieCade Way (Con’t)

### Sponsorship

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

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

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

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

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

### IndieCade’s Seasonal Cycle

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

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

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

### Evolution of the Submission & Jurying Process

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### The Submission System

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



# 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](http://www.indiecade.com)



# 2008 A Festival is Born



## IndieCade Milestones

First Festival in at Open Satellite in Bellevue

## IndieCade Events

IndieCade Showcase @ E3 Media & Business Summit, July 15–17, Los Angeles Convention Center

IndieCade @ E for All, October 3–5, Los Angeles Convention Center

IndieCade Festival, October 10–17, Open Satellite, Bellevue, Washington

IndieCade @ GameCity, October 27–31, Nottingham, UK

Two thousand eight was a pivotal time for the fledgling independent game ecosystem and marked the start of the console wars for the hearts and minds of indie gamemakers. Jonathan Blow's *Braid* was picked up by Xbox and *Everyday Shooter* and *fIOW* signed on with PlayStation, setting off a rivalry which PlayStation would eventually win, despite Microsoft's attempt to make the Xbox an easier development environment. The mainstream game industry introduced some new noteworthy franchises that year—*Mirror's Edge*, which has since been heralded as a breakthrough for female representation in games, and *LittleBigPlanet* by Media Molecule, whose founders had made the underground indie hit *Rag Doll Kung Fu*. *Portal*, Valve's commercial game based on a DigiPen Institute of Technology student game called *Narbacular Drop*, hit the circuit and won three Game Developers Choice Awards—Game of the Year, Innovation Award, and Game Design. That game company's first PlayStation 3 game, *fIOW*—which originated as part of Jenova Chen's master's thesis project—won the Best Downloadable Game award. All three provide an excellent illustration of the intersection between play and practice, as well as the fluidity of games and developers from between modes—student to indie, indie to mainstream, and vice versa.

## IndieCade @ PAX 2008

The Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) was the flip side of E3. Founded in 2004, it was the first major fan convention devoted exclusively to video games. In 2008, four years before the Indie MEGABOOTH became a staple at PAX, the general public was only vaguely aware of independent games—and pervasive games was its most underexposed subgenre. In order to differentiate itself, IndieCade decided to present a selection of pervasive games with two aims: showcase an emerging genre that was notoriously difficult to exhibit and promote the first IndieCade Festival, which was taking place in a nearby Seattle suburb six weeks later. IndieCade @ PAX included pervasive games, including *Cruel 2 B Kind*, by Jane McGonigal and Ian Bogost, a mobile game where you complimented random strangers on the street, and then-Georgia Tech PhD student David Jimison's *Urban Bingo*, which used common sightings in urban landscapes as icons for a physical bingo card. I used his online card-creation tool to generate custom "expo" editions for IndieCade's Showcases at both PAX and E for All.

In 2008, E3 returned to its regular location, the Los Angeles Convention Center, with a slightly larger version of the summit format piloted in 2007. Again, the standardized kiosks and per-game space allocation gave the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 a large footprint due to the high volume of games shown. Because submissions for IndieCade's first Festival had opened just a few months prior, the timing was such that Showcase games could be drawn from the Festival submission pool, as well as curated from other sources.

The IndieCade Showcase @ E3 2008 had included an art exhibit of images from indie games printed on canvas and stretched over frames in the manner of paintings. Each one was a work of art in and of itself. For instance, we asked Jason Rohrer—whose game *Gravitation* was in the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 2008 in the Festival later that year—to lay out the entire world of his prior game *Passage* as a single image. *Passage*, which was originally created at a GAMMA event hosted by Kokoromi, is a paradigmatic artgame that abstracts the story of a man's life as one continual sidescroller; along with Rod Humble's *The Marriage*, both have been cited as evidence that games can evoke complex emotions. Other canvases at the 2008 Showcase included screenshots from *The Misadventures of P.B. Winterbottom*, *The Unfinished Swan*, *Machinarium*, *Blueberry Garden*, and *The Night Journey*. The quintessentially "indie" aesthetic represented by these works provided a counterpoint to E3's other art show that year, *Into the Pixel* (organized by ESA, the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art), which consisted of high-resolution prints from commercial Triple-A video games.

In selecting games for the IndieCade Showcase @ E3, special care was taken to include those that had been sidelined in other indie contexts, as well as to provide access to developers themselves, who were normally rarely seen at E3. Casual games studio Large Animal Game's Wade Tinney showed the company's successful Facebook game *Bumper Stars*, while Greg Trefry from Eric Zimmerman's studio Gamelab (creators of *Diner Dash*) showed *JoJo's Fashion Show*, a casual game targeted primarily to women that nonetheless captured the attention of the predominantly male attendees, who waited in line to assemble outfits around fashion themes such as Bollywood and Hippie.

There were a number of standout student games that would go on to win awards at the first IndieCade Festival in October, an indicator of the important role of academia in the ecosystem. These included *The Misadventures of P.B. Winterbottom*, a riff on Alan Lightman's *Einstein's Dreams* set in an Edward Goreyesque steampunk world that was later published on Xbox as a result of being at IndieCade 2008. An early progenitor of the local multiplayer trend was *ibb & obb*, a two-person cooperative game that was published by Sony and shown at their IndieCade tent in 2013.

## IndieCade Showcase @ E3 2008

Showing artgames was always fun because it was an easy way to blow the minds of E3 attendees. One example was Julian Oliver's *Levelbead*, an augmented reality (AR) game that required a physical cube outfitted with AR markers to play. As you tipped the box, its animated occupant moved around from room to room. This game was exemplary of the extra effort entailed in exhibiting innovative games. Besides being programmed in Linux (which created its own set of challenges), Julian had attempted to send the cube from Saudi Arabia, where he was located at the time, but it got held up in customs, presumably due to a perceived security threat. Using a PDF template that he emailed to us, I plumbed my designer father's foam collection to assemble a functional facsimile. Los Angeles artist Eddo Stern also showed *Darkgame*, described as a "sensory deprivation computer game" that today would be called an alternative controller game. A local multiplayer game, it featured a homemade tentacle headset that indicated the direction of predator or prey, depending on your role. Other artgames in the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 were Tale of Tales' *The Graveyard*, a classic example of an "un-game," and Jason Rohrer's *Gravitation*, a vertical platformer dealing with the tension between creativity and parenting and the spiritual successor to the game that put him on the map, *Passage*.

At one point, Festival Director Sam Roberts was doing a press interview highlighting difficult-to-show games from a video compilation. These included Blast Theory's *Rider Spoke*, a pervasive game played with mobile devices mounted to bicycles; *Prototype 161: The Lonesko Abduction*, a quest-based mystery game by Inking Productions (not to be confused with Inking Games); and *Block H*, an installation by artist Faith Denham that used the Counter-Strike engine to explore the Northern Ireland conflict. When Sam got to *Dark Room Sex Game*, a hilarious Wiimote-based audio game that simulates an orgy created by students at the IT University of Copenhagen, a reporter commented, "No graphics?" Sam replied, without skipping a beat, "Don't need 'em."

The booth attracted not only press but a large number of E3 attendees. As Kotaku's Maggie Greene observed, "While my first visit down to the IndieCade corner of the exhibition hall was met with a reasonably subdued scene, it grew progressively more crowded through the day as more and more people gathered to take a look at the games" (Greene 2008).

The IndieCade Showcase @ E3 after-party was once again held at Tracy Fullerton's house. Many developers were in attendance, and it was clear that the Los Angeles indie community was beginning to blossom. The mix of IndieCade, E3, and local universities like USC, UCLA, and Santa Monica City College were creating a critical mass that represented several facets of the emerging indie ecosystem, well before mainstream publishers were coming on board. A number of those present would also go on to become key contributors to IndieCade.





# IndieCade Festival 2008

The first IndieCade Festival was an intimate affair put together on a minimalist budget. It came about with the help of Paul Levy, who Stephanie Barish met at D.I.C.E. through his game studio public relations work, who in turn introduced her to Abigail Guay of Open Satellite in Bellevue, Washington, the gallery where the Festival was held. With Abigail's help, we were able to secure financial support for the inaugural Festival from the City of Bellevue, which was fortuitously located in the Seattle/Redmond area just down the road from Microsoft, Nintendo, and DigiPen Institute of Technology.

The entire Festival took place in a single high-ceilinged gallery and included 25 Nominees culled by our jury from a little under 100 entries. The onsite team included Stephanie, Sam Roberts, and myself; Abigail Guay, Open Satellite's curator; Adam Robezzoli, who worked on the website and jury system; his wife, Carolina; and their baby, Dante. Scott Chamberlin, while not present, also helped out with many aspects of festival planning and production. The handful of sponsors included the City of Bellevue, DigiPen (who provided computers and student volunteers), and EEDAR, a game market analysis company headed by former *EverQuest* lead designer Geoffrey Zatkin, one of the earliest IndieCade supporters.

The setup had a bit of a hitch on day one. On the first morning of the Festival, I broke my foot exiting the house to my rental car. My prime directive that morning was to purchase a cable so that Jenova Chen could give a sneak preview of the yet-unpublished *Flower*, thatgamecompany's second PlayStation 3 game. On my way to the gallery, I took a short trip to an office supply store, using a shopping cart as a walker. When I arrived at Open Satellite, I phoned to say I had the cable outside but needed someone to take me to the hospital. Carolina shuttled me there, and I returned later that day to spend the first IndieCade Festival on crutches.

The walls of Open Satellite were adorned with graffiti by local artists, the canvas prints that had been shown at E3 and E for All, and the inaugural Festival poster designed by Jon Burgerman. Colorful children's furniture was purchased to create a playful environment (though it turned out to be a little small for adults). In typical indie style, refreshments were sparse, and attendees managed to stretch one keg of beer over the entire weekend. Jenova Chen's sneak peek of thatgamecompany's *Flower* was accompanied by a talk entitled, "Indie to Mainstream." The *Narbacular Drop* team from DigiPen discussed transforming their student game into *Portal* for Valve, and a comedy improv troupe improvised skits based on the names and themes of games. This also began the IndieCade tradition of having hand-crafted, unique works of art for each award trophy.

The 2008 Festival saw the glimmer of trends and movements that would grow in years to come: games produced within academia, by both students and instructors; artgames; alternative controllers; and local multiplayer, documentary, and pervasive/alternate reality games.

IndieCade's decision not to segregate student games proved fruitful. Many of the Nominees and award winners from the 2008 Festival were undergraduate or master's projects that would go on to receive publishing deals. Richard Boeser's thesis project *ibb & obb*, a two-player side-scroller cooperative game created in Unreal, took the Game Design Innovation Award. The game had a double-gravity mechanic that required players to cooperate from two different sides of the world. It presaged the local multiplayer trend and would reappear at IndieCade 2013 as a PlayStation game in Sony's Booth, along with Ian Dallas's *The Unfinished Swan*, also a 2008 Nominee, created while he was a research assistant in Mark Bolas' USC lab. *The Misadventures of P.B. Winterbottom* by USC's The Odd Gentlemen, whose team included Matt Korba, Paul Belezza, and Asher Vollmer (then a high school student), won the award for Story/World and was later published by 2K Play on Steam and Xbox Live. *And Yet It Moves* by Broken Rules—originally an undergraduate project at the Vienna University of Technology—was later published by Nintendo.

The history of Copenhagen Game Collective illustrates IndieCade's role in the web of interdependencies within the indie ecosystem. Among the awardees at the first IndieCade were two by Danish developers. The first was graphicsless orgy game *Dark Room Sex Game*, by a group of PhD students from Copenhagen ITU, which won the award for Most Fun Game, in part, said the award jurors, because it was embarrassing. The second was Developers Choice Award winner *Rückblende* ("Flashback"), Nils Denekin's final visual communications project at Essen University, created using intricately crafted paper cutout environments. The participation of these two games at the first IndieCade formed the impetus for the formation of the Copenhagen Game Collective (CGC), and the expansion of Denekin's company Die Gute Fabrik to include Doug Wilson and Christoffer Holmård. Collectively, these two entities, their offshoots and affiliates would go on to be among the most exhibited developers at IndieCade, with games including *Where is my Heart?*, *Johann Sebastian Joust* (which spawned the *Sportsfriends* compilation), *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, *Affordable Space Adventures*, *Spin the Bottle: Bumpie's Party*, and many more.

The 2008 Festival also contributed to bridging the gap between indie games, faculty-created university-based games, and artgames. Tracy Fullerton and Bill Viola's *The Night Journey*, with its unconventional aesthetics and mechanics (Leray 2008), flouted the definition of "game" and, as a result, was controversially rejected by the Independent Games Festival. In contrast, the 2008 IndieCade awards jury felt the game was so significant that they created a special award category for it—Sublime Experience.

Another example of how indies were tackling more complex themes was Tale of Tales' *The Graveyard*, also in black and white and which put players in the role of an elderly woman strolling through a cemetery. Along with enlightenment and death, two 2008 Festival games explored parenting, an unusual subject for a video game: Jeff Lait's roguelike *Fatherhood*, which conveyed the challenge of both protecting and finding resources for your children, and Jason Rohrer's vertical scroller *Gravitation*, which explored the balance between creative inspiration and family.

In addition to these Nominees, attendees also included members of the *Portal* team, who were in the process of turning their student project into a commercial game at nearby Valve, and sponsor Geoffrey Zatkin of EEDAR, who had been a lead designer on *EverQuest*. Two future IndieCade Trailblazer Award recipients were also present: Her Interactive CEO/President Megan Gaiser, and AR pioneer and future card game mogul Elan Lee of *Exploding Kittens* fame.

Within its first two years, the IndieCade Festival began to find its niche within the larger indie game ecosystem—as both a feedback system and amplifier for indie games and developers. At IndieCade's 10th Anniversary Celebration in 2017, Jason Rohrer cited the 2008 IndieCade Festival as the moment when he decided to primarily devote himself to game design. During the same panel, Keith Nemitz remarked that the Festival was the first time anyone had referred to him as an artist. Members of the studio Tale of Tales have also said that the recognition of *8* at IndieCade Showcases helped inspire them to continue making games.



Festival 2008 Photographers Unknown





# IndieCade @ E for All 2008



IndieCade @ E for All 2008—the second and last such fan event—took place in Los Angeles only a couple of weeks before the first juried IndieCade Festival in Bellevue, Washington. It featured a mix of curated games that included some that were more mainstream, as well as more novel games with an element of spectacle and surprise. Single-player digital games displayed included *Rooms: The Main Building* by South Korean developer Jonghwa “Jake” Kim (HandMade Game), in which players solved puzzles by moving rooms around to allow the character to progress from one part of the house to the next and which was later published on Steam, Nintendo DS, and Wii. A number of casual games were displayed, such as Gamelab’s *Jajo’s Fashion Show* and Large Animal Games’ *Bumper Stars*, and future indie hits like *Machinarium*, *The Misadventures of P.B. Winterbottom*, Messhof’s *FLYWRENCH*, all three of which had also been 2008 Festival finalists.

There were three of what could be called passively massive online games (PMOG), which generated a score based on your computer and online activity: Tale of Tales’ massively multiplayer online game screensaver *The Endless Forest*, which only ran when your computer was asleep; *Meanubible* by Peter Brinson, a single-player game in which the main character could be changed by high-scoring players, thus affecting other players’ experiences; and the eponymous PMOG (*Passively Multiplayer Online Game*) by Gamelayers, a game that basically played itself based on your web activity.

Artgames, especially installation or custom-controller based games, were particularly important for IndieCade to represent, since these were the types of games that the average consumer rarely had the opportunity to experience. Eddo Stern’s *Darkgame* was one of these shown.

In addition to IndieCade’s PAX edition of *Urban Bingo*, other pervasive games included Jane McGonigal’s *World Without Oil*, a serious game created at the Institute for the Future about the consequences of running out of oil, and Blast Theory’s *Rider Spoke*, also considered an artgame.



# IndieCade @ GameCity 2008

**When IndieCade came to GameCity last year, it brought with it two games that would end up as hits on the console download services in 2008 - PSN’s psychedelic *Everyday Shooter*, and Xbox Live Arcade’s psychological *Braid*. The latter became a critical darling...IndieCade’s selection has become something worth watching closely, for industry and fans alike.**

—Oli Welsh, Eurogamer

The second IndieCade @ GameCity was housed in the Malt Cross Gallery, a location in Nottingham with ample hanging space. The walls were lined with indie game screenshots printed on canvas and paper, including screenshots from games such as Tale of Tales’ *The Endless Forest*, which had been shown the year before, and *Where is my Heart?*, which was included in the showcase. An interactive comic book/fairy tale about a family getting lost in the woods, *Where is my Heart?* was designed by Danish studio Schulenburg Software and would go on to be completed and published by Die Gute Fabrik on PlayStation 3 in 2011. The 2008 IndieCade @ GameCity Showcase also included Anamita Design’s *Machinarium*, which had won the Aesthetics Award at the first IndieCade Festival a few weeks earlier and became an indie hit, along with a number of other award-winners. The exhibition included an IndieCade Artists Salon in the gallery, and IndieCade helped plan sessions throughout the week, giving attendees a rare opportunity to meet and talk to game designers.





# 2009 “The Video Game Industry’s Sundance”

## IndieCade Milestones

IndieCade Festival moves to Culver City

## IndieCade Events

IndieCade Showcase @ E3, June 2–4, Los Angeles Convention Center

IndieCade @ SIGGRAPH Sandbox, August 3–9, New Orleans Convention Center

IndieCade Festival, October 1–4, Downtown Culver City

IndieCade @ GameCity, October 27–31, Nottingham, UK

By 2009, a number of developments had laid fertile ground for the indie ecosystem to flourish. Among the most significant was the launch of thatgamecompany’s *Flower* on PlayStation 3, which IndieCade attendees had seen the previous year. The Independent Games Festival also introduced the Nuovo Award for innovation that same year, creating a niche within the Game Developers Conference for IndieCade-style games. Finally, the founding of Kickstarter would set the stage for a radical shift in funding within the indie ecosystem.

Stories from individuals who had attended events the previous year fueled an increase in both submissions and attendance: the submission pool doubled in 2009. E3 returned to its old expo format, with IndieCade now a regular feature, and the IndieCade Festival moved to downtown Culver City, where it would remain for the next seven years. The return of E3 to its original expo format put IndieCade in the middle of the action. With this transition, the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 lost its scale advantage afforded by the summit format but gained creative control of its exhibition space. Above its booth in the massive expo hall was an IndieCade banner designed by Jon Burgerman. Designed to be comfortable and inviting, IndieCade’s booth came to be referred to as the “Indie Oasis”—a contrast to the gigantic, noisy booths surrounding it, most of which displayed an endless parade of franchise series games. Despite its smaller footprint relative to other booths, IndieCade again had more games on exhibit than anyone else—and the total production cost of all those games combined was a fraction of any *one* of its neighbors’ games.

**IndieCade...the video game industry’s Sundance.**  
—Ben Fritz, *LA Times*

## IndieCade Showcase @ E3 2009

The 2009 IndieCade Showcase @ E3 hinted at the coming explosion of new platforms and genres. It blended Nominees and award-winners from the inaugural Festival with games that would later become Festival Nominees, such as *Where is my Heart?*, *Rooms: The Main Building*, *Cogs*, *Dear Esther*, and *Blueberry Garden*. The showcase also included two highly experimental massively multiplayer online games—*Tale of Tales’ The Endless Forest* and *Papermint*, a colorful 3D world of 2D paper cutouts. iOS games were on display, including *Ruben & Lullaby*, a playable graphic novel by Erik Loyer of Opertoons, and Ian Bogost’s *Guru Meditation*, both of which made innovative use of the iPhone’s accelerometer. Custom controller games included *Mightier*, created by Lucas Pope and Keiko Ishizaka, which used a printer and camera to capture hand-drawn solutions to puzzles within a 3D world. (Pope would go on to create the award-winning *Papers, Please* in 2013.) Also included were two ARGs—*Prototype 161: The Lonesko Abduction* and *The Deep Sleep Initiative*—a genre rarely exhibited at game conventions or festivals. One of the luminaires to visit the IndieCade booth that year was Alexey Pajitnov, designer of *Tetris*.

Diversity, though key to the IndieCade philosophy, could sometimes be a challenge in the hyper-masculine culture of E3. Members of the press typically requested interviews with male team members to the exclusion of their female counterparts, including IndieCade’s founders. E3 had waffled several times on its booth babe policy, disallowing and then re-allowing provocatively clad women as bait for their megaboos. This resulted in some awkward situations at the IndieCade booth, such as *Papermint* co-designer Barbara Lippi—whose friends called her “Dr. Babsi” due to her PhD—being repeatedly mistaken for a booth babe.



## IndieCade @ SIGGRAPH Sandbox 2009

In 2009, IndieCade was invited to create a small game showcase in conjunction with the SIGGRAPH Sandbox, a two-year-old academic initiative to bring games to the larger computer graphics community. SIGGRAPH, founded in 1974, is the primary conference and expo for computer graphics in computer science and film, as well as interactive forms such as VR. However, its emphasis on high-end applications meant that it had historically shunned the low-fidelity visuals of video games, many of which were pedestrian compared to its standard high-end fare.

In the mid-2000s, SIGGRAPH began to recognize the growing significance of games in the field as its own attendance was waning. In 2007, they added the SIGGRAPH Sandbox Symposium, a track devoted to games organized by Drew Davidson of Carnegie Mellon University’s Entertainment Technology Center (who later served as IndieCade’s Jury Co-Chair, Think:Indie Co-Chair, and Well-Played Track Chair) and Eli Neiburger, a forward-thinking librarian from Ann Arbor, Michigan. Dating back to my VR days in the 1990s, I had a longstanding relationship with SIGGRAPH that included roles as a curator and chair of the computer graphics conference. In 2009, Drew and Eli asked IndieCade to partner with them to create a juried exhibition in conjunction with the Sandbox Symposium.

The IndieCade @ SIGGRAPH Sandbox exhibition included *The Path*, *Osmos*, *Akrisia*, *Zephyr: Tides of War*, and *World of Goo*, among others. Games with special interfaces were also presented, such as *Mightier*. Thatgamecompany’s *Flower*, which had been previewed at IndieCade’s 2008 Festival, was one of the first video games to be included at the SIGGRAPH Animation Festival; a hands-on demo was on display at the IndieCade @ SIGGRAPH exhibition.

Computers for the IndieCade exhibit were provided by Disney Animation, which had a generous policy of loaning out animation workstations that had been recently retired. This SIGGRAPH connection set the stage for Disney—which was located in nearby Burbank—to provide computers for the IndieCade Festival just a few months later. The Disney relationship seemed to capture the zeitgeist of video games catching up with high-end film animation.



SIGGRAPH Sandbox  
Photos by Celia Pearce



# IndieCade Festival 2009

As reported by the *Los Angeles Times*, IndieCade's move to Culver City began at a classmate's birthday party to which Stephanie's children had been invited (Fritz 2009). There she met Scott Malsin, who asked her about IndieCade after seeing the Festival's logo on her *Flower* T-shirt. As it turned out, Scott was the mayor of Culver City.

The 2009 cycle marked the start of IndieCade's upward trajectory toward exponential growth in size and engagement with an ever-expanding community. To give a sense of the scale shift, the first Festival drew from just under 100 submissions; by the second year, submissions had doubled to 200—a mere drop in the bucket compared to what was to come.

Culver City had both historical and personal significance to the team. Nicknamed “Screenland,” it was one of the birthplaces of the southern Californian film industry and the home of Thomas Harper Ince, Hal Roach, and MGM Studios (now owned by Sony), where my grandparents had worked in the 1930s. In 2009, Culver City was undergoing a renaissance, including the growth of a burgeoning Helms Bakery District. There was an emphasis on art and entrepreneurship, and the city was supporting cultural projects that would help to boost its reputation as a creative center. It also had the added advantage of being close to local game studios, as well as Stephanie and Sam's homes and my Los Angeles headquarters.

Culver City's small and centralized government allowed the IndieCade team to develop a personal, sustained seven-year relationship with City Hall. In the run-up to the second Festival, the team (mostly Stephanie) attended City Council meetings to present proposals, collect testimonials from local residents and businesses supporting the event, make regular visits to the City's fire and public safety offices, and secure access to private business and city-owned venues downtown.

Culver City posed both challenges and opportunities in terms of spatial appropriation and new approaches to exhibit design. Unlike Bellevue, where a single space had housed the nascent Festival, 2009's Festival was distributed, modeled after an artwalk, although none of the venues where games were exhibited were in any way designed to exhibit video games or even media. Nominees were spread among three very different spaces: Wonderful World of Animation, an art gallery devoted to animation; the studio of Gregg Fleishman, an artist and furniture designer working primarily with wood; and the window-encircled dining room of the historic Culver Hotel. Each of these venues had a distinct style and ambiance, creative constraints, and proprietor personalities.

Fleishman's studio, located at the busy intersection of Culver Boulevard and Main Street, was a longtime landmark in Culver City. It housed the complex geometric hybrid artwork and designs of its namesake, which included furniture and structures of various sizes on, in, and around which we perched various games. There was a large corner space with display windows on both sides and a smaller back room visible through a small portal-shaped window.

Photos by Vincent Diamante



The display window provided visibility but was challenging in terms of monitor glare, so it was used primarily for games with physical interfaces, including analog games, that had a strong visual draw. In 2009, one of these games was *Train* by Brenda Romero (then Brathwaite), which won the IndieCade Vanguard Award. The gameboard—a broken window pane referencing Kristallnacht, the 1938 Nazi pogrom against German Jews—was so delicate that she had to drive to Los Angeles herself from her home in Savannah.

The smaller room housed a video showcase and visually compelling screen-based games that required less light but could be viewed through the portal window, such as Steve Swink and Scott Anderson's *Shadow Physics*, which had been presented in prototype form at the Game Developers Conference's Experimental Gameplay Workshop earlier that year. With its strategically central location, Fleishman's studio was ideal for deploying ARGs like *The Deep Sleep Initiative*, *BackChatter* by Local No. 12 (Colleen Macklin, John Sharp, and Eric Zimmerman), and *Collectible Business Card Game*, by Copenhagen Game Collective, which had been formed by members of the *Dark Room Sex Game* team and Die Gute Fabrik following the 2008 IndieCade Festival.

Wonderful World of Animation, a more traditional gallery space, posed its own challenges: there was a paucity of electrical outlets (a chronic problem with exhibiting in art galleries) and the owners had stipulated that all art be left hanging. The trend in adventure games was showcased in the front gallery with games such as *The Path*; *Dear Esther*, which went on to become a major indie success; *Spectre*, by a team of USC students; and Erin Robinson Swink's *Nanobots*, later published by Wadjet Eye as *Puzzle Bots*. Games in black and white—a trend that year—were collected in a small enclosed space painted red and included two by Tyler Glaiel, then a high-school student—*Closure* (with Jon Schubbe) and *Aether* (with Edmund McMillen)—as well as *Akraisia*, by Doris Rusch and the Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab, which used simple *Pac-Man*-like mechanics to convey the emotional arc of addiction. Wonderful World also had a large monitor in the gallery's display window, which cycled through a screen feed of selected games from the gallery.

The Culver Hotel was strategically situated in a public square facing a megaplex theater, and its dining room featured large windows and high visibility. The centerpiece was *Minor Battle*, created by USC students who dubbed themselves “The Peanut Gallery.” *Minor Battle* was an early innovation in local multiplayer games: it featured four screens arranged facing outwards to form a square, which players had to run around to follow their characters. *Zeno Clash* was an impressively polished adventure/brawler by ACE Team—quite literally a band of [three] brothers from Chile who had been developing its intense imaginary world since childhood. The Culver Hotel collection included the addictive steampunk gear-based puzzler *Cogs* by Lazy 8 Studios, and *Osmos*, also a 2009 award-winner. On the back wall of the room, visible from the plaza, were the stretched canvases that had been exhibited at the first Festival. The upstairs bar, which had a quieter, more mature ambiance, housed additional artgames such as Daniel Benmergui's interactive poem *Moon Stories*.

The Festival's 2009 “Opening Night Happening” was hosted at Royal/T, a modern Japanese-style tea house (complete with maid-uniformed waitresses!) and pop culture gallery located right up the street from the other Festival venues. Using a lightning-style format, developers gave short summaries of the games on display, emceed by Richard Lemarchand, the co-lead designer of the award-winning *Uncharted* series and later a Conference Co-Chair and Nominee.

The conference aimed to elicit discussions that were both practical and inspiring, and sometimes surprising. Conference sessions were held at the Ivy Substation, a former streetcar station that had been converted into a theater by Tim Robbins' The Actors' Gang. Roundtable discussions took place at the Grand Casino, an Argentine bakery and café, and Rush Street, a local bar located kitty-corner from the Culver Hotel. Each day focused on a theme: Emotional Depth and Challenging Topics, Art and Innovation, and Aspiring Game Designers Young and Old. The first two days were professional sessions targeted to game developers. Artgames were a prevalent theme. Offerings included a talk by Tracy Fullerton and Bill Viola about *The Night Journey*; a panel on artgames curation that included Eddo Stern, David Familian of the University of California, Irvine, and John Sharp, who would sign on as conference Co-Chair the following year; and Richard Lemarchand, who did a talk on art and innovation with Ian Dallas, creator of 2008 Nominee *The Unfinished Swan*. A discussion on difficult topics included Brenda Romero and Mikkel Lucas Overby from Serious Games Interactive, creators of the *Global Conflict* series.

A charming panel entitled “A Brainstorm on First-Person Shooters” featured the unlikely trio of Jenova Chen, Robin Hunicke, and Keita Takahashi. Eric Zimmerman had a conversation with scholar Henry Jenkins, who had done a series of interviews with Stephanie during the formation of IndieCade (Jenkins 2006b, 2006c). Will Wright, designer of *SimCity* and *The Sims*, gave a brilliant keynote in which he discussed the early days when all video games were indie, as well as the sources from which he drew inspiration (E. Campbell 2009). This was also the start of indies' blossoming romance with iOS, captured by a session with Nominees Steph Thirion (*Eliss, Faraway*), Erik Loyer (*Ruben & Lullaby*), and Radiolaris' Fares Kayali and Martin Pichlmair (*Radio Flare*). Young developers such as thatgamecompany's Kellee Santiago and the developers of *And Yet It Moves* talked about publishing student games and starting your own company. The 2009 IndieCade gala awards were hosted at the Sony Pictures Atrium as part of its in-kind sponsorship package.

The 2009 Festival planted the seed for what would grow into a full-fledged community effort. For the first two years, Stephanie, Sam, myself, Scott Chamberlin, and a handful of volunteers had done more or less everything for the Festival. By the end of the 2009 Festival, people began volunteering to take over different aspects of the event. John Sharp, then a professor from the Savannah College of Art and Design, and Richard Lemarchand, then working at Naughty Dog as lead designer on the *Uncharted* series, offered to chair the 2010 Conference. Over the next seven years, with the help of a growing number of contributors, IndieCade's Culver City footprint would grow and morph, absorbing other venues and spaces throughout the downtown area.



Photos by Vincent Diamante



## IndieCade Festival 2009 (Con't)



Festival Photos this page by Vincent Diamante



Photo by Vincent Diamante

**...the only event in Europe that IndieCade bothers with... the Fringe of annual gaming events in the US, giving a shine to developers outside the corporate world who are trying to drag the industry away from the cycle of sequels and rehashed games with better graphics...**

— Al Needham, *LeftLion*



Photographer Unknown

IndieCade @ GameCity, dubbed "GameCity Squared" in 2009, put IndieCade front and center with this fan-facing event. Unlike previous years, when IndieCade's showcase had taken place in a gallery, the 2009 exhibition was in a central location: the activities tent in Nottingham Old Market Square. Dubbed "Indie Village," it was co-located with Brickstock, a *LEGO Rock Band* tournament that included a LEGO building area and large-scale local multiplayer games. The IndieCade corner included a lounge area and salons to discuss games on display, including work by European gamemakers such as Tale of Tales' *The Path*, The Chinese Room's *Dear Esther*, and Avaloop's *Papermint*, all of which had been in the Festival. The event also included American games such as *Nanobots* (later published as *Puzzle Bots*) by Erin Robinson and Vince Wesselmann (Ivy Games) and Steve Swink and Scott Anderson's *Shadow Physics*.

Speakers included Keita Takahashi, who had designed a playground for the nearby Woodthorpe Grange Park. The proximity to Halloween meant that there were lots of zombies running around, and even a zombie-themed live action role-playing game.

## IndieCade @ GameCity 2009



Uncredited Photo from Hay's Death Blog



# 2010 It Takes a Village

## IndieCade Milestones

John Sharp and Richard Lemarchand begin as Conference Co-Chairs

Sony PlayStation Home begins sponsoring

## IndieCade Events

Art History of Games IndieCade/IGDA Game Slam, February 6, W Hotel, Atlanta

IndieCade Showcase @ E3, June 14–17, Los Angeles Convention Center

IndieCade Festival, October 8–10, Culver City

Two thousand ten saw transformative changes in the indie ecosystem. Beyond Sony, indie games were increasingly showing up on other consoles, including IndieCade 2008 Nominees. *And Yet It Moves* was published that year on the Nintendo Wii, and *The Misadventures of P.B. Winterbottom*, came out on Xbox. The Kinect was also introduced for the Xbox, an interface that indies would embrace, misuse, and push far beyond the imaginations of the platform's designers. Although nobody quite knew what its impact was going to be, the release of the iPad in April was another major game-changer, and IndieCade Nominees were already exploring its unique affordances. In 2010, the Indie Fund was founded by Kellee Santiago (formerly of thatgamecompany and OUYA), Jonathan Blow of Number None (creator of *Braid*), Nathan Vella (Capybara Games), Matthew Wegner (Flashbang Studios), Kyle Gabler and Ron Carmel (*World of Goo*), and Aaron Isaksen (AppAbove Games) to provide financial support for independent games.

The 2010 IndieCade Festival was a turning point in terms of scale and visibility. After being in start-up mode for the first two years, the Festival was now joined by a new community of people to help build IndieCade into what it would become. John Sharp and Richard Lemarchand made good on their offer to serve as the Conference Co-Chairs and had a major role in setting quality and content standards for future programming.

The Festival itself had grown significantly by this point. The submission pool had more than doubled again, and the Culver City footprint grew to include the Culver City Fire Station as an exhibition venue. New programming categories included Big Games and Night Games (which were proposed and organized by Colleen Macklin and inspired by *Come Out & Play After Dark*), with both focusing on large-scale physical and social games with an element of spectacle. Other new venues included the Culver City Foshay Lodge No. 467, City Hall, and Media Park in front of the Ivy Substation. The city-owned parking lot between the Culver Hotel and Trader Joe's began its multi-year transformation into IndieCade Village, and IndieCade oversaw a city-funded public art program in conjunction with the Festival.

This year also marked the addition and expansion of key sponsorships. The partnership with Sony, which began with its film studios sponsoring the 2009 awards, grew to include PlayStation Home—which became a Premiere Presenting Sponsor—along with Activision and Intel. New branding from Young & Rubicam was rolled out with banners and posters. Most importantly, there was a growing commitment from the community to assist in both the creative and practical aspects of running the Festival.

IndieCade's first round of branding, used in 2008 and 2009, came as the fortuitous result of Stephanie meeting British artist Jon Burgerman at IndieCade @ GameCity in 2007. The team loved his playful hand-drawn style, and over the two years that followed, Burgerman produced IndieCade's first banners, postcards, business cards, and other branding.

At the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 in 2009, the IndieCade team was approached by Alvin Lumanlan from Young & Rubicam, one of the world's largest advertising agencies. Alvin was attending E3 with the mission of engaging the agency in the game sector and stumbled on IndieCade's booth. He immediately became a fan and offered to orchestrate a pro-bono project to do IndieCade's branding. Young & Rubicam decided to run the project as a competition out of its San Francisco office, where Lumanlan was based at the time.

The first campaign to come out of the competition was called "Inspiration" and was used to make IndieCade's 2009 T-shirt, which became something of a collector's item for early IndieCaders. It featured a hand-drawn logo with an illustration of a woman's head swirling with game ideas in place of hair, all in a rainbow-colored palette.

Early in 2010, Stephanie and I visited the Young & Rubicam office in San Francisco to discuss the final branding design, which became the basis for all IndieCade branding going forward—featuring the now-iconic stacked orange letters. There were several other colors offered, but orange was selected because it was bold and gender-neutral. The concept for the branding was that this simple lettering could become the focal point for a variety of different themes. In 2010, the letters served as a jungle gym for an array of characters from games displayed the prior two years, including P.B. Winterbottom himself, the little robot from *Machinarium*, and a yellow *Train* playing piece. This design became the banner that hung over the Culver City Fire Station and is also used on the cover of this book. Young & Rubicam also created a playful "Voices" poster series that included photos of developers with imagery from their games.

The giant Helvetica Neue letters have since become a trademark component of IndieCade's branding, with many variations over the years, including different color schemes for IndieCade East and IndieCade Europe, integration of other images and motifs, and so on.

Two thousand ten was also the start of an eight-year collaboration between IndieCade and Florida-based artist Will Wagenaar. It came about after the artist who had been asked to create the Festival's trophies dropped out last minute. In panic mode, I did an Etsy search for "robots," landing at reclaim2fame. I was immediately charmed by Will's playful robot characters, made from "upcycled" materials repurposed from flea market finds. They combined artistry and technology, were cute and friendly, and each had its own unique personality. I wrote him a frantic message and said I wanted to purchase everything in his store, all mounted on bases, plus commission him to make a few more. He happily obliged, resulting in what would become the signature trophies used for IndieCade's awards until 2017. In subsequent years, we provided a list so he could customize them for each award. His annual trophy-making tradition typically began with an email, followed by a treasure hunt to local flea markets near where he lived in Florida to find component parts: teapots, View-Masters, film reels, hammers, vacuum tubes, old cameras, and the odd vintage board-or-video-game part. Over time, his creations evolved as he added different bases and experimented with new techniques—such as interactive magnetic parts—making each year's crop of trophies a distinctive set. In fact, no two IndieCade trophies were ever alike: every trophy is as individual and unique as the creators and games it honors.

## IndieCade+IGDA Game Slam at Art History of Games

In 2010, John Sharp—then a professor at the Savannah College of Art and Design's Atlanta campus—along with Georgia Tech professors Ian Bogost and Michael Nitsche, organized a symposium called The Art History of Games, which focused on the intersection of fine art and games and included a number of IndieCade Nominees and speakers (past and future). The event took place at Atlanta's High Museum of Art, with the organizers curating an exhibition that included Brenda Romero's *Train*, commissioned works by Tale of Tales and Jason Rohrer, and Eric Zimmerman and Nathalie Pozzi's *Sixteen Tons*, which became an IndieCade Nominee later that year (Pratt 2010).

For the after-party, IndieCade partnered with the local chapter of the International Game Developers Association, or IGDA (which was co-led by John Sharp and me at the time), to organize the IndieCade/IGDA Game Slam. Modeled after a poetry slam, it was a simple, flexible, easy-to-implement format that required minimal infrastructure. The result was an open-mic-style demo session where gamemakers had only three minutes to show their games. There were no restrictions on presenting; the first 15 people to sign up got slots. Time limits were strictly upheld and people were kicked off the stage when their time was up. One of the great things about this format was that it didn't matter how weird, bad, or wonderful games were—you only had to spend three minutes with each one.



October 8-10, 2010

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# IndieCade Showcase @ E3 2010

The timing of the IndieCade submissions cycle was such that the Showcase @ E3 became a testbed for presenting new games and an experiment for showing a diverse array of new genres. Overhead was a banner featuring what would become IndieCade's signature logo and branding. The booth was decorated with posters produced by Young & Rubicam as part of the "Voices" campaign and included images of developers such as the team from Broken Rules leaping into the air, *Papermint's* Lev Ledit, *Cogs' Lazy 8*, *Eliss* creator Steph Thirion, and *The Odd Gentlemen*. The centerpiece of the booth was a lounge area for developers to hang out and play mobile games, which were increasing in number. Visitors chatted and clustered around computer games perched on draped tables.

Variety was the watchword of the event, and the Showcase exemplified IndieCade's penchant for breaking out of the video-game mold. One area where IndieCade set itself apart in this regard was with novel controllers. Taiyoung Ryu's *Maum* was an early experiment with the Mindset brain-computer interface, a thesis project that epitomized the role of academia in spurring innovation. Another was *B.U.T.T.O.N.: Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally Okay Now*, by Copenhagen Game Collective and Die Gute Fabrik, a kind of digital "Mother May I?" local multiplayer game in which players were instructed to do strange things with Xbox controllers (e.g., "The first one to touch their controller button loses"). The game resulted in a vigorous showdown between Sam Roberts and the actor-director LeVar Burton, who had signed on to host the IndieCade awards show in the fall.

IndieCade continued to present pervasive games at the Showcase @ E3. One example stands out for its novel use of the iPhone's accelerometer and mapping capability: *Gigaputt*. This game used its mapping function to create a golf course on the fly in any location and the accelerometer to turn the phone itself into a golf club. Created by Gigantic Mechanic (Come Out & Play co-founder Greg Trefry and Mattia Romeo), it was an early experiment that prefigured *Pokémon GO* by five years.

A notable trend in 2010 was the abstract spatial puzzle game. There were two standouts from the Showcase @ E3: one was Marc ten Bosch's *Miegakure*, a brilliant mind-bender in which puzzles are solved by flipping between the third and fourth dimensions (it would go on to win the Amazing Award at the Festival). The second example illustrates IndieCade's important role as a venue for dialogue between play and practice. Australian developer Alexander Bruce of Demruth showed an early prototype of *Antichamber* (then titled *Hazard: The Journey of Life*), an abstract spatial that used space as a metaphor for life challenges. Although the game didn't make it into the Festival that year, its inclusion in the showcase turned out to be invaluable to the game's evolution. As Bruce noted in a 2011 interview, the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 "was my first time to really put it in front of people and test it, and once I did that, I thought, 'Oh my god, I am nowhere near finished with this'" (Dominguez 2011). The testing and jury feedback he received, as well as demos at other events, led to *Antichamber* becoming an IndieCade Nominee in 2011 and an Independent Games Festival award-winner in 2012, after which it received finishing funds to go on to a 2013 release. In 2013, Bruce flew from Australia to New York to attend the first IndieCade East because he wanted to support and mentor newer developers.

Two examples of adventure games that IndieCade exhibited at the Showcase that year went on to great acclaim and success. The first was the published version of Erin Robinson Swink's *Nanobots*, which had been in the 2009 Festival and was renamed *Puzzle Bots* and released by Wadjet Eye. (Erin was also featured on one of the IndieCade posters as part of Young & Rubicam's "Voices" campaign.) The second game was UCLA student Josh Nuernberger's *Gemini Rue*, an old-school adventure game inspired by the 1990s classic game *Blade Runner*, which went on to win both acclaim and three awards the following year.



In 2010, IndieCade needed to expand capacity in Culver City. This began with a partnership with NextSpace, a coworking space that provided an office, became a venue for jurying, and was expanded to a production office during the Festival. Strategically located at the corner of Culver Boulevard and Main Street, it overlooked The Gregg Fleishman Studio and the giant parking lot that would be transformed into IndieCade Village during the event. IndieCade's new branding, which had begun at the Showcase @ E3, was fully rolled out and integrated into the Game Walk, which guided attendees to the different Festival locations throughout downtown Culver City.

The Culver City Fire Station Headquarters were centrally located, spacious, and offered three giant roll-up doors that opened out to the street. This new location, home to most of the Nominee games, made for better visibility, expanded capacity, and provided a more fluid traffic flow, which became increasingly important for attendance growth. The Fire Station also had the cherished resource of plentiful electricity, which had been in scarce supply in conventional gallery spaces. The Fire Department was thrilled with the partnership and graciously offered to park its trucks behind the station for the duration of the Festival.

This larger, more flexible space allowed for works that were more demanding in terms of footprint, like Eric Zimmerman and Nathalie Pozzi's *Sixteen Tons*, an installation-based artgame that had been commissioned for the Art History of Games exhibition earlier that year and won IndieCade's 2010 Choice Award. In this human-sized board game, players had to pay one another—with real money—to make their moves for them by repositioning heavy pieces of steel piping. Preparing for the installation entailed matching Pantone color swatches to the Fire Station's floor to ensure color fidelity with the stickers that comprised the game board.

IndieCade's presence also expanded in the parking lot in front of the Culver Hotel, a dead space that had been slated for future development. Transformed into IndieCade Village, it became the heart of the Festival. Located at the junction of several major streets and adjacent to a multiplex theatre, it housed the registration area, some of Gregg Fleishman's signature structures, tents, and sponsor displays. Between IndieCade Village and the Culver Hotel was the first in a series of public art installations commissioned by the city and curated by IndieCade. The winning piece was an oversized board game painted on the sidewalk by John Derevlaney, a local resident, television producer, and IndieCade supporter; his *CulverLand* was a *Candy Land*-inspired family game with a special Los Angeles twist—moves were made based on the colors of cars at the nearby stoplight.

Pervasive games, Big Games (large-scale street games that included new field sports), and alternate reality games (ARGs)—all genres that integrate real-world elements, with or without technology—were deployed from multiple venues throughout the Game Walk. While often excluded from other festivals, IndieCade embraced their wild creativity and innovation, in spite of their sometimes-daunting jurying and exhibition requirements. One of the best examples was *The Games of Nonchalance* (aka *The Jejune Institute*), an ARG that attracted over 10,000 players in San Francisco between 2008 and 2011. Because of the site-specific nature of the game, the

# IndieCade Festival 2010

designers were invited to create a mini-installation in IndieCade Village—a mysterious van surrounded by barriers with cryptic artifacts and monitors displaying videos about the bizarre cult around which the game revolved. In addition to winning the IndieCade 2010 Best Story/World Design Award, it later became the subject of an award-winning documentary film, *The Institute* (McCall 2013; Rothe 2013). The Grand Casino hosted *Socks, Inc.*, Jim Babb's Kickstarter success in which players made a physical sock puppet avatar and then went on missions to make media with their creations. Media Park hosted *The Unwritten Storybook*, an experimental ARG prototype by Walt Disney Imagineering, the company's theme park division, in which players competed to create the best fairytale.

The inaugural Big Games program was chaired by Colleen Macklin, a professor at Parsons School of Design - The New School and a member of Local No. 12 (along with Eric Zimmerman and IndieCade Conference Co-Chair John Sharp), and Jeff Watson, a PhD student at USC specializing in ARGs. Big Games and Night Games were deployed from one of Gregg Fleishman's structures in IndieCade Village. The hands-down hit of the inaugural Big Games program was *Humans vs. Zombies (HvZ)*, a large-scale pervasive game that had recently become the rage on college campuses. *HvZ* transformed the downtown area into a giant tag game, with "humans" wearing orange IndieCade/*HvZ* armbands either running away from or chasing after "zombies" in matching headbands. *HvZ* took the 2010 IndieCade Kids Choice Award; its creators would become IndieCade chairs and, in 2017, would receive the first Bernie De Koven Big Fun Award, devoted to gamemakers who had advanced physical play.

Night Games was a giant party featuring large scale physical games that created a spectacle. One of 2010's highlights was *Humanoid Asteroid*, created by a co-founder of the Big Game festival Come Out & Play, Nick Fortugno, along with Sam Strick and Dave Warth. In it, a player is pushed around in a cart while they shoot glow-in-the-dark pucks at "asteroids" that begin as clusters of four people wearing illuminated suits and linking arms; when hit, the asteroid divides into two people, then one, mimicking the original *Asteroids* mechanic of generating smaller, spin-off asteroids that could potentially hit the player. The Developers Choice Award went to another Night Game entry: *Renga* by wallFour, a local massively multiplayer cooperative game in which an audience of as many as 200 worked together to manipulate virtual space stations by directing laser pointers at a shared projection screen.

The Festival also encouraged spontaneous physical gameplay, with USC students Asher Volmer (who was on *The Misadventures of P.B. Winterbottom* team and went on to make the hit iPhone game *Threes!*) and Sam Farmer (who became an IndieCade Nominee) running *Ninja* games throughout the week. Asher had introduced the IndieCade community to *Ninja*, a physical game in which players mimic ninja moves in slow motion until someone makes contact to "cut off" other players' moves and eliminate them. Asher and Sam had the role of instigating and running spontaneous sessions of the game. This became another signature IndieCade activity that members of the community later began playing at the Game Developers Conference.





## IndieCade Festival 2010 (Con't)

On the digital side of things, indies were increasingly experimenting with alternative controllers and alternative uses of standard controllers. The Fleishman Studio's display windows, centrally located across from IndieCade Village, proved the perfect venue for these highly physical games. *Recurse*, by Matt Parker, an artist and game designer who eventually went on to chair IndieCade East, was an early example of a gesture-based machine-vision game that predated the Kinect by several months. Parker later released it on iOS, taking advantage of the platform's onboard camera. The Fleishman Studio also housed Chris De Leon's *feelforit*, which made novel use of the iPad's accelerometer and had come out only a few months before. Nearby, the Copenhagen Game Collective ran *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, a perfect game to catch the attention of passersby through the picture window.

Although the Games for Change Festival celebrating activist and documentary games had launched in 2004, its purview was still not fully embraced by the broader indie scene. IndieCade's 2010 Festival saw a flowering of these genres, including Impact Award winner *The Cat and the Coup* by Peter Brinson and Kurosh ValaNejad, a game in which players experienced the 1953 Iranian coup from the point of view of the prime minister's cat.

At the intersection of activist and artgames was *Every day the same dream*, Paolo Pedercini/Molleindustria's game about white-collar labor and alienation. Created in less than a week for the 2009 Game Developers Conference's Experimental Gameplay Workshop, the game has been described as "a demonstration of why games are better suited to some artistic statements than any other medium" (Alexander 2014). Other artgames included *Faraway*, for which Steph Thirion won his second IndieCade award for Most Sublime Experience, and *A Slow Year*, a collection of four interactive poems by Ian Bogost, which ran on an Atari 2600 and won two awards that year.

By 2010, indie games were increasingly garnering mainstream attention, and there a few standouts from the Festival that year. *Retro/Grade* (later published on the PlayStation 3) could be played with either a standard controller or a *Guitar Hero* controller and took the IndieCade Audience Choice Award. Terry Cavanaugh's *VVVVVV*, which won the IndieCade award for Most Fun/Compelling Game, was known for being incredibly hard to play. *LIMBO*, by Danish studio Playdead, became a particular indie darling for its "film noir" and

"German Expressionist" aesthetic (Koo 2011). It was often cited as demonstrating indie games as an art form (Gillin 2010) and went on to numerous awards, including the 2010 IndieCade award for Best Sound and the 2011 Independent Games Festival award for Best Visual Art. It also made several top lists, including *Time Magazine's* Top 10 Everything list (one of two indie games, along with *Super Meat Boy*) (2010) and *Wired's* Top 20 Video Games (Kohler 2010).

The conference portion of IndieCade also went through major growth under the watch of Co-Chairs John Sharp and Richard Lemarchand. Spread out among multiple venues, the conference explored a diverse array of issues: curating game exhibitions, publishing on consoles, game narrative and artgames, Big Games, and ARGs. Highlights included Eric Zimmerman hosting an *Iron Game Designer* game-show-style competition. Frank Lantz from the NYU Game Center gave a talk about his company Area/Code, which was a pioneer in pervasive games; the studio hit it big with a casual game, *Drop 7*, that was sold to Zynga, the publisher of *Farmville*. Colleen Macklin interviewed *Doom* co-creator John Romero about his early days as an indie developer. Brenda Romero gave a stirring talk describing how she applied the principle "The Mechanic is the Message" to her series of games about human tragedy, which included *Train*, a 2009 IndieCade awardee.

As mentioned earlier, academia became an important component in putting on IndieCade, including through both volunteer labor and financial support. The GameU program was introduced to showcase different degree programs represented by IndieCade's constituents and conduct outreach with aspiring game designers. Initially, GameU included sample class activities from Georgia Tech, Guildhall School of Music & Drama, Savannah College of Art and Design, and the Art Institutes of California in order to give prospective students a taste of the teaching style at each school. In the years that followed, GameU evolved—under the watch of Jeremy Gibson Bond and Chris DeLeon—into a program that included not only educators and students but also amateur and hobby game developers looking for practical guidance and peer learning opportunities.

As the Premiere Presenting Sponsor for 2010, PlayStation Home had its own gallery to show games that had been launched for the platform's virtual world. This unlikely partnership was born of my consulting work for the

division (headed up by Jack Buser and Katherine de Leon), which had decided to open up its platform to indie developers (MCV Staff 2010). A few IndieCade games were ported to PlayStation Home, including *Cogs* and *Minor Battle* from 2009. This marked the beginning of a long-term relationship with PlayStation, which would become pivotal in Sony's play to dominate the indie console space.

The 2010 IndieCade awards were held once again in the atrium of Sony Pictures Plaza. The host was LeVar Burton—of *Roots*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and *Reading Rainbow* fame—who brought a "cool factor" to IndieCade that resonated across three generations of attendees. Burton was also a media entrepreneur who represented the spirit and diversity that IndieCade sought to embody. Appropriately, attendees were given crayons and an IndieCade coloring book to enjoy during the ceremony. The awards show was written by *Los Angeles Times* journalist Ben Fritz.

IndieCade's awards categories have evolved over time in response to the changing landscape, always emphasizing innovation. In 2010, they included Vanguard (for a cutting-edge game), Virtuoso (a game made by one person), Wild Card (something unexpected), Gameplay Innovation, Sublime Experience (originally created for *The Night Journey* in 2008), Amazing, Aesthetics (the visual design award), Documentary, World and Story, Fun/Compelling, and the Jury Award. There were also three "Choice" Awards: Finalists Choice, Audience Choice, and Kids Choice.

In 2010, IndieCade also introduced the Trailblazer Award to honor a game designer whose work had broken new ground in terms of innovation. The first award was given to adventure-game darling Tim Schafer—who had worked for LucasArts and Lucasfilm Games on the original *The Secret of Monkey Island* and *Grim Fandango*—by his longtime collaborator and friend Ron Gilbert. Along with some other LucasArts refugees, Schafer had launched his own studio, Double Fine Productions, in 2000, going on to make such critically acclaimed favorites as *Psychonauts* and *Brütal Legend*, the latter of which starred actor Jack Black as the voice of its protagonist. Schafer would gain further indie kudos by launching *Double Fine Adventure* on Kickstarter, which became the first project on the platform to surpass \$2 million.



Photo by Stephanie Barish



Photo by Vincent Diamante



Photo by Vincent Diamante



Photo by Stephanie Barish



Photo by Vincent Diamante





# 2011 Space Invaders!

## IndieCade Milestones

First sponsored Game Jam

IndieXchange launched

## IndieCade Events

IndieCade Showcase @ E3, June 7–9, Los Angeles Convention Center

IndieCade Mobile 3D Game Jam Sponsored by LG Electronics, August 6–7, USC Robert Zemeckis Center for Digital Arts

The iconic image of IndieCade's 2011 Festival was Jason Torchinsky's art installation *Invasion!*, a series of oversized Space Invader sculptures that "landed" in various locations around downtown Culver City. The result of the second public art competition created by IndieCade in collaboration with the city (Frauenfelder 2011), they appeared at a time when IndieCade was expanding in a number of directions: size, attendance, submissions, geographical footprint, and community. More people were coming on board to help out, and there was broadening participation from a widening circle of gamemakers. IndieCade's complex relationship with the mainstream game industry—as both a counteragent and divining rod—expanded through its Showcase @ E3 presence and its



growing partnerships with Sony and other console makers. Within the larger indie ecosystem, 2011 was a milestone in the cultural perception of games in the US. In May, headlines across the country read, "US Government Calls Games Art," the result of a subtle but decisive move by the Media Arts division of the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) to add video games to the list of media forms it funded. To discuss this as revolutionary in 2011 seems absurd, especially given that government-funded grants for games had been prevalent in Australia, Canada, and much of Europe for close to a decade. But in the US, video games had long been enmeshed in the so-called "culture wars" and served as a scapegoat for gun rights advocates.

Nonetheless, just one month after the NEA story broke, the Supreme Court determined that video games were a form of expression and therefore protected as free speech. These two developments were seen by many in the game industry as a vindication—a sign that the US government had finally caught up with the times and recognized that games were not only a form of artistic expression but one worthy of funding. There was a recognizable shift in the flavor of the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 in 2011. Trends from the 2010 Festival continued, most notably the growth in Big Games and custom controllers. Increasingly, games that had been in the IndieCade booth were now appearing elsewhere on the show floor as published games; at the same time, developers were increasingly seeking alternatives to conventional publishing, such as Steam and the App Store.

In 2011, the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 attracted multiple expo-wide awards, including several for the indie darling *Skulls of the Shogun*, which attracted *Minecraft* creator Notch (Markus Persson) to the booth. The Showcase also featured *ibb & obb*, which had matured from a master's thesis project to a published game on Steam, the artgame *Hobokum* by Richard Hogg and Honeyslug, and *Where is my Heart?*, an interactive comic book by Bernhard Schulenburg and Die Gute Fabrik, which was published that same year on PlayStation.

**Welcome To The Arthouse: IndieCade 2011: A gallery of ingenuity. The organisers have the noble aim of showing the cultural and artistic significance of gaming, which I'm all for, but it does mean there's a lot less shooting and jumping, and a lot more ambiance and contemplation.**

— Adam Smith, Rock Paper Shotgun



## IndieCade Showcase @ E3 2011

IndieCade's Showcase @ E3 stood in sharp contrast to the mainstream industry's frantic race for increased graphics fidelity by featuring a series of graphicless digital games. Robin Arnott's *Deep Sea* was an audio horror game in which players donned a mask that used their own breath as an integral part of the game, and prefigured his later work with VR and sound on Oculus Rift. *Papa Sangre*, an iOS game created by UK studio Somethin' Else with backing from the British public-service television network Channel 4, also immersed players in a story space using only sound.

Alternative controller games were also on the rise. One attention-grabber was *Kiss Controller*, created by a pair of Georgia Tech students: Korean-born artist Hye Yeon Nam (then working on her PhD) and master's degree student Sam Mendenhall. Nam, whose work explored intimate interfaces, adapted a tongue-driven interface for disabled computer users that had been developed by engineers at Georgia Tech; in the game, one user wore a headset while the other donned a tongue magnet, which required players to French kiss in order to control objects on the screen (in this case, a bowling ball from *Wii Sports*). *Kiss Controller* was reviewed as one of the most novel games across the entire expo that year (Pham 2011).

By this point, IndieCade was already known for bringing alternative genres, including Big Games, to its Showcase @ E3, and 2011 marked the IndieCade debut of The Wise Guys—Myles Nye and Greg Snyder—who became IndieCade regulars. The duo had found success creating highly original team-building games for corporate clients like Google and television shows like *Survivor*. IndieCade's curators found it hard to resist their submission *Twistianopolis 500* (later renamed *Dot Racing*), a racing game played on a 20-foot-long Twister board.

## IndieCade LG 3D Mobile Game Jam

In the summer of 2011, IndieCade partnered with South Korean electronics firm LG to produce a first-of-its-kind sponsored game jam for LG's new 3D phone. Recognizing that the platform needed content to succeed, LG signed on to sponsor a weekend-long game jam to develop innovative titles that would leverage the device's 3D capabilities. The IndieCade LG 3D Mobile Game Jam was produced in collaboration with the USC School of Cinematic Arts' Interactive Media Division. Unity provided free 90-day software licenses to all participants and extended the license to a full year for any games that were completed by the October Festival. The jam was co-produced by myself, Akira Thompson (then employed at Disney Imagineering and who made the *Forbes* "30 Under 30" list later that year), and Alejandro Quan-Madrid (who would later go on to be a member of the Glitch City collective with Thompson). It was hosted at USC's Zemeckis Center for Digital Arts by Tracy Fullerton, her colleagues, and VR pioneer Perry Hoberman, who provided a 3D plug-in for Unity that allowed participants to output directly to Android-based phones.

To support the aim of innovating within the platform, a number of participants were invited based on their history of creating with mobile devices. One was Erik Loyer, whose *Ruben & Lullaby* had been an Official Selection and Nominee in 2009. Loyer and Ezra Clayton Daniels created *Languish* (a deliberate pun), a flight simulator where players fought an airborne war of ideas by avoiding, destroying, and/or recombining words and phrases. *Languish* won second place in the jam; first place went to *Hungry Hungry UFOs*, a networked multiplayer game where players competed as UFOs trying to suck up the most buildings in a city. The game was created by Asher Vollmer (of *Threes!* fame), Sam Farmer (who had started his IndieCade career as a Showcase @ E3 student volunteer and whose studio Rocket Science Amusements later became a member of Glitch City), and Ben Bharier (who would go on to found GameCake in 2015). The jam, the first of its kind, paved the way for a series of jams that leveraged indie developers' early adoption tendencies by matching creators with new platforms in need of content.



Game Jam Photos by Celia Pearce



# IndieCade Festival 2011

In his proposal for the 2011 Festival's public art call, Jason Torchinsky described *Invaded!* as "a playful installation picking up where the iconic arcade game left off: the point at which the eponymous aliens land on the surface of the planet." These giant sculptures became the backdrop for some of the most memorable images from the Festival, as well as an excellent metaphor for its expansion.

IndieCade Village expanded to become the vibrant hub of the Festival, with PlayStation Home occupying a large tent as the Premiere Presenting Sponsor, as well as new sponsors Activision and Alienware, which provided computers. Culver City Fire Station Headquarters, with its large roll-up doors, allowed Nominees such as the PlayStation Move-based tag game *Johann Sebastian Joust* and *Ordnungswissenschaft*—a physical game where players passed around and stacked boxes—to spill out onto the sidewalk, drawing people into the space.

In 2011, IndieCade launched IndieXchange in response to the rapid growth of the commercial distribution of indie games. The business development and matchmaking summit was held at NextSpace, a coworking space in the heart of Downtown Culver City, which provided the event space and an office as part of an in-kind sponsorship. IndieXchange formalized a process that was already happening emergently; companies such as Sony, Activision, and Microsoft were already attending the Festival to see what was hot and make deals. By formalizing that relationship, we were able to serve as a more direct liaison and help indies get to the people they wanted to meet. The first IndieXchange, helmed by game journalist Jane Pinckard, was open to anyone who had submitted to IndieCade. It included developer/publisher matchmaking, practical workshops, and an open "Game Tasting" that allowed developers to show work that was not in the Festival. The format was adopted from Bernie De Koven, who had hosted board game tastings at his home, via his ongoing relationship with USC. It provided a way for developers to share works in progress, get feedback, see what other developers were up to, and showcase pre-festival work to prospective funders and publishers.

Two thousand eleven was a turning point in terms of indie games garnering commercial success, and a number of Festival games became fan favorites. Phil Fish/Polytron's *Fez* was already a cult hit when it won IndieCade's 2011 Grand Jury and Story/World Design Awards but would become even more prominent the following year as one of the games profiled in *Indie Game: The Movie* (Pajot and Swirsky 2012). Nominee *BITTRIP FLUX* by Gaijin Games was part of a popular series that included IndieCade 2010 Nominee *BITTRIP RUNNER*, the Independent Games Festival 2011 awardee for Excellence in Visual Design. With its garishly colored crayon-style graphics, Best Game Design awardee *Deepak Fights Robots* by Tom Sennet flew in the face of mainstream games' fidelity fetish.

Artgames, which had previously been reserved for galleries and museums, were also beginning to gain a larger mainstream audience. Honeyslug's *Hobokum* was a breakout artgame with a quirky, quintessentially indie mechanic and painterly visuals by British artist Richard Hogg. (The developers even made a whole level with a special ending just for the Festival.) Another example was *Proteus* by David Kanaga and Ed Key, which immersed players in a stylized musical landscape that was generated on the fly with each new playthrough, an early example of a gameworld that is essentially built by code through interaction. In the past, both of these games would have

been deemed too artsy for consoles, but both would be released on PlayStation a couple of years later. These games pushed the limits of gameplay and defied mainstream gaming trends, epitomizing what Jesper Juul would come to describe as "indie style" (Juul 2014, 2019).

This year also marked a major departure from the fixation on console publication as the holy grail of distribution. Indie developers were discovering the iPad, and a year after its release, the platform saw its first real indie hit. *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP*, by Superbrothers and Capybara Games, with music by Jim Guthrie, won the Visuals Award at the Festival, ultimately selling over 1.5 million copies. USC student Elizabeth Swensen released her master's thesis project, *The Witch*, on iPad, earning her a spot on the *Forbes* 30 Under 30 list a month after appearing at the Festival (one of a number of IndieCade Nominees to be so honored) (Noer and Howard 2011). She also worked on staff at USC's Game Innovation Lab and chaired several IndieCade programs in subsequent years. Also on iPad and an example of indie-developer virtuosity was *GeoBook* (later titled *Earth: A Primer*), described by its creator as "a geology book brought to life through the magic of simulation." The game's developer, Chaim Gingold, a Georgia Tech graduate, worked on *Spore* for Maxis and would go on to get a PhD at the University of California, Santa Cruz and serve as Festival Co-Chair in 2013.

The Festival also featured two "proto-VR" pieces, both of which used old-fashioned film-style 3D glasses. Both by Canadian studios, they set a new watershed for games in which 3D was integral to gameplay. *The Depths to Which I Sink*, by Bigpants, involved layering and occlusion (covering objects with one another); it took the 2011 Audience Choice Award and went on to be an Independent Games Festival 2012 nominee. *SUPERHYPERCUBE*, by the Kokoromi artgame collective (Cindy Poremba, Heather Kelley, Damien Di Fede, and Phil Fish), was a 3D puzzler that involved rotating and inserting blocks in slots, with gameplay entirely reliant on the 3D format. It would go on to become a PlayStation VR title right after the 2016 Festival.

Although 2013 would be the breakout year for local multiplayer games, the seeds were clearly being planted in 2011. In addition to *Kiss Controller*, which had been at the Showcase @ E3, there were several other significant games in the 2011 lineup. Chris Bell's Carnegie Mellon University thesis project *Way*, a nonverbal two-player networked game, earned him the Developer's Choice Award, a spot on the *Forbes* 30 Under 30 list that year (Noer and Howard 2011), and a position as one of the designers on thatgamecompany's *Journey*. Doug Wilson's *Johann Sebastian Joust*, which would eventually be published on PlayStation as part of the *Sportsfriends* collection, was prominently featured on the sidewalk in front of the Fire Station Headquarters and won two IndieCade awards that year: Impact and Technology.

The Festival also saw a resurgence of tabletop games with the undisputed hit *Cards Against Humanity*. Created by members of the Gnarwhal team that had exhibited *Humans vs. Zombies* the previous year, the game "broke" at the 2011 Festival and went on to become a board game blockbuster. Another standout was *The Metagame*, a massively multiplayer card game designed to provoke debates at game conferences by Local No. 12 (Conference Co-Chair John Sharp, Eric Zimmerman, and Colleen Macklin of Parsons' PETLab).

Members of Gnarwhal curated the Festival's Big Games program, which included The Wise Guys' *Twistianopolis 500*; a Culver City edition of *Alphabet City* by Gigantic Mechanic (Greg Trefry and Mattia Romeo), a word game/scavenger hunt using signs and locations in the neighborhood; and *Pigeon Piñata Pummel*, by Joshua DeBonis and Nik Mikros, who would go on to create *Killer Queen* and *Killer Queen Arcade*, the first big hit of the "new arcade" movement.

The 2011 Conference was co-chaired by John Sharp, Colleen Macklin, and Andy Nealen of Hemisphere Games, the creators of 2009 finalist *Osmos*. The Conference opened with a keynote entitled, "Beauty and Risk: Why I Love Indie Games" by Naughty Dog's Richard Lemarchand, who blogger Michael Abbott described as "effervescent" (Abbott 2011) in describing how games "hold our attention by taking advantage of the way we are grabbed by seeing systems evolve in front of our eyes" (Kumar 2011). The *Well Played* panel series was launched by Drew Davidson, editor of the eponymous journal (published by Carnegie Mellon University ETC Press, also the publisher of this book!), which promoted advancements in game criticism. There was a reprise of the *Iron Game Designer* game show from the prior year, hosted by Eric Zimmerman, and a panel discussion entitled, "Do Artgames Matter?"

The 2011 IndieCade awards moved from Sony Plaza to the Santa Monica Bay Woman's Club. The ceremony was written by Ben Fritz, the *Los Angeles Times* reporter who had called IndieCade "the Sundance of the video game industry" (2009), and was hosted by Samm Levine, one of the stars of the TV show *Freaks and Geeks*. According to IndieCade lore, the 2011 awards gala was the birthplace of "Philippe Lemarchand," the stage name of the DJ duo Phil Fish and Rich Lemarchand, the latter of whom taught Phil the ropes while DJing at the party. The two also DJed the closing party at IndieCade Village as well as a number of subsequent game parties all over the world.

The Santa Monica Woman's Club was a fitting venue for that year's Trailblazer recipient, Megan Gaiser, the CEO of Her Interactive, developers of the highly successful *Nancy Drew* game franchise and pioneers of the 1990s Girl Games movement. Megan gave a rousing speech describing the lack of vision in the mainstream game industry and inspired boisterous cheers with her closing exhortation to "Buck the system!"

The 2011 cycle culminated with a Christmas party hosted at Riot Games' Santa Monica headquarters. The event included an art exhibition of handmade postcards by developers.



Photo by Stephanie Barish



# 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



# 2013 Games with Friends

## IndieCade East 2013

### IndieCade Milestones

Launch of IndieCade East

### IndieCade Events

IndieCade East, February 16–17,  
Museum of the Moving Image, New York

IndieCade Showcase @ E3, June 11–13,  
Los Angeles Convention Center

Oculus + IndieCade VR Jam, August 2–25,  
multiple locations

IndieCade Festival, October 3–6, Culver City

**The rise of the indies can be traced in no small part to IndieCade, a quirky, artful gathering that attracts people from around the world to an event that's known as the Sundance of games.**

—Harold Goldberg, *New York Times*

In 2013, the indie boom seemed headed towards its apex. Indies were increasingly going mainstream, and games that had exhibited at previous IndieCade events were showing up as published console and PC games. As new platforms were proliferating, some tech companies recognized that their success would rely on content. Academics, who had been heavily involved in the rise of indie games, belatedly began to “eat their own picnics,” so to speak, and include indie games as a topic of research. In his introduction to the *Loading... Journal of Canadian Game Studies Association* special issue on indie game studies, editor Bart Simon admitted that, in the preceding decade or so, game studies had been overly preoccupied with the fruits of capitalism—mainstream Triple-A games—at the expense of developing robust scholarship on alternative forms (Simon 2013). The 2013 Digital Games Research Association Conference—which was co-chaired by John Sharp and myself in Atlanta and hosted by Georgia Tech—included a session establishing “indie game studies” as a new subset of the field.

The sponsored IndieCade LG 3D Mobile Game Jam, which had been introduced at the 2011 Festival, became an attractive method for platform creators to get a high volume of content created quickly. In 2013, IndieCade partnered with Oculus VR, which had just released its first development system, the Oculus Rift Development Kit 1 (also known as DK1). Startups Sifco and Leap Motion also came on board.

IndieCade had been on the front end of the local multiplayer game craze since its very first Festival, but 2013 saw a rapid increase in submissions of this genre (Suellentrop 2013). *Sportsfriends*—an anthology that included past IndieCade Nominees, Official Selections, and awardees *Johann Sebastian Joust*, *Hokra*, *BaraBariBall*, and *Pole Riders*—was released by Danish studio Die Gute Fabrik on PlayStation. Meanwhile, in mainstream games, eSports had begun taking off in the form of massive tournaments with huge financial stakes, video streaming, and a growing video game spectator culture (Taylor 2012). To top its game, IndieCade East introduced its own more humble flavor of eSports, with its signature focus on innovation in game mechanics.

At the end of the year, *The New York Times* called 2013 “the Year of the Indie”, inspired by the IndieCade Festival exhibition *Indie Essentials: 25 Must-Play Video Games*, which was co-curated with the Museum of the Moving Image in the run-up to IndieCade East 2014:

*This has been a year when the new generation of game consoles seemed like tweaks to the old machines, a year in which many games released for them were merely good when I needed more to blow me away. But lower-budget (and lower-priced) indies . . . took my breath away. . . . In this welcome squall, the annual IndieCade event in Culver City, Calif., forecasts the tempest. Games showcased there can become what critics call “most anticipated” (Goldberg 2013b).*

—Bart Simon, *Loading...*

Since its inception, IndieCade had enjoyed a strong relationship with New York’s indie, artgames, and academic communities, with a number of New Yorkers taking roles as co-organizers, speakers, Nominees, and award-winners at the flagship Festival. One of IndieCade’s earliest advisors had been Carl Goodman of the American Museum of the Moving Image (MOMI). MOMI was formed in 1988 in a historical building that had been part of Kaufman Astoria Studios in Queens, one of the first movie-making facilities in the US—analogous in some ways to IndieCade’s Screenland locale in Culver City. Goodman joined the MOMI staff in 1989 as an educator and in 1992 became its first Curator of Digital Media, making it one of the first museums to collect and display video games.

Goodman had expressed an interest early on in hosting IndieCade, but it wasn’t until 2013 that the museum’s schedule and IndieCade’s critical mass aligned to make this a reality. IndieCade East was scheduled for February 2013 to coincide with MOMI’s *Spacewar!* exhibition on video game history curated by John Sharp, who was also serving as Conference Co-Chair, along with MOMI’s current Curator of Digital Media, Jason Eppink.

The Chair of IndieCade East was Matt Parker, whose *Recurse* had been in the 2012 Festival and was now teaching at NYU. Without him, the event never would have happened. He spearheaded and more or less organized the whole event, liaising between the Los Angeles-based IndieCade team and the MOMI team. It was at IndieCade East that the first Indie eSports Tournament was organized by Simon Ferrari, then a PhD student at Georgia Tech, where I was teaching at the time.

**I was warmed, then moved, by this recent history of indies, spartanly staged in low light, each a gem of shining creativity.**

—Harold Goldberg, *New York Times*

Because of its timing, IndieCade East was the perfect moment to announce the opening of submissions for the fall Festival. Because of this, the majority of the games shown were curated from 2012 Nominees and Official Selections. These included awardees like *Armada d6* (Eric Zimmerman and John Sharp), *Botanicula*, *Dyad*, *Gorogoa*, *Hokra*, *Reality Ends Here*, *Renga*, *The Stanley Parable*, *Unmanned*, and *Vörheim*, as well as Nominees such as *BlindSide*, *Bloop*, *Cart Life*, *Find Me a Good One*, and *Tengami*. The exhibition also introduced some new discoveries—future hits that would end up at the Festival and Showcase @ E3 later that year. These included *Spaceteam*, and *Thirty Flights of Loving* by Brendon Chung, one of the co-founders of Los Angeles-based game collective Glitch City, which launched later that year.

Social games were a constant theme throughout. There was a “decathlon” tournament in the *Spacewar!* exhibit involving 10 classic video games and sessions celebrating the publication of the *Sportsfriends* collection on PlayStation, including a “Sportsfriends & Friends” play session organized in conjunction with a panel featuring

creators Douglas Wilson, Ramiro Corbetta, Noah Sasso, and Henry Smith moderated by NYU’s Frank Lantz. There was also an *Iron Game Designer Challenge* competition that pitted NYU faculty and students against those from the Parsons School of Design, presented by Eric Zimmerman and Colleen Macklin, who represented the two schools.

Diverse topics included “Games as Commentary,” with Paolo Pedercini, Heather Chaplin, Richard Hofmeier, and Ian Bogost. Vlamber’s Rami Ismael gave a talk about “Why We Make Games.” Kaho Abe, Katherine Isbister, and Greg Trefry gave a panel about “Jumping off the Screen” moderated by Jamin Warren, founder of Kill Screen. John Sharp gave a keynote on the *Spacewar!* exhibition and the relationship between punk rock/DIY culture and indie games.

Night Games featured the US premiere of Hide&Seek’s *Searchlight*, a Kinect-based game in which players had to move objects while staying out of a roving light. Several 2012 Nominees and Official Selections were included, such as *Panoramical*, a musical landscape by Fernando Ramallo and David Kanaga; Kaho Abe’s *Hit Me!*; and *Yamove!* by Katherine Isbister’s lab at NYU Tandon School of Engineering, a team-based dance game that took the *Dance Dance Revolution* mechanic further by capturing a wider variety of movements. Mario von Rickenbach’s *Rakete* asked five players to navigate a spaceship together by controlling one of five thrusters on a rocket ship using a foot throttle. Night Games also included 2012 Developer’s Choice Award winner *Renga*, played in the auditorium by over one hundred people using laser pointers.

IndieCade East 2013 featured a Sony-sponsored game jam to generate content for the company’s new portable platform, PlayStation Vita. A group of jammers worked on their games over the weekend, playtested, and presented them to IndieCade East attendees. The games produced included *Crystallon*, *Hermit Crab in Space* (by Jane Friedhoff and Andy Wallace aka Golden Ruby), *CRUMBLE* (by Anstabo), and *Don’t Wake the Bear* (Ramsey Nasser, Kaho Abe, and Francis Hsueh, aka Policy), a game where you had to pass the Vita around while avoiding waking the sleeping bear. All four teams received free trips to the Game Developers Conference to demo their games, and *Hermit Crab in Space* and *Crystallon* were both eventually published on PlayStation Vita. It was also here that Brian S. Chung and GJ Lee of The Sheep’s Meow created their first prototype of *EXPOSURE*, a camouflage game that they continued to develop and which became an IndieCade Nominee and sleeper hit in 2018. MTV News cited the IndieCade PlayStation Vita Game Jam, organized by Akira Thompson, as one of the highlights of the event:

*It’s great how much you could take for granted at IndieCade East, held this past weekend at the Museum of the Moving Image in New York. You could take for granted that the people there love games and are, overwhelmingly, open-minded about them and want to see new things done with them. The academics there from NYU, Parsons, and elsewhere are all as far away as possible from stodgy academicism. They are grown adults who have dedicated their lives to studying play and designing games, and so it shouldn’t be surprising that they’re all fun and funny in person. You can take for granted that they take for granted the value of games, and while it’s apparent they’re exploring the expressive potential of the medium I also get this sense that they just see the inherent value in bringing play back into other adults’ lives. (Jordon, 2013)*

**[The] PlayStation Mobile GameJam Was the Most Productive Part of IndieCade East—IndieCade: East wasn’t all fun and games (okay, maybe it was); there was [sic] also people getting work done. Tucked away in the corner, next to the collection of honoree games, was a major player in the video game industry attempting to help some indie game developers get some much-needed exposure. Sony, one of the IndieCade East sponsors, was hosting a three-day long GameJam that leveraged their PlayStation Mobile platform. The twelve teams that participated were competing to take their creations to GDC, and hopefully win a spot at Sony’s booth at E3.**

—Jason Cipriano, *MTV News*





# IndieCade Showcase @ E3 2013

By 2013, it was clear that local multiplayer games had gone mainstream and that indies were leading the charge. Hundreds of local multiplayer games entered the Showcase submission pool, creating a significant jurying challenge. One of the most popular games from 2013 was *Spaceteam*, a cooperative networked local multiplayer game (via Bluetooth) for iPad. In it, each player had a different set of spaceship controls with a constant display of ever-changing technobabble instructions, some of which pertained to players' own controls and some to other players'. This meant a lot of yelling; *Spaceteam* could have easily taken the award for "Loudest IndieCade Game" at the Showcase @ E3, if such an award existed.

Local multiplayer and technological innovation could both be seen in *Spin the Bottle: Bumpie's Party* by NapNok, whose members had worked on *Dark Room Sex Game* and *B.U.T.T.O.N.* Designed for the Wii, the game had players doing strange things with a partner, such as spinning the Wiimote controller or hugging their partner with the Wiimote in their hand while jumping up and down. Another cooperative local multiplayer game was *Lovers in a Dangerous Spacetime*, an adorable spaceship simulator by Asteroid Base. Simon Ferrari hosted the Indie eSports section of the IndieCade Showcase @ E3. Examples of competitive games in this genre were Zach Aikman's territorial game *Voronoid*, *TowerFall* by Matt Thorson, and a pre-publication version of *Sportsfriends*, which would come out on PlayStation the following year.

A few other game highlights: *Luxuria Superbia*, by prior IndieCade awardee Tale of Tales, was a departure from their previous games, which tended to be story or character-driven. Played on an iPad and described as "an abstract erotic game which explores the connection between religious and sexual ecstasy," it reconfigured the well-trodden "tunnel shooter" mechanic in a fundamentally feminine way. *Luxuria Superbia* went on to become an IndieCade Nominee as well as the recipient of the Independent Games Festival's Nuovo Award the following year. Other single-player games included *Soundodger* by Studio Bean's Michael Molinari and *7 Grand Steps: What Ancients Begat*, a strategic game that played out over multiple generations, created by Mousechief (Keith Nemtzi), who was in the first IndieCade Festival. Also at the IndieCade booth was the soon-to-be-released PlayStation title *Hobokum*, which had been a Nominee at the 2011 Festival, as well as the newly-released PlayStation Vita edition of *Flower*. On the mobile side was *In a Permanent Save State*, an activist iPhone game by Benjamin Poynter that was based on real-life suicides by iPhone factory workers and had actually been banned from the App Store.

The IndieCade Showcase @ E3 was one of the first places you could get your hands on new technology platforms, including Leap Motion's gesture interface; Sifteo Cubes, small reprogrammable cubes with a video display; and, of course, Oculus Rift. As part of its sponsorship, IndieCade had worked with Oculus to organize a mini-game jam in order to generate playable content on its brand new DK1 development system. Even at this early phase in its rollout, indies were eschewing the natural temptation to reconfigure old genres for this new platform. *SoundSelf*, by Robin Arnott, Evan Balster, and Todd Cook, was a prime example: the meditation experience immersed the player in an abstract world transformed by their own voice. Other Oculus games created by IndieCade developers for the Showcase @ E3 included *The Recital*, *Homework from Another World*, *Irrational Exuberance*, and *If a Tree Screams in the Forest...* These works were something of a teaser for the Oculus "slow jam" that would take place later that summer.

Three new IndieCade Showcase @ E3 discoveries were particular standouts. Two exemplified the evolution of adventure games. The first was *Dominique Pamplemousse in "It's All Over Once The Fat Lady Sings!"* This quirky black-and-white claymation musical, featuring a protagonist of "ambiguous gender," was an act of virtuosity by a single developer, Dierdra Kiai, aka Squinky. As one juror put it, "This is the type of game that IndieCade was created for." The "breakout musical hit" (Warr 2017) was an Independent Games Festival finalist the following year, and its creator made the *Forbes* 30 Under 30 list in 2015.

The second was *That Dragon, Cancer*, featured in the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 while still a work in progress. Developed by Numinous Games (Ryan Green, Amy Green, Josh Larson, Jon Hillman), it chronicled a family's struggle with the brain cancer diagnosis and treatment of their baby boy. Part autobiography, part documentary, part interactive poem, it was groundbreaking in terms of its subject matter and emotional depth. *That Dragon, Cancer* went on to be funded through a successful Kickstarter, became the subject of the 2015 documentary film *Thank You for Playing*, and was published in 2016 to critical acclaim and numerous awards.

In terms of mainstream success, the third big splash of 2013 was *TowerFall* by Matt Thorsen of Matt Makes Games. Originally referred to as "Ouya's killer app" (Kuchera 2013), the game became an unparalleled success that eventually landed on virtually every game platform.

By 2013, Nintendo and Xbox had joined Sony as IndieCade sponsors. All three exhibited prior IndieCade Nominees in their respective tents in IndieCade Village. Several 2008 Nominees, including *ibb & obb* and *The Unfinished Swan*, as well as *Sportsfriends*, were among the games featured in the Sony booth. GameDesk Edupalooza featured Cardboard Arcade, as well as other activities focused on kids.

The sheer volume of submissions—which was continuing to grow—necessitated adding personnel to oversee the process. Holly Gramazio, co-founder of the UK-based Hide&Seek (who had also been IndieCade Nominees), became the Festival's first Jury Co-Chair, working with Sam and myself to wrangle, collect, and assess juror scores and reviews. Because she had extensive experience with nonstandard game formats through curating Big Game and other experimental exhibitions, Holly helped craft creative jurying strategies; she was also plugged into an international network, including the alternative-controller and pub-game scene in the UK.

Submissions were always a good way to chart trends, and in 2013, local multiplayer games were the undisputed leader, including a spike in board game submissions fueled by the success of *Cards Against Humanity*. But these genres, which also included alternative-controller and installation-based work, placed a higher demand on in-person jurying, requiring further creative measures to accommodate them. Initially, IndieCade staff ran special jury sessions with the help of volunteers, but it became clear that the volume of special-format and board games made that method unsustainable. So in 2013, IndieCade organized its first "jury hub" at Glitch City, an indie games collective that had settled in Culver City due in part to its proximity to IndieCade. Throughout the summer, developers Brendan Chung and Ben Esposito spent multiple weekend days opening up shop for IndieCade special jurying sessions.

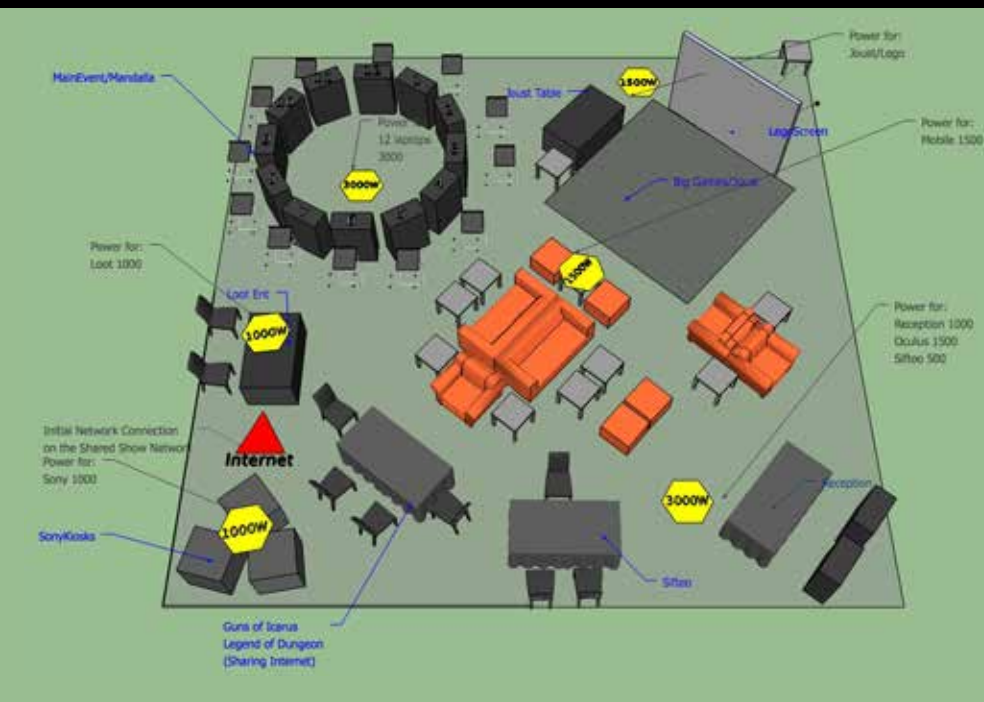
Digital gaming was getting more social and local, and numerous 2013 Festival games of this type went on to be major hits. A few examples on the consumer/digital side were *Nidhogg*, a two-player sword dueling game; *Lovers in a Dangerous Spacetime*, a hyperkinetic cooperative space-exploration game; *TowerFall*; *Spaceteam*, an early networked local iPad game; *SlashDash*, a four-player Ninja combat game; and *Spin the Bottle: Bumpie's Party*, by NapNok & Redgrim, which won the 2013 Technology Award.

# IndieCade Festival 2013

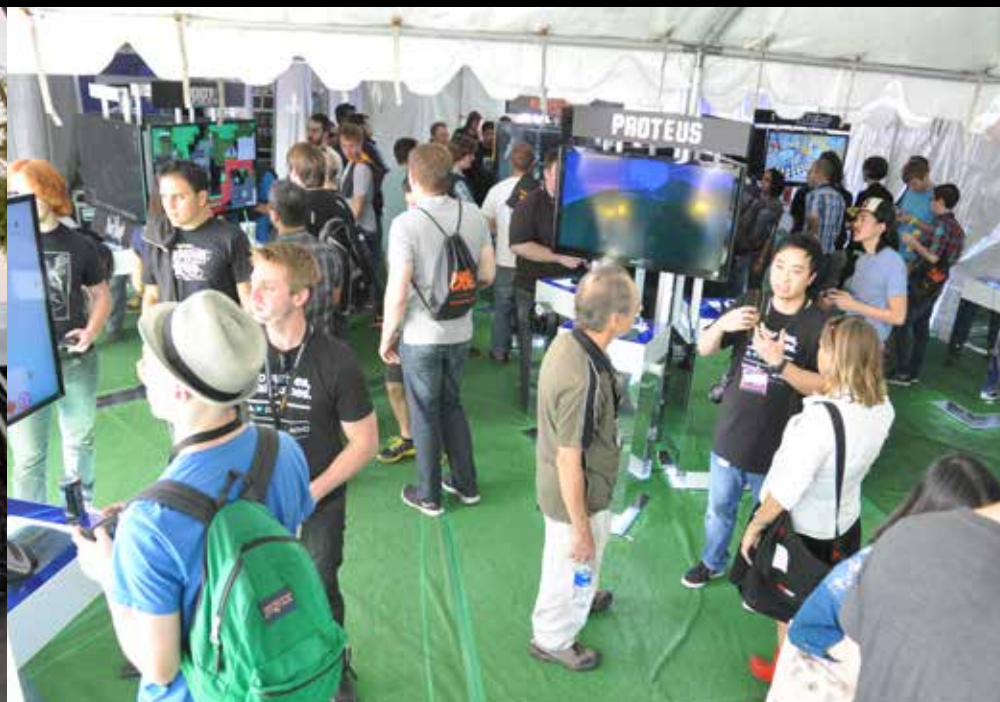
Face-to-face social interaction was also driving alternative forms of play. One example was the burgeoning "new arcade" or "artcade" movement—custom cabinets that harkened back to the days of *Tron*. The undisputed hit in this regard was 2013 Developer Choice awardee, *Killer Queen Arcade*. *Killer Queen* had made its IndieCade debut in 2012 as a field game using foam swords, essentially a prototype for the digital game's final implementation. After iterating on different control schemes, they finally settled on the large arcade cabinet, which had to be shipped in a giant crate from New York to the Culver City Hotel for the 2013 Festival. *Killer Queen Arcade* went on to become one of the greatest success stories of the new arcade movement, with over 40 cabinets installed throughout the US by 2019, and spawning its own eSports tournament.

During Night Games, *Johann Sebastian Joust* creator Doug Wilson staged an installation entitled *Edgar Rice Soirée*. Inspired by Edgar Rice Burroughs's novel *Tarzan*, it involved 20 PlayStation Move controllers suspended from the ceiling of a 20-by-20 foot tent. The goal was to "swing" (still on your feet, of course) between Move controllers when they flashed your color. Two installation-based games used the body as the primary interface: Concordia University TAG Lab's *Propinquity*, and Michael Molinari of Studio Bean's *SoundodgerLIVE*, an installation version of his bullet-hell music game that projected the game field onto the ground and used players' bodies as cursors while avoiding abstract projectiles. Two featured games anticipated the escape room craze, which would begin to escalate in 2014: *The Hearst Collection*, a jewel-heist laser maze by Gabe Smedresman, and Two Bit Circus' *STEAM Carnival*, a live event focused on the intersection of art and science.

Shawn Pierre of OriGaming Games, who would go on to become Games Manager for IndieCade, showed two games: *Rainbow Bacon*, a Move controller variant of the folk game *Steal the Bacon*, and his card game *These French Fries are Terrible Hot Dogs*, a party card game in the tradition of *Apples to Apples*, which ran a successful Kickstarter and appeared in the Boston Festival of Indie Games that same year. One of the other major tabletop games that year was Liam Liwanag Burke's *Dog Eat Dog*, a roleplaying game in which you play members of a colonized community, which won the 2013 Impact Award.



Uncredited Photo from Joystiq E3 2013 Edition





## IndieCade Festival 2013 (Con't)

Pervasive and alternate reality games, while a smaller niche, continued to delight with new innovations and diverse creators. These included *Extrasolar*, a major departure for designer Rob Jagnow, who later said that attending IndieCade inspired him to up his game. *99 Tiny Games* by Hide&Seek, a selection of quirky urban street games, manifested as a series of stickers distributed throughout the Festival and an online app created as a commission for the 2012 London Olympics.

A major transformation was also happening on the single-player side, particularly with regard to narrative games. In spite of the growing climate of misogyny that would reach its climax the following year, alternative voices, particularly queer and women's voices, were coming to the forefront. These brought new modes to empathy, identity, agency, and play. Among the awardees were breakouts that would go on to earn mainstream acclaim, including *Kentucky Route Zero* (Best Visuals and Story/World Design); *Gone Home* (Best Audio), which won two citations from other awards for Best Studio Debut the following year; and *Porpentine's Twine Compilation*, which won an IndieCade Special Recognition Award. *Spaceteam* took the award for Best Interaction Design. An adventure game about hacking, *Quadrilateral Cowboy*, by Glitch City member Brendon Chung of Blendo Games, took the IndieCade Grand Jury Award; the game went on to win the Seumas McNally Grand Prize at the Independent Games Festival awards in 2017. Official Selections following this trend included Zoe Quinn's *Depression Quest*, Mattie Brice's *Mainichi*, *Dominique Pamplousse in "It's All Over Once the Fat Lady Sings!"*, and *That Dragon, Cancer*, all of which went on to receive international recognition.

In response to this rise of new voices, IndieCade added a new award in 2013, the Game Changer, conceived for an individual who had made a major impact on changing the indie landscape, especially with regard to inclusiveness. Although it became a regular award, the Game Changer was initially inspired by Anna Anthropy, whose 2012 IndieCade Official Selection *Dys4ia* and book *Rise of the Video Game Zinesters* had become a major influence in a burgeoning queer and trans game scene.

The 2013 Conference Co-Chairs were Brenda Romero (*Train*), Chaïm Ginghold (*GeoBook/Earth: A Primer*), and John Sharp (*Armada d6*), all prior IndieCade Nominees, Official Selections, or awardees, with a speaker lineup that was the most diverse to date. One of the highlights of this year's Conference was the Keynote

Conversation, which celebrated the 20th anniversary of *Myst* with designer Rand Miller—in some sense the godfather of the adventure game genre—and Tale of Tales' Auriea Harvey, one of the leaders of the genre's twenty-first century renaissance. Other speakers included game designer and writer Shawn Allen, Kaho Abe, Vander Caballero—Creative Director of Minority Media, which created *Papo & Yo*, a 2012 Nominee—and many others. The blossoming queer game scene was represented by gamemakers such as Mattie Brice, Colleen Macklin, Naomi Clark, Christine Love, merritt k, Anna Anthropy, Steve Gaynor (one of the creators of *Gone Home*), Cas Holman, and Porpentine.

The Conference was bookended by IndieXchange and GameU. IndieXchange had become a major draw for developers (who received a free ticket with submission), in part due to the matchmaking with publishers and funders that took place. Sessions tended to be practical in nature. One, for instance, dealt with grants and was meant to include Alyce Myatt, Director of Media Arts for the NEA; however, she was forced to pull out at the last minute due to a US federal government shutdown. The IndieXchange Show and Tell gave developers the opportunity to show works in progress or games that did not make it into the Festival, give one another feedback, and see what others were working on. This open sharing of ideas highlighted the indie philosophy of eschewing the proprietary anxieties of the mainstream game industry, which rarely revealed works in progress for fear of intellectual property infringements.

The awards gala was hosted by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which had a growing presence in the game space. They had co-curated *Into the Pixel*, an exhibition of printed mainstream game imagery at E3, and were also collecting and exhibiting games and hosting lectures with game artists, many of whom had been in IndieCade festivals and showcases. The awards attendees assembled in a waiting area that, appropriately, featured punk-rock and new-wave concert posters from the 1980s.

Moving away from television celebrities, the 2013 IndieCade awards hosts were drawn from the IndieCade community: longtime supporters and husband-and-wife team John and Brenda Romero. During the awards, the audience played *Cat on Yer Head*, a British pub game by Playniac in which players tried to pass around an invisible "cat" and "mouse" in pursuit of a yellow "cheese" balloon.

The Trailblazer Award that year went to Tracy Fullerton of USC's top-ranked Interactive Media & Games Division program. Although the final decision was made by the award jury, honoring Tracy was significant to IndieCade because it acknowledged the growing importance of academia in educating a new generation of indie developers. In addition to having been an industry pioneer and creating her own award-winning games, Tracy was also a mentor to dozens of gamemakers who were making a mark on the indie ecosystem. It was particularly poignant that, at the time she received the award, she was also recovering from cancer.

In 2012, *INTERFERENCE*, an installation by Eric Zimmerman and Nathalie Pozzie that had been commissioned by La Gaité Lyrique in Paris for its *Joue Le Jeu (Play Along)* exhibition, won the IndieCade Interaction Award. Due to space demands, the full installation could not be shown at the Festival, and instead it was included as documentation.

In 2013, with help from Carol Stakenas, then-Executive Director of LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions), Eric and Nathalie were able to arrange an installation that would overlap with the IndieCade Festival. The piece was installed at Culver City's Track 16 Gallery, near the Festival, which also hosted an opening event. In addition to being able to play *INTERFERENCE*, the gamemakers facilitated design workshops in which a number of luminaries from the indie game scene participated in prototyping new games for the *INTERFERENCE* "platform." The rules they developed were recorded and displayed in the space for the duration of the exhibition.

**The sheer breadth of originality on show was eye-popping, with almost every finalist offering a completely unique approach to the competition's minimal brief.**

—Paul James, *Road to VR*



## XYZ: Alternative Voices in Game Design

The 2012 IndieCade Showcase @ E3 had fallen on the heels of Anita Sarkeesian's *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* Kickstarter, and the game industry's toxic relationship with gender was very much on everyone's mind. It was here that Akira Thompson, then IndieCade Developer Relations Chair, made an off-handed remark to me: "I really want to do an exhibition on women game designers." My response: "We're totally doing that."

A year later, just after the 2013 Showcase @ E3, *XYZ: Alternative Voices in Game Design* opened at the Museum of Design Atlanta. While not explicitly an IndieCade project, the exhibition was co-curated by Akira and myself with longtime IndieCade Conference Co-Chair, John Sharp, and Cindy Poremba, who would go on to serve as IndieCade Jury Co-Chair in 2015—both of whom had been IndieCade Nominees and jurors—with support from Adam Rafinski, who was my graduate student at the time. All four had extensive curatorial experience. Cindy had co-curated *Joue le Jeu ("Play Along")* at La Gaité Lyrique in Paris along with Heather Kelley and Lynn Hughes, and John had curated *Spacwar!* at the Museum of the Moving Image earlier that year in conjunction with the first IndieCade East.

*XYZ* focused on women creators, many of whom had been in IndieCade. Past IndieCade projects included *The Night Journey*, *The Path*, *Analogue: A Hate Story*, *Luxuria Superbia*, *Train*, *Dys4ia*, *Mainichi*, *Gravity Ghost*, and games by Blast Theory, Nathalie Pozzi (with Eric Zimmerman), Hide&Seek, and Colleen Macklin. The exhibit also included mainstream games created with women in leadership roles, including *Journey*, *Skylanders*, *League of Legends*, and *LittleBigPlanet*. The exhibition opened in August in conjunction with the Digital Games Research Association's 2013 conference—the first to include a panel on "indie game studies"—hosted at Georgia Tech and co-chaired by John Sharp and myself.

## Oculus IndieCade VR Jam

One of the biggest developments of 2013 was the release of the Oculus Rift DK1 development kit, which, at the time, was not yet commercially available. Its story is illustrative of the synergies between different aspects of the indie ecosystem. A company with ties to USC, Oculus made two early strategic moves that proved productive: sponsoring IndieCade and sending free DK1s to universities in sync with the Oculus IndieCade VR Jam. Rather than the traditional format of putting jammers in one place for a weekend, this jam was distributed across multiple locations and took place over a three-week period, thus earning it the informal moniker of a "slow jam." The call was open, and jam sites were largely hosted at university labs, many of which already had DK1s—including NYU, USC, Georgia Tech, and others—in advance of the jam. While the jam was open, IndieCade also hand-picked key developers who were invited to participate. Loaner systems were also distributed to IndieCade-affiliated groups such as the Copenhagen Game Collective, Toronto's Bento Miso, and Let's Make Games in Perth, Australia, to name only a few. Prize winners received funds to produce their games, as well as exhibition opportunities at other IndieCade events.

The two Grand Prize winners were Ed McNeill with *Ciess*, a cyberspace hacking puzzler later published as *Darknet* (James 2014), and Lau Korsgaard (of Copenhagen Game Collective and NapNok) with *Virtual Internet Hacker*, which also had a hacking theme, only '90s retro style (James 2013). Second place was tied between *Dumpy: Going Elephants*, by Georgia Tech grad Brian Schrank, a comical cartoon world with which players interacted as an elephant using only its trunk, and *Nostrum*, created by Robert Yang, a flight simulator inspired by Hayao Miyazaki's anime film *Porco Rosso*. Yang was renowned for his *Radiator* series of Half-Life mods, and his *Celestia* was in the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 earlier that summer.

The Oculus DK1 came out the same year that Valve launched Steam Greenlight, a crowdsourcing experiment in which players could vote on games they wanted to see showcased on the Steam site. The first crop of Oculus games began appearing on Steam almost immediately after the release of the DK1 and were only playable by people who had the DevKit (in other words, developers). Thus began the process of seeding the Oculus with gamemakers, an important key to its success.



# 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.





# 2015 Weathering the “Indiepocalypse”

## IndieCade East 2015

### IndieCade Milestones

Gaming for Everyone partnership with Intel launches

### IndieCade Events

IndieCade East, February 13–15, Museum of the Moving Image, New York City

IndieCade Showcase @ E3, June 16–18, Los Angeles Convention Center

### Will Wagenaar, Trophy Hero

In 2015, IndieCade sadly lost the designer of our signature trophies, Will Wagenaar. The trophy-ordering process typically got underway in August with a reminder email from Will. However, in 2015, no reminder arrived. I tried to track him down through email, phone calls, and Etsy, and was finally able to find him through a member of one of his Facebook groups, who gave me the sad news that Will was in hospice, dying of cancer. As I prepared to get on a Skype call with a possible substitute, my phone rang, and a gruff voice on the other end of the line said, “This is Will! I’m not dead yet!” For the subsequent two months, I worked with Will and his partner Connor to oversee his final trophy designs, quite literally from his deathbed. He passed away on October 8, 2015, just a few days before the 2015 Festival. At the award ceremony, I was honored to give a tribute to him, accompanied by images of his work.

In Rigipulos’ acceptance speech, describing his nearly 20 years as a developer, he said:

*There usually comes a time in a pitch when the publisher wheels out . . . their data analytics person . . . who informs them that . . . “There aren’t really any comps for this [comparative game sales data], so we can’t . . . confidently forecast how it’s going to sell.” I always have two reactions. Half of me is immediately crestfallen because I realize that this publisher is probably not going to fund my game. The other half of me thinks . . . “Well, hell yeah! There’s no comps! That’s the whole point!” IndieCade is a community of people who are flipping the bird to comps.*

First used in 2013, the Twitter hashtag #indiepocalypse had fewer than a half-dozen posts before 2015. However, by late 2015, “indiepocalypse” had become the latest buzzword in indie games; as of this writing, there continue to be roiling debates about its nature, cause, and even existence.

Some in the industry attributed the concept to growing pains, market fluctuations, and oversaturation of content—but it really depends on how or where you measure success. Outside of the capitalist model, there were artistic and cultural measures to consider, including plenty of arguments to counter the doomsday hype (Clark 2015), as well as studies showing that indies were doing reasonably well despite an overcrowded marketplace (Parker 2015).

Nevertheless, IndieCade faced an existential dilemma: it was formed to promote games that were either ahead or entirely outside of existing markets. This meant that IndieCade shared the same sustainability challenges as the individuals it represented. Despite the fact that their work was not financially motivated, many of its constituents had been able to find paying audiences.

In reality, the indiepocalypse was less remarkable than the fact that the indie market had gotten big enough to even *have* an apocalypse at all. How was it possible, for instance, that *Johann Sebastian Joust* ended up as a published PlayStation game? In 2012, when Oculus launched its Kickstarter for the Oculus Rift, who would have guessed that the company would be purchased by Facebook two years later (or that it would be another two years before it even launched a commercial product)?

By 2015, there were already hundreds of indie titles on the Steam platform, despite the fact that there was no way for anyone other than developers to play them. Who would have imagined that games like *Gone Home* and *Dear Esther* would become commercially successful? Or that *Papers, Please* would win an Independent Games Festival award? Had the “indie bubble” popped? There were fluctuations, though; as predicted, the role of consoles in the indie ecosystem would wane (Whitson 2013). At the same time, VR, AR, and mobile would take increasingly important roles, the latter of which opened up entirely new audiences. Furthermore, new distribution models were on the horizon that nobody really anticipated at the time.

For those who attended or took part in shaping IndieCade that year, the indiepocalypse appeared to be overstated. Although Festival submissions had dipped from their 2014 record high, mainstream publishers were still present at the Festival and publishing a record number of games, and developers continued to innovate. As with each prior year, new genres were born, old genres were reborn, and games that defied genre became the norm.

Even while diversity continued to be a pain point within the game industry, IndieCade had countered the morass of 2014 with a boldly optimistic heart motif as its central theme, reinforcing its ongoing commitment to inclusiveness. As it turned out, the aftermath of Gamergate would instigate a new partnership for the Festival—this time with Intel. The company had made a serious misstep the year before by pulling ads from *Gamasutra* due to pressure from Gamergaters over Leigh Alexander’s “Gamers’ are Over” article (Alexander 2014). The backlash was instant and intense, and Intel—long-known for its public support of diversity—was forced to issue a series of mea culpas to compensate for its tone-deafness (Takahashi 2014; Tassi 2014). One of these came in the form of the IndieCade/Intel Gaming for Everyone initiative, which gave IndieCade the opportunity to transform swords into ploughshares.

In 2015, the Museum of the Moving Image (MOMI) offered an extended-run exhibition in conjunction with IndieCade East. The theme was *Love and Rejection*—an unusual topic for mainstream games but commonplace among indies. The exhibition featured current and future indie classics. Among the games included were *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, by Jimmy Andrews and Loren Schmidt, which entailed awkwardly controlling the tongues of two French-kissing characters. *Consentacle: A Card Game of Human-Alien Intimacy*, Naomi Clark’s board game about consent between aliens and humans, went on to win the 2015 Impact Award later that year. The aim of the exhibit was to introduce the broader public that frequented the museum to the breadth of expressiveness being explored by indie developers.

While eSports writ large generally focused on mainstream combat-oriented games such as *League of Legends* and *World of Warcraft*, IndieCade continued to grow its unique avant-garde style within its Indie eSports Tournament. MOMI’s theatre spaces were ideal for this purpose, creating a stadium-style experience for spectators. The 2015 IndieCade East tournament included PHL Collective’s *ClusterPuck 99*—which was exactly what it sounds like—a chaotic whirl in which players, as pucks, competed to score points in a series of differing playing fields; *N++*, by Metanet, the multiplayer sequel to one of its early indie hits; and *Extreme Exorcism*, by Golden Ruby Games (Jason Boyer and Andy Wallace), which was released later that year on PlayStation 4. Indie eSports also provided the opportunity for entertaining commentary by “eSportscasters” who emceed the event.

True to its game-party format, the IndieCade East Night Games curation introduced a number of new paradigms for social interaction. These included Gigantic Mechanic’s *Scattershot*, a massively local multiplayer arena shooter played on smartphones by up to 100 people, and *Hot Mess*, a Makey Makey game by Shanghai developer Mike Ren with a core mechanic built around humans who served as electrical conductors by holding hands.

IndieCade East also included an open-format show-and-tell. One of the games was *Home Improvisation* by the Stork Burnt Down, a furniture-building game and IKEA spoof that had won an award as part of the Global Game Jam earlier that year. The game, created by some of my former Georgia Tech students, had drawn a huge fanbase, who created “Frankenfurniture” with the kit’s interoperable parts. After meeting the team at IndieCade East 2015, Sony ended up loaning them a development kit to make a PlayStation 4 version, and *Home Improvisation* went on to become a local multiplayer VR launch title for that console. In addition to making new deals at IndieCade East, Sony also exhibited some past IndieCade games that they had published, including *Chasm* by Discord Games and *The Hero Trap* by SMASHWORX, both of which had been in the show-and-tell the year before.

In 2015, IndieCade East Chair Matt Parker was joined by Toni Pizza, and the Exhibitions Chair was Jamey C. Shafer, one of the founders of transmedia studio Inklings Productions, whose ARG *Prototype 161* had been in two of the 2008 IndieCade Showcases @ E3. The Conference Chairs were Clara Fernandez-Vara and Matthew Weise, formerly of the MIT Gambit Lab, both of whom had since moved to NYU. The conference keynotes included Mary Flanagan—a Dartmouth professor whose work included the diversity game *Buffalo*, installations such as *[giant]Joystick*, and books like *Critical Play* and *Values at Play in Digital Games*—whose keynote focused on diversity among players and makers of games. The other keynote was by Uruguayan game designer and scholar Gonzalo Frasca, known for newsgames such as *September 12*, as well as his scholarly work. His keynote focused on play as the opposite not of work but of boredom. The third keynote was Thomas Grip, co-founder of Frictional Games, on the integration of play with story.

The Babycastles Unofficial IndieCade After Party!™ was held at the Manhattan-based artgame gallery and coworking space, a year-round venue for exhibiting artgames that was synergistic with IndieCade. With its funky, graffiti-encrusted walls and novel exhibition strategies, Babycastles was the CBGB of the video game generation—the perfect place to celebrate the second instantiation of IndieCade East, which had self-proclaimed itself as “IndieCade’s sarcastic, all-black-wearing cousin.”



Photo by EMI Spicer



Photo by EMI Spicer



Photo by EMI Spicer



## IndieCade Showcase @ E3 2015

The IndieCade Showcase “oasis” at E3 served as a compelling counterpoint to anxieties about the indiepocalypse. The influence of the indie scene was already surfacing in the design of mainstream games. French studio Dontnod’s *Life Is Strange* had just come out, and everything about it—excluding its studio backing and high production value—seemed indie. Described as an “episodic graphics adventure game,” the coming-of-age story featured a female protagonist, a complex, sometimes controversial narrative, and a time-rewind feature that had all the hallmarks of an IndieCade game. One of the eSports hits of the year was indie darling *Rocket League* by Psyonix. In addition, a number of indie or indie-esque classics were re-released, including Harmonix’s *Amplitude HD* (funded on Kickstarter) and Double Fine’s *Gang Beasts*, which had shown at IndieCade East in 2015 as a sponsored game. In a double coup for Double Fine, a remastered edition of founder Tim Schafer’s LucasArts’ classic *Grim Fandango* was also released that year on PlayStation.

The “vets-going-indie” trend that had emerged in 2014 continued in the 2015 Showcase @ E3. A highlight was *Wattam*, a game that Polygon described as “designed with pure joy as your starting point” (McWhertor 2015). The first commercial release of Funomena, the newly formed studio of Robin Hunnicke and Martin Middleton, and created in collaboration with Keita Takahashi, *Wattam* was coming out on the PlayStation 4 later that year. However, Funomena opted to debut it in the IndieCade booth so they could get more press attention and hang out with other developers.

Among narrative adventure games, perhaps the biggest standout was State of Play’s *Lumino City*, in which a female protagonist must solve engineering-based puzzles. The game was set within an entirely handcrafted, paper-cutout world and won numerous awards including a BAFTA for Artistic Achievement and Most Innovative from Games For Change. Canadian studio Klei Interaction showed *Invisible, Inc.*, a stealth turn-based spy game with stylish graphics that also garnered high acclaim. *Tribal & Error* by Grotman Games, a game built around a language-learning mechanic with a fictional system of glyphs, won a Best of E3 award from Metaleater that year as a result of being exhibited in the IndieCade booth.

iOS games continued to grow, expanding both the scope and audience for games with genre-defying examples such as the mesmerizing *GNOG*, a strange and wonderful 3D puzzle game developed by KO\_OP Mode that would be published by Double Fine the following year; *Metamorphabet* by Vectorpark, an interactive alphabet in which letters transformed into objects; and *Plug & Play*, which collaborators Mario von Rickenbach (creator of 2014 Nominee *Drei*) and Michael Frei referred to as depicting “the binary relationship of two characters and their plugs.”

The local multiplayer and eSports trend had settled in with a regular repertoire of original offerings. In *Chambara*, by USC’s “Team OK,” players camouflaged themselves by hiding against a matching color background; this would become the first game to be published under the USC Games Publishing label in 2016.

Selected VR games included *SMS Racing*, a satirical interactive public service announcement in which players had to drive while reading and replying to text messages by Turbo Button, a Los Angeles-based studio composed of former Georgia Tech students.

The alternative-controller scene also continued to heat up: *Butt Sniffin Pugs* asked players to navigate the world as pugs using a giant tennis ball implanted into a plush toy dog’s bottom. *TRIPAD*, by Alexander Krasij, was a new platform created by configuring three Launchpad DJ controllers in a half-cube configuration. *In Tune*, by Tweed Couch Games, used skin conductance to explore a consent mechanic; pairs of players were shown poses to mimic—or not—depending on their preference.

The Big Games showcased at E3 2015 were particularly intriguing in their use of the physical body to tell a story about embodiment. *FUNBOX*, created by students at USC, was a 3D Twister and tag hybrid in which players donned white coveralls splashed with paint and stood inside a giant box covered with different-colored dots, awaiting directions as to which color to touch with which body part. In *Dysforgiveness*, created during Ludum Dare #32 by Seanna Musgrave and Laura E. Hall, players donned gendered body parts kitted with velcro, then tried to exchange parts with other players to assemble their desired configuration, all without using their hands. Perhaps the most powerful among the physical games was Akira Thompson’s *Ernaybetheywontkillyou*. A single-player larp, it asked players to don a hoodie to run an errand while being subjected to a series of micro- and macro-aggressions typically meted out to African American men. The game mechanic used a counter to tabulate players’ frustration levels, playing out the risks entailed in failing to bottle up their feelings in the face of racial profiling. It was an incredibly powerful game that left some players in tears, a rare occurrence at E3.

**For every mega million dollar production in gaming there are hundreds of small independent games passionately crafted by coders, artists, and story tellers who've traded the safety of corporation for the wings of creative freedom. The memorable experiences in gaming aren't always coming out of Microsoft or Sony, in fact if you want to see the best parts of gaming you'd be hard pressed to find a bigger gathering than IndieCade.**

—Davey Nieves, *The Beat*



## IndieCade Festival 2015

If the so-called indiepocalypse was real, you wouldn’t have known it from Sony’s presence at the 2015 Festival. More than 130 indie games were published on PlayStation that year, and Sony demoed 25 of them at its gigantic tent in IndieCade Village. A number of its indie releases were also timed to coincide with the Festival. Other publishers, while still releasing indies, were trailing far behind Sony at this point. In fact, indie games were becoming successful enough to warrant sequels, such as *Costume Quest 2* by Double Fine and *N++* by Metanet.

Indie developers were also being asked to do contract and licensing work for big studios. The Odd Gentlemen, whose *The Misadventures of P.B. Winterbottom* won the first IndieCade Best Story/World Design Award in 2008, were hired by Activision to do a PlayStation reboot of the classic adventure game *King’s Quest*, the first chapter of which had been released in July on multiple platforms.

The game lineup for the 2015 Festival reflected the boom in indie games and was the largest yet in terms of quantity. Including Nominees, Official Selections, and the Gaming for Everyone initiative with Intel, over 300 games were exhibited, including 43 sponsored games, which was close to twice the 2014 count. These were drawn from over 900 submissions and featured a dizzying array of formats: single-player digital games on 10 different platforms including mobile and desktop; a half-dozen different input devices, some of which were pre-market; over 60 board game submissions; nearly 180 local multiplayer games; and around 160 special handling games that were event- or location-based.

In order to meet this increasing demand in submissions, IndieCade turned, as it always had, to its community. Operations in 2015 were based out of the IndieCade offices about a mile from downtown Culver City, provided as an in-kind sponsorship from Skybound, the production company that owned *The Walking Dead* comic book franchise. From here, the jury committee, which included the Jury Co-Chairs, plus Sam, myself, and a small army of interns, deployed games to a network of 15 international jury hubs that were now fully integrated into the submission software.

Special format games posed distinct challenges because, by definition, they required custom handling. This meant either finding a qualified juror who had already played the game, assigning someone to go to a specific site to play it, or sending a developer to a juror’s site to give them a demo. *Nevermind*, which used biofeedback to capture players’ actual biological responses to influence a story about trauma, was demoed at a jury hub by its designer Erin Reynolds. Game Design Awardee *Line Wobbler* by Robin Baumgarten—a “one-dimensional” game played entirely along a linear LED strip with a door stopper spring interface—was juried by people who’d played it at other events (Martens 2015). The ARG *Eleanor of Ayer* had only been played once in a café in Taiwan, requiring site-specific jurors who spoke only Chinese, as well as volunteers who could translate their reviews into English. Jurors had to be sent to a pub game night in London to play Alistair Aitcheson’s *Codex Bash*, a Nominee and awardee. The creators of Official Selection *Operator*, who referred to themselves as the “Exterminations Department of Killigan Industries,” brought their installation to the Glitch City jury hub. In the game, players were supposed to launch a bomb with support from a physical “customer service” phone that took them through an endless maze of prerecorded help options. Finally, jurors were deployed to alt.ctrl.GDC to play games like Sensible Object’s 2015 Technology Award-winning *Fabulous Beasts*, a hybrid game in which players created an ecosystem of fantastical creatures on an iPad by building a tower with proprietary pieces. After its international debut at the Festival, the game was renamed *Beasts of Balance* and funded via Kickstarter in 2016—earning nearly \$350,000 over its \$50,000 pledge goal. It would go on to launch as a commercial product in 2017, and garnered a distribution deal with Apple Stores.

As always, indies were moving forward by looking backward for inspiration, and the most notable trend of 2015 was the resuscitation of the long-dead genre of interactive cinema. Initially thought to be the “future” of interactive media, it showed promise in the early 1990s with works such as *The 7th Guest* (Trilobyte, 1993), *Voyeur* (Philips Interactive/Interplay/MacPlay, 1993), *Burn Cycle* (TripMedia, 1994), *In the 1st Degree*, (Bröderbund, 1995), and *Johnny Mnemonic* (Sony Imagesoft, 1995). But by 2000, interactive cinema had gone the way of laserdiscs and Philips CD-i console, forgotten platforms that prioritized video fidelity over real-time 3D animation.





## IndieCade Festival 2015 (Con't)

Nobody would have guessed that FMV—Full-Motion Video—would resurface as a catchphrase 20 years after the first E3 expo, where these genres had once been so prominent. Indeed, no one could have predicted that an interactive film (*Her Story*, by Sam Barlow) would take not only the IndieCade Grand Jury Award in 2015 but also go on to receive the Independent Games Festival Grand Prize in 2016. Another noteworthy interactive cinema accomplishment was *Pry*, by Tender Claws, a USC thesis project that was curated into the Festival and IndieCade East for its novel modes of interacting with live video, as well as excellent writing, acting, and directing. As the name suggests, *Pry* used the multi-touch capability of the iOS platform to take players into the mind and memories of a soldier suffering from PTSD. It earned a place on the App Store's Best of 2015 Spotlight list, where it was described as “a visceral, evocative, and sometimes heart-wrenching story with many hidden secrets to uncover” (Apple 2014; Eadicicco 2015).

IndieCade's Night Games, curated by Festival Director Sam Roberts, were particularly memorable in 2015. They included such visually spectacular games as Kaho Abe's *Hotaru*, in which two players collaborated using a gauntlet and backpack outfitted with Arduinos and lights, and *Maze of Heart*, a Kinect-based game in which one player moves objects around in a robot's body using their own body as the interface. *Pixel Prison Blues* (by BumbleBear, creators of *Killer Queen Arcade*) was a kind of cops-and-robbers, team-based prison break game that ran on ESI Design's proprietary ESC platform and allowed 30 players to interact en masse on a large screen using iOS devices.

One positive thing to arise out of the maelstrom of 2014's Gamergate was IndieCade's Gaming for Everyone partnership with Intel. The Gaming for Everyone Pavilion Hosted by Intel was co-chaired by Charles Babb and myself in my capacity as IndieCade's Inclusiveness Chair, with support from GaymerX/MidBoss' Toni Rocca. The aim was to showcase both gamemakers and organizations that promoted or embodied diversity, as well as provide them with travel funds to attend IndieCade. These included groups such as Games for Change, Different Games, The AbleGamers Charity, Code Liberation, LACE (Liberation Arts and Community Engagement) Games, and Girls Make Games.

Gaming for Everyone also included a “Demo Lounge” that included *Hue*, by Henry Hoffman and Dan Da Rocca, with a central mechanic focused on color; *The Joylancer: Legendary Motor Knight*, a racing video game featuring an androgynous protagonist by queer-artist collective alpha six productions; and *We are Fine, We'll Be Fine*, a hybrid tactile board-audio game exploring experiences of marginalization created by Team Sagittarius

from Concordia University's Critical Hit: Game Incubator. There were also informal salons and sessions, a discussion with the International Game Developers Association's Allies Special Interest Group moderated by Josh Samuels, and journalists providing different perspectives on game creation and criticism. Centrally located in IndieCade Village, the Gaming for Everyone Pavilion became one of the most highly-trafficked venues at the 2015 Festival, attracting a broad swath of constituents and avoiding the classic game-industry pitfall of becoming a place where only marginalized people went to see each others' work. USC also hosted QGCon, the Queerness in Games Conference, the day after IndieCade in an effort to continue discussions among developers who had traveled to Los Angeles for the Festival.

Even with the safety and cachet of a designated space sponsored by Intel, people were still uneasy in the post-Gamergate atmosphere of harassment. So, in conjunction with the Gaming for Everyone initiative, IndieCade released its first formal inclusiveness statement. With the support of an inclusiveness committee and in collaboration with GaymerX, a “Statement of Values” was drafted and posted onsite at Registration and the IndieCade website. Rather than a list of “shalt nots,” the approach enlisted the help of all IndieCade participants in supporting and taking ownership of IndieCade's core value of inclusiveness. In the event of a problem, “NPCs” (a game abbreviation for nonplayer characters)—volunteers who could provide outside intervention if necessary—were positioned throughout the Festival. However, they were seldom called upon to do so, since the community supported one another in resolving issues.

IndieXchange, which took place the day before the Conference and Festival, had grown exponentially under the guidance of Jeremy Gibson Bond, Juan Gril, and Kelly Divine. Located in the Culver City Veterans Memorial Building, it included a massive Game Tasting where people went to show and discover new work and network. IndieCade facilitated meetings between potential collaborators as well as sponsors and developers, including Oculus, who continued to benefit from its ongoing relationships with content creators, and Premiere Sponsor Sony, who published a record number of indie games in 2015.

Analog games of various genres were experiencing a renaissance, very much in line with the broader trend towards more social games. Highlights included *MONARCH* by Mary Flanagan's Tiltfactor, a game that put players in the role of princesses who had to vie for their mother's crown by developing the most successful leadership style. The Developers Choice Award went to Big Games Official Selection *Rose MacBeth* by Wise Guys Events, a blindfolded tag game played with roses and daggers.

With all these developments, there remained a strong core of single-player digital games. On the narrative side were buzzworthy titles like Star Maid Games' *Cibele*, another example of Nina Freeman's adept experiments with short-form narrative, and *Emily is Away* by Kyle Seeley, both of which explored mediated relationships; the poignant *a•part•ment: a separated place*, by the Elsewhere Company & Friends, which used objects to tell the story of a fractured relationship. Less story-driven and more choreography-meets-interactive-painting, *Gathering Sky* by A Stranger Gravity was a “zen-style” game where players control a flock of birds against a watercolor sky; it was a Digital Selection and PlayStation-sponsored game in 2015.

There were a number of memorable digital Nominees: Squad's *Kerbal Space Program*, a game where players manage a space program for an alien civilization, garnered both critical acclaim and commercial success and spawned an educational edition; the BAFTA award-winning *Prune*, by Polyculture, was based on pruning a kind of digital bonsai tree to maximize its sun exposure.

The Conference Co-Chairs were John Sharp, Richard Lemarchand, and game journalist Cara Ellison, who continued the tradition of organizing talks and sessions around current conversations among gamemakers. A follow-up to the *Love and Rejection* exhibition at IndieCade East, Naomi Clark (developer of *Consentacle*), Nina Freeman (creator of *how do You Do it?*), and Robert Yang (developer of *Cobra Club* and *Succulent*) shared a keynote conversation on intimacy and sexuality in games.

The GameU program, targeted to teachers, students, and aspiring gamemakers, continued to grow under the leadership of Chris DeLeon and Jeremy Gibson Bond, and in 2015, included a Gaming for Everyone track with diverse developers and journalists sharing their work, experiences, and insights. As part of the Gaming for Everyone initiative, Intel hosted a town hall moderated by Jane Pinckard on the topic of diversity and inclusiveness, which allowed attendees to give voice to their concerns, share experiences, and brainstorm solutions.

The 2015 Festival awards were once again hosted at Fais Do-Do, with a new hosting team of Ashly Burch—an actor known for her voice acting in video games—and game designer Teddy Diefenbach, who also wrote the script for the awards. Burch's hilarious “Social Justice Warrior” episode of *Hey Ash, Whatcha Playin'?* was also featured at the Independent Games Festival awards that year. The Awards Jury Chair was Colleen Macklin of Local No. 12 (*The Meta Game*) and Parsons School of Design - The New School. The awards were produced by TJ Moore, with music by “Sum” Roshmond Patten.

With so many hybrid, physical, and non-digital games taking awards, the digital awardees stood out as particularly noteworthy this year, primarily for how different they were from one another. *Memory of a Broken Dimension*, a game that takes place in a moody cyberworld of digital relics, won two awards for Visual and Audio Design. The Audience Choice Award went to *BADBLOOD*, a local multiplayer game by NYU student Winnie Song, which became an Indie eSports favorite. The Story/World Design Award went to *Donut County* by Ben Esposito. Originally submitted in 2012 as a proof-of-concept prototype, the game went through several iterations, including a name change brought on by concerns about cultural appropriation, and emerged a winner in 2015. *Donut County* was published on PlayStation 4 and iOS and made the front page of the App Store in fall 2018.

The 2015 Trailblazer Award went to Brenda Laurel, a pioneer in interaction design and games at both Apple and Atari in the 1980s. She authored the 1991 book *Computers as Theatre*, a proto “game studies” book before there even existed such a thing. She was also among the earliest “first-wave” VR artists, and in 1996, she founded Purple Moon Software, which emerged from Interval Research, a technology incubator started by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, and was one of the first studies in the 1990s Girl Games movement.

Rather than give an acceptance speech, Brenda participated in an engaging conversation with games journalist and then-producer of the web series *Geek & Sundry*, Rob Manuel. Brenda represented a legacy of proactive and proto-activist approaches dating back to the earliest days of the medium. At the Conference, she also participated in a historical discussion on the history of Girl Games with prior Trailblazer Megan Gaiser and Emma Westecott. At a moment when the game industry had reached a crisis point with issues related to diversity, Brenda's experience provided a long view of where indie games sat in the larger story arc.

### Coda

A couple of weeks after the 2015 Festival, John Sharp posted a blog announcing his resignation from his long-standing role as IndieCade Conference Co-Chair, a role he had held for six years since first offering to do it at the 2009 Festival. A champion of artists, John shared his concern that the Conference and Festival models were cost-prohibitive to those working primarily as artists, who often did not have the resources for its requisite travel regimen. This criticism was legitimate, but its solution was confounded by IndieCade's own struggle for sustainability. This struggle would become more palpable in the years that followed, with multiple changes in venue and major shifts in the indie ecosystem's economic landscape.



Photo by EMI Spicer

Photo by EMI Spicer



# 2016 Beyond Screens

## IndieCade Milestones

IndieCade Festival leaves Culver City

IndieCade Europe Launches

Launch of IndieCade Twitch Store

## IndieCade Events

IndieCade East, April 29–May 1, Museum of the Moving Image, New York City

IndieCade Showcase @ E3, June 14–June 16, Los Angeles Convention Center

IndieCade Festival, October 14–16, USC School of Cinematic Arts, Los Angeles

The two big stories of 2016 were the arrival of commercial VR—the release of the Oculus Rift consumer headset and Sony VR (formerly Project Morpheus)—and the mainstreaming of alternate reality in the form of *Pokémon GO*. Indie games were an integral part of both developments. *Pokémon GO* was the successor of ARG cult-favorite *Ingress*, created by Niantic, which spun out of Google in 2015. By the end of summer 2016, *Pokémon GO* had 500 million downloads worldwide (Perez 2016). The game became so mainstream that presidential candidate Hillary Clinton made reference to it on the campaign trail, with the infamous quip-gone-meme, “*Pokémon Go* to the polls!” (Grebeby 2016).

By the time Version 1 of the Oculus Rift consumer headset launched, two generations of its developer kit had already been in the wild. As a result, with the complicity of IndieCade, there were already numerous developers working on the platform and playing one another’s games on Steam by the time the consumer device went live. Sony was also in the process of cutting deals with indies for launch titles for its own VR headset, which included many developers they met through IndieCade. Both devices were released the week of the 2016 Festival.

This same year, the Festival moved from Culver City to USC’s Los Angeles campus. Diversity continued to grow, as reflected by its leadership and awards. Mattie Brice, designer of 2013 Official Selection *Mainichi*, joined the staff as Associate Director, and a record number of LGBTQIAP+ creators—particularly transgender gamemakers—took home trophies.

In 2016, IndieCade also launched its downloadable game store on itch.io, which helped address the “discoverability” issue by creating a centralized place for people to access games that had been in the Festival.



# IndieCade East 2016

IndieCade’s 2015–2016 season culminated with the fourth IndieCade East. The schedule at the Museum of the Moving Image enabled a shift to late April/early May, avoiding the snowstorms that had plagued the event in previous years. The Co-Chairs were Toni Pizza, who had exhibited several games in previous IndieCade events, and Simon Ferrari, who had spearheaded IndieCade’s eSports initiatives.

The 2016 IndieCade East exhibition, *Strange Arcade*, carried over from the 2015 trend of custom and embodied controllers, a theme that would grow even more at the main Festival later that year. *Strange Arcade* showcased a wide range of experiments that were both literally and figuratively “outside the box.” Curated by GJ Lee and Brian S. Chung (aka The Sheep’s Meow), with Sam Roberts and Museum of the Moving Image’s Jason Eppink, the exhibition focused on a wide array of new physical and embodied control schemes.

There were games using stuffed animals as an interface, including *Butt Sniffin Pugs* and *Veterinarian’s Hospital: Ruff Day*. *Anamorphic Agency*, a game about sleep paralysis, used a NeuroSky brainwave reader in conjunction with an Oculus Rift headset. *Hello, Operator!* by Em Lazer-Walker used Arduino controllers to convert an antique 1920s-era telephone switchboard through which players answered the phone and connected calls using old-school patchbay cables. *Crank Tank* used a homemade wooden crank to operate a digital tank.

Many of these games had a spectator aspect, such as *MASK* by Laura Juo-Hsin Chen, which used a series of wearable mobile VR headresses to connect to the virtual world. Alternative controllers were also used to make social statements, such as *Infinit-O*—an installation piece by Los Angeles artist Corazon Del Sol with Glitch City co-founder Archie Prakash and indie Oscar Alvarez—about female power and expression, which was played with a plush vagina controller created by Louis Roots of Melbourne-based SK Games (a connection made in part through IndieCade).

The “Beyond Screens” trend also extended into weekend events. Night Games included *RainboDisko*, a tabletop game played on a record player. *In Time* used people’s bodies as electrical conductors to navigate consent while getting into a variety of funny poses with one another. Holy Wow Studios’ *Icarus Proudbottom’s Typing Party* was played with two keyboards plugged into the same computer. *Sboal*, an illuminated table game by Owen Bell, Tony Higuchi, Titouan Millet, Tobias Wehrum, and Kailin Zhu, asked players to care for an ecosystem.

There were also local massively multiplayer games such as Em Lazer-Walker’s *Chirp Club*, an arcade-style jousting game which up to 100 players could join via web browser on their phones. *The Adventure Society*, a single-player participatory/immersive theatre piece by The State of Play (not to be confused with the digital game studio State of Play), foreshadowed a trend in participatory performance that would come into full view at IndieCade West later that year.

The IndieCade East 2016 Conference, chaired by Jennie Robinson Faber (co-founder of Dames Making Games and Gamma Space) and Henry Faber (co-founder of Bento Miso, an IndieCade jury hub) of Toronto, had three overarching themes: Alternate Universe, which focused on design lessons from other indie media; System Update, focused on communities, commerce, and institutions; and Weird Science, about tools and technologies that were changing games. Some speaker and topic highlights included: keynote Richard Marks from Sony’s PlayStation Magic Lab on best practices for creating VR; Los Angeles media artist Kate Parsons on interdisciplinary art and technology performances; Yetunde Folajimi, on Nigeria Geek Girls Club, her organization that teaches African girls how to code; and Felan Parker, a Toronto-based professor, curator, and indie-games scholar, on diversity. IndieCade’s serial Conference Co-Chair, John Sharp, and I staged a conversation about the challenges of working within an arts context, which dovetailed into an initiative to better address the distinct needs of artgames practitioners. Given the wide interest in this topic, it’s fitting that the after-party was once again held at New York’s hippest “artcade”/gallery, Babycastles.





## IndieCade Showcase @ E3 2016

The two big trends of the 2016 E3's mainstream offerings were a continuing battle for fidelity at the expense of gameplay innovation and the release of Sony VR, scheduled for an October launch that would coincide with the IndieCade Festival. The fare at IndieCade's Showcase @ E3 distinguished itself with an array of diverse voices and characters. Two standouts—games that you would never expect to see at E3—both focused on empathy and went on to win awards at the Festival. *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* was a unique take on the first-person shooter in which the player was a photojournalist assigned to cover the 1979 Iranian Revolution while trying to avoid being killed, which won the Grand Jury Award. In *We are Chicago*, by Culture Shock Games, which was developed in collaboration with residents of Chicago's South Side, players had to solve the disappearance of the protagonist's friend while navigating the complexities and dangers of a troubled neighborhood. It would go on to win the Developers Choice Award. Although conventional in some ways, these games demonstrated that video games could be an art form that tackled tough topics in meaningful ways.

The Showcase also featured two explicitly feminist works: *#Feminism*, presented by co-editor Lizzie Stark, an anthology of live action role-playing (larp) games with themes of gender and feminism; and Corazon Del Sol's *Infinit-O*, featuring a furry vagina controller, which also featured in the *Strange Arcade* exhibition at IndieCade East 2016. In spite of challenging the E3 status quo, *Infinit-O* received a Best of E3 award from *GAMBIT Magazine*, which captured the game's stunning contrast with the rest of E3:

*I loved my time with the game, but what I found most interesting was that people kept walking by laughing, or chatting uncomfortably about the game and its controller. It's really funny how one can get done playing a game that lets you take a chainsaw to people, run over civilians, kill innocents . . . and all sorts of insane and realistic brutality, but the idea of a female body part made people uncomfortable.* (Luis 2016)

By the 2016 Showcase @ E3, it was clear that local multiplayer games were here to stay. Gamemakers were continuing to play with the multi-player affordances of tablets with games like *Clapper*, by Bridgeside Interactive, which used an ingeniously simple patty-cake mechanic where players clapped their hands together above a prone iPad, which captured their input through the camera and microphone. A PC standout was *INVERSUS*, by Hypersect, an action/territory game where players shot to create paths in their own colors; the game was released a month later on PlayStation 4.

The tabletop game selection included *Pass the Buck: A Game of Corporate Responsibility Management* by Carol Mertz, in which players tried to slough off their corporate job assignments to others while avoiding getting caught. Another was Cardboard Fortress' *RESISTOR\_*, a game where players try to build a circuit to their opponents by flipping cards. A great example of the various interdependencies in the indie ecosystem, *RESISTOR\_* was initially created at a monthly game jam at Cipher Prime Studios, whose games *Auditorium* and *Fractal* were both Nominees in the 2010 Festival. *RESISTOR\_* was funded in a 2015 Kickstarter where the team's ask of \$9,500 ballooned to \$23,346 by the time the pledge period ended.

The influence of escape rooms was also rippling through the indie scene. A fairly new form with roots in digital-adventure games, according to a 2016 report on the *Room Escape Artist* website, the industry had gone from zero escape rooms at the start of 2014 to around 1,000 in the US by the time of E3 2016 (Spira & Spira 2018). *Escape Room in a Box: The Werewolf Experiment*, by Wild Optimists Ariel Rubin and Juliana Patel, translated the collaborative puzzle-solving of an escape room and repackaged it as a tabletop game full of unique tangible artifacts. Martzi Campos' USC MFA project, *Beautiful Corner*, was a kind of fairytale-escape-room-meets-adventure-game composed of a lovingly crafted physical room with puzzles and clues to help players piece together the story.



After seven years of growth in the heart of Culver City, the parking lot that had transformed annually into IndieCade Village was finally slated for development. Without this critical space, the Festival was impossible to execute, leaving it homeless. Tracy Fullerton stepped up to the plate and offered to host the Festival at the USC's School of Cinematic Arts.

One of the strengths of the USC facility was that it was more compressed than the sprawling, diasporic layout of Culver City—but it was also more isolated. Intermingling with the general public had been a great way to gain exposure for the Festival, especially in the early days, yielding a spate of local drop-ins amid the residential neighborhoods and highly trafficked businesses. However, USC's professional-grade cinematic sound stages afforded a higher degree of aesthetic control, infrastructure, and technology, and powering IndieCade Village had complex logistics. The School of Cinematic Arts also had courtyards and parklike areas that were ideal for tabletop, big, and night games; large on-site theatres for keynote and panel sessions; and a screening room that was spacious enough to host IndieCade's awards gala.

It was ironic that the 2016 Festival was hosted at USC's School of Cinematic Arts during a year that saw a dramatic reduction in the number of games played on screens. From its inception, IndieCade had embraced games that broke the mold, but screen-based games had still dominated for most of its lifespan. Now, games were moving beyond screens in a range of ways.

This was enabled in part by many new developments in the game ecosystem. The availability, accessibility, lower cost, and ease of devices like Arduino microcontrollers, RFID (radio-frequency identification), and infrared allowed for new hybrid physical-digital approaches and inspired creators to think further outside the box and use conventional hardware in novel ways. One example was Technology Award recipient *Threadsteading*, by Gillian Smith and Disney Research, a strategic territory board game played on an electronic embroidery machine attached to an Arduino controller.

## IndieCade Festival 2016

While this was a one-off installation, conventional wisdom held that trying to mass-produce custom hardware was a losing battle (although Harmonix had already disproven this assertion with *Guitar Hero* over a decade earlier). But games like 2015 IndieCade Technology Award Winner *Beasts of Balance* paved the way for new game genres that included mass-produced custom devices, such as 2016 Nominee *Blinks* (then called *Automatiles*), a set of intelligent illuminated tiles that could be reprogrammed to create a wide array of games. Like Harmonix, *Blinks* began as a master's project of an MIT Media Lab student, Jonathan Bobrow, who used it to launch his company, Move38. Another was *Octobo*, by Thinker-Tinker, which also began its life as a master's thesis project, although it was more of a tangible media/mixed-reality product. An iPhone inserted into the front of a stuffed octopus created its animated face, bringing the character to life and allowing the player to interact with it through detachable objects found in an accompanying book. Although it would have been a longshot as a commercial product even five years earlier, by the time of this writing, *Octobo* was in production and taking pre-orders.

In 2016, the "potential" for VR touted by pundits was finally being realized and exceeded by people working outside of traditional media. Some examples were Logan Olson's *SoundStage*—an immersive "one-person band" that allowed players to position their own instruments from a variety of options, had an elegant interface design, and was fun to watch people play—earned the Audio Award. Other standouts included *Floor Plan*, by Turbo Button, a comical game where players solved puzzles by going between floors in an elevator, and David O'Reilly's *Everything* (later released on PlayStation 4), where players could choose to inhabit any object and see the world from its perspective.

Because of its longstanding support of VR, IndieCade was a perfect resource for building a robust catalog. Samsung had released its Gear VR (with underlying technology from Oculus) a little less than a year before, and Google was also investing in the VR mobile space. In addition, a number of hybrid AR/VR platforms were on the horizon, some of which looked to IndieCade and the indie community for new content.





## IndieCade Festival 2016 (Con't)

And then, of course, there was the dizzying array of innovations being carried out with unaided physical objects. *Thug Life*, Horseshoe Games' board game about urban street warfare, launched its successful Kickstarter the week of the Festival. *Go Extinct!*, by STEAM Galaxy, had a core mechanic revolving around building evolutionary trees. The Interaction Award for 2016 went to an edible board game—*The Order of the Oven Mitt* by Jenn Sandercock—a Global Game Jam game inspired by the theme of ritual, in which players' induction into knighthood is executed by playing (and eating) a cookie-based strategic board game.

Even as *Pokémon GO* had brought the ARG and AR forms into the mainstream, indie developers were continuing to push the envelope in a genre that had long been an IndieCade favorite. *Sherlock Holmes and the Internet of Things*, by Columbia Digital Storytelling Lab and Nick Fortugno (one of the founders of the Come Out & Play Festival), used augmented reality and smart objects to allow players to create stories about crime scenes. The designs for the game artifacts—based on objects from Sherlock Holmes stories—were crowdsourced through an online MOOC (Massively Open Online Course).

As these various areas continued to flourish, 2016 brought some new emerging genres and communities to IndieCade that had not previously been engaged, including immersive theatre and escape rooms, and, in some cases, both. Live action role-playing games (larps) had long been a part of IndieCade, but they became particularly prevalent in 2016. On the comical side was *Ghost Court*, by Jason Morningstar of Bully Pulpit Games, a comical courtroom reality show that played out civil trials between ghosts and the living. Night Game *Clue House*, by longtime favorite Wise Guys Events, was a live-action adaptation of the classic board game *Clue*, with players trying to commit murder by getting alone in a room with one other player and a specific weapon. On the more serious side was *Keeping the Candles Lit*, by Shoshana Kessock, about three generations of Jewish women impacted by the Holocaust.

Alongside larps, IndieCade had also been tracking the rise of immersive theatre, which was slower to come into the fray. But the 2016 Festival saw multiple entries in this category. One, *Hamlet-Mobile* by Capital W, was a reinterpretation of Shakespeare's classic play deployed to multiple locations via minivan, which won the Game Design Award.

*Hamlet-Mobile* was not the only Nominee inspired by the Bard's classic tragedy. *Elsinore*, a digital game by Golden Glitch Studios, is best described as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* meets *Groundhog Day* from the point of view of Ophelia, who, looping through the same sequence of events, tries to avert tragedy.

In addition to escape rooms and immersive theatre were hybrids that combined live and digital elements. *Séance*, from Twocan Consortium, used its supernatural context to integrate artifacts, puzzles, and special effects. *Six Ghosts and a Pie* was described as a "micro amusement park" ride by its creators at Two Bit Circus, whose founders included Brent Bushnell (son of the inventor of *Pong*), former designers from Walt Disney Imagineering and IDEO, and the former Creative Vice President of MTV. In *Bad News*, by University of Southern California, Santa Cruz's Expressive Intelligence Studio, a live actor interacted with a single player via prompts from a sophisticated artificial intelligence program.

Digital Games shown in 2016 tackled complex personal, political, and cultural issues. *Civil Unrest*, by IV Productions/Leonard Menchiari, looked at protest through a systems lens, creating a realistic crowd-control simulation to explore the social dynamics between police and protesters during a riot. Quicksand Games presented *Antariksha Sanchar: Episode Zero*, a science-fiction adventure game and the first major culturally driven game to come out of India. *Lieve Oma*, by Florian Veltman, was a lyrical game—almost an interactive painting—with the simple premise of picking mushrooms with your grandmother. *Liyla and the Shadows of War*, by Rasheed Abueideh, used stylized black-and-white animation to tell the story of a Palestinian girl trapped in the perpetual war zone of the Gaza Strip.

Games continued to grow as an expressive art form through examples like *Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor*, by Sunday Month, which upended classic science-fiction tropes by putting players in the role of low-skilled workers in a futuristic world. *Killing Time at Lightspeed*, a Twine adventure game, was a dark comedy conveying the deterioration of humanity via text messages as players hurtled further away from their home planet. And, as always, indie developers made cool games about programming, like *Beglitched* by Hexacutable (Jenny Jiao Hsia and AP Thomson), which immersed players in a magical world of hacking and debugging.

Alongside the exhibition were a range of sessions targeted to specific subcommunities. IndieXchange, which took place the day before the Festival, included a number of practical sessions ranging from hands-on workshops such as paper-and-pencil prototyping (a standard practice in digital game design), creating non-photorealistic VR, community building, starting your own company, and game design as a form of protest.

The Conference was restructured to more of a summit format and rebranded Think:Indie. A number of topics were explored, including the challenge of maintaining sustainable careers in both indie and artgames—an issue that John Sharp had brought to the fore in his blog post following the previous year's Festival—as well as the sustainability of IndieCade itself. Keynote conversations included Tessa Blake and Tracy Fullerton on "Creative Leadership in the 21st Century," which dealt, in part, with issues around diversity in leadership. Another was "Visiting the Past and Future of Games" with Cyan Worlds' Rand Miller—creator of *Myst*—who received the Trailblazer Award that year. Having written my PhD dissertation, and later a book (Pearce 2009), about refugees in Miller's online game *Uru*, the two of us had a lot to talk about. Our conversation spanned the origins of his first independent game, *The Manhole*, to his newest indie game-in-progress, *Obduction*, which his studio had funded through Kickstarter.

The GameU program supported aspiring and beginner game designers with presentations about designing "games for change," best practices in VR, and cinematic storytelling. I ran a board game modification workshop with some school groups using Mary Flanagan's *Values at Play Grow-A-Game Cards*, as well as a team-building speed-dating game I designed in which people had to create superhero characters of themselves with game-design stats.

Held in USC's luxurious Norris Cinema Theatre, the 2016 awards stage was by far the most diverse in IndieCade history. The Grand Jury Award went to *1979 Revolution: Black Friday*, and the Developer Choice Award went to *We Are Chicago*. Many of the award-winners were teams led by women, which put a decidedly feminine spin on gaming; *The Order of the Oven Mitt* won Interaction Design, *Threadsteading* won the Technology Award, *Infinite-O* won Visual Design, and *Hamlet-Mobile* won Game Design. The Story/World Design Award went to *Diary of a Spaceport Janitor*.

Audience Choice went to *Bad News*, while Media Choice went to *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter*, by Seemingly Pointless Games (James and Joe Cox), an ASCII game about a teenager looking at pornography for the first time. The 2016 Game Changer was Toni Rocca, co-founder of GaymerX and MidBoss, and the Trailblazer Award went to Rand Miller for his pioneering contribution to the adventure-game genre. The awards gala was hosted by game actress Sarah Elmaleh, who had previously contributed to IndieCade through her volunteer efforts, and Asher Vollmer, who had shown games in IndieCade since he was in high school. As part of the IndieCade family, both brought a lively spirit and levity to the proceedings.





# IndieCade Europe 2016

Although IndieCade had hosted prior showcases at GameCity Nottingham in its early years, there was a longtime aspiration to launch a self-contained event in Europe. European studios had been engaged from the very beginning, making up over a third of games in the inaugural Festival. Through an introduction made by Global Game Jam's Susan Gold, Stephanie collaborated with Olivier Lejade, who connected her with curator Simon Bachelier and Capital Games. The first official IndieCade Europe was hosted at the Conservatoire national des arts et métiers (CNAM) in Paris on November 18–19, 2016. The event was supported by Capital Games, the City of Paris, Île-de-France regional government, the French government (DIRECCTE), and the European Union (ERDF).

The Programme Chair was Martin Pichlmair, a member of the Copenhagen Game Collective and Head of the Games Programme at IT University of Copenhagen, who had worked on *And Yet It Moves* (2009) and *Radio Flare* (2008), among other IndieCade games. Martin worked alongside Simon Bachelier and Vlambeer's Rami Ismael, a Dutch-Egyptian developer known for his talks on diversity, who helped with networking and organizing.

IndieCade seemed right at home as the twenty-first century counterpart to CNAM's artifacts of art, design, innovation, and technology, which included protobicycles and medieval flying machines. Its cozy café served as a social hub throughout the weekend. A smaller-scale version of the US Festival with a focus on European developers, IndieCade Europe 2016 included the typical range of digital and analog games, as well as a VR showcase.

Speakers included Rami Ismael, who talked about his experiences as an indie making his hit *Ridiculous Fishing*; Adriel Wallick, who discussed putting on Train Jam, an annual game jam that takes place on a train in the US en route to the Game Developers Conference; Michel Ancel, creator of the *Rayman* franchise. The keynote was by Siobhan Reddy, co-founder and studio director of Media Molecule, which had leveraged the success of its indie cult-hit *Rag Doll Kung Fu* to create the Sony PlayStation hit *LittleBigPlanet*.

Over 40 games were shown, including sponsor games, some drawn from prior events that year. Games that were new for IndieCade Europe included *Shadowmatic* by Triada Studio, an iPad game where the player rotates an abstract object until it resolves into a recognizable shadow, and *Metrico+* from Digital Dreams, whose 3D world and game mechanics revolved around infographics.

Two IndieCade Europe exclusives stand out for their playful approaches to intimacy. The first was *Smooch Station*, created by "The Smoochers," whose team included former IndieCade intern and then-IT University of Copenhagen student Raghav Bashyal. This 2015 ALT CTRL Game Jam winner had each player manipulate and send feedback with their mouth via a (disinfected) pacifier. The other game was *Surrender* by Zack Wood, an American ex-pat living in Berlin, along with Sarah Homewood, Olli Harjola, and Johannes Følsgaard. Created at Lyst (pronounced "loost"), an annual summit and game jam held in Denmark around themes of sex and intimacy, it involved two players competing to touch a third player's hands with objects in order to produce the most pleasurable effect.

IndieCade Europe included its own award show, which was produced and hosted by the Copenhagen Game Collective, whose roots were entangled with IndieCade. Among the awards given was a Media Choice Award for *Old Man's Journey*, by Broken Rules, which went on to win 16 more awards at other festivals, bringing the studio full circle from its first year at IndieCade.

Following the first IndieCade Europe, freelance artist Adriel Beaver organized an unofficial after-party entitled "La Petite IND&CADENCE," a playful mashup of English and French words. Promoted as an alt-game and music event with an emphasis on diversity, it was hosted at a nightclub/restaurant called La Panthère Ose, also a pun that loosely translates into both "The Pink Panther" and "The Audacious Panther."





# 2017 The Post-Publisher Era

## IndieCade Milestones

IndieCade Festival Celebrates its 10th Year

Move to Japanese American Museum

## IndieCade Events

#ResistJam, March 3–11, distributed

IndieCade Showcase @ E3, June 13–15, Los Angeles Convention Center

IndieCade Festival, October 6–8, Japanese American Museum, Los Angeles

IndieCade Europe, October 30–31, Conservatoire national des arts et métiers (CNAM), Paris

IndieCade's 10-year celebration illustrated the transformation of the indie ecosystem during the preceding decade and revealed the community's cohesiveness in response to an industry in transition. Indies had managed to survive the so-called indiepocalypse, and the indie game community likewise held steady. As Molleindustria's Paolo Pedercini put it in his IndieCade Europe keynote that year, in spite of the fundamental conundrums of capitalism, "we won" (Pedercini 2017). By 2017, opportunities had grown, and it was commonplace to see IndieCade games published across a variety of platforms. Students were both entering and leaving college with aspirations of independence. For many, it became possible to make a living as an indie developer, often through a combination of creative strategies including contract work on other indies' projects, academic grants, and selling original work.

In 2016, VR settled into the mainstream. There had been no fewer than eight VR headset product launches the prior year, including the Oculus consumer headset, Sony VR, the HoloLens, and HTC Vive (also an IndieCade sponsor). In addition, there was a push by companies working in low-end VR, such as Google Cardboard and its imitators. For \$12, you could drop your phone into a plastic headset and watch 3D films on YouTube. Indies that had been on the front end of the new wave of VR were rewarded with VR launch titles on PlayStation.

Major shifts were underway in terms of platforms. At E3 2017, Sony announced it was stepping away from publicly supporting indies, even while publishing a record number of them and announcing that they would start publishing on non-Sony platforms. Later that year, Microsoft shut down its Xbox Live Indie Games marketplace to make way for indie distribution on its newer platform, Xbox One. These developments may have appeared to some as proof of the impending indiepocalypse, but other trends suggested otherwise. In 2017, games remained the top category in the App Store. This was very far from an indiepocalypse. As it turns out, what was really going on was that consoles were declining incrementally while mobile was ascending at a much more rapid rate (Wijman 2018).

As some publishers' interest in indies seemed to be waning, so was publishers' relevance to indies. This manifested in a couple of ways. First, there were increasing avenues of self-funding and self-publishing that streamlined production and eliminated the need for publishers, as well as costly ports to proprietary platforms (which developers often had to furnish on their own dime). Indie game developers found, as musicians had in prior years, that they could actually make *more* money by self-publishing and selling fewer units than they might through a formal publishing relationship. Mobile, with its publisher-free model, became the biggest commercial driver in the space.

Crowdfunding enabled projects to have reasonable budgets without the need for creative compromise (although it took a *lot* of time and energy away from the development process). And while the *ratio* of video games getting funded on Kickstarter had decreased, overall, the *number* of games funded had plateaued and remained much the same since 2013. If you include tabletop games, 2017 was a record year, with over \$162 million pledged to successful projects (Bidaux 2018). Valve's Steam publishing platform was a pioneer in enabling indies to reach a wider audience—but at the 2017 Festival, the buzz was, to quote developers who attended, "Steam is not your friend." The issue stemmed from a perceived lack of developer support and the sense that Steam Greenlight, which funded projects based on audience ratings, had created a "tyranny of the masses," inheriting some of the more toxic aspects of gamer culture.

On the other hand, there were platforms like Kickstarter, itch.io, and Twitch.tv, as well as festivals like IndieCade, that actively supported developers and enabled them to cultivate direct relationships with their fans. These allowed developers to interact directly with their audiences, eliminating the middleman. This meant that public-facing events like IndieCade, where fans could actually *meet* independent developers, became increasingly important. The ecosystem had thus evolved from the original model of getting your game in front of a publisher to getting it in front of the public. As such, getting into IndieCade's Showcase @ E3 had become more about press coverage and less about publishing deals.

At the same time, new players started getting into the game who were not game industry publishers in the traditional sense. Amazon and Google, for instance, started publishing games, and Oculus was both promoting and funding game development. Apple, which was arguably garnering the greatest benefit from the indie surge, would not come on board until a couple of years later. Finally, other game genres were becoming increasingly attractive to developers; board games actually began outpacing digital games on Kickstarter (Bidaux 2018).

In addition, emerging genres such as site-specific and event-based games, which included escape rooms, installations, and theatrical experiences, were radically changing the landscape. These borrowed from economic models more adjacent to theatre and attraction design. Escape rooms and immersive theatre were harbingers of where things were headed. While games of these types challenged IndieCade's own funding infrastructure, they also amplified the Festival's relevance: many IndieCade 2017 games could not be seen anywhere else.

Despite all this, in its 12th year of Showcases and 10th year of Festivals, IndieCade's mission had changed little: to celebrate and support creative innovation in games and interactive media.

The year 2017 was also challenging in terms of world events. To the dismay of many, the UK voted to exit the European Union, and Donald Trump went from an annoying quasi-celebrity troll to the most powerful man in the free world. He staffed his White House with many of the same people who had promulgated Gamergate. After experiencing that particular controversy firsthand in our own community, it was shocking to see that toxic culture rise to the highest levels of government. Game creators, like many other people worldwide, fell into a state of despair but responded the best way they knew how: by making games. Thus, activism became a ubiquitous theme in the indie games became of 2017. This tumultuous time called for flexibility and responsiveness, as well as introspection and engagement. Indie developers were thinking deeply about how to use their craft to address this new, frightening reality, as well as its underlying systems and historical contexts. At the same time, they were reconsidering their own position in the ecosystem.





## #ResistJam

#ResistJam represented a coming together of the indie community in response to the shift in the global political climate that began in 2016. It was instigated by Retora Games' Tyler Coleman, whose *Night Lights* had been a 2012 IndieCade Official Selection and who had appeared on *Forbes* 30 Under 30 list; Damon Reece of the Vague Collective, the creators of *REVISION* and *Steal My Artificial Heart*; and Maize Wallin, an Australian audio designer and composer. IndieCade was a presenting partner, and other partners/sponsors included Global Game Jam, Games for Change, Raw Fury, and Devolver Digital. The jam was hosted on itch.io from March 3–11, and gamemakers created a diverse array of games around protest themes, generating publicity within the game press and even a little in the mainstream. The event description on the IndieCade website read:

*#ResistJam is an online game jam about creating games that resist oppressive authoritarianism in all its forms, in partnership with IndieCade. It differs from most game jams in that we're providing mentorship and workshops from experienced members of the game industry to make sure that as many people as possible can participate, no matter their skill level. Our objective is to empower jammers to make amazing and powerful games by focusing on diversity and inclusion.*

The themes of the jam were:

- I <3 Diversity: Work in a diverse team.
- This is How it Feels: Raise awareness of the personal impact of hate speech.
- Hardware Accessibility: Can be played in a browser or on a low-end netbook.
- Nevertheless, She Persisted: Standing up against many.
- Everyone Can Play: Design your game with accessibility in mind.
- Other Shoes: A positive portrayal of someone with a different life experience from your own.
- Don't Censor Me, Bro!: A core theme of censorship and its impact.
- Localized: Make the gameplay require two languages.
- Freedom of Press: The game showcases press and journalism through gameplay.
- Folk: The game uses a folk or indigenous art style of your region.
- Migration Power: The value of migrants to a culture and economy.

By the end of the week, there were over 200 games from around the world, some of which were exhibited at the Showcase @ E3, including *The Cat in the Hijab* and *O for Oppression*.

The game industry is notorious for its lack of public engagement. Unlike other entertainment sectors, such as music and film, game developers have tended to remain aloof from politics, except in matters of censorship affecting the industry directly. It was therefore a subversive act in and of itself to bring these games to E3, a space that was typically not only apolitical but also widely criticized for its poor record of diversity both on and off the screen (Hall 2017; Salter and Blodgett 2017).



# #RESISTJAM



Since IndieCade's Showcase @ E3 in 2007, there had been a significant shift in the relationship of indie games with the larger video-game ecosystem. As Stephanie Barish pointed out in her 2017 interview for *Vice's* Waypoint, games from IndieCade's Showcase @ E3 were now regularly migrating to other booths on the show floor (Waypoint 2017). By June 2017, Sony had published close to 1,200 indie games, the vast majority of them since the 2006 launch of its PlayStation Network, while Xbox had nearly half that number. Although Nintendo had faltered with the Wii, the company began to turn a corner with Nintendo Switch and, in 2017, would launch "Nindies."

By 2017, one-third of the twenty-four games shown at the first IndieCade Festival had been published on consoles. Nonetheless, in that same year, Sony—which had been by far the dominant player in the space—did an abrupt 180, pulling out of its IndieCade sponsorship and making what many saw to be a misstep by saying that indies were no longer "relevant" at its annual press event (despite the fact that most of their VR launch titles were from independent developers). This dismayed both fans and the press alike and led to, as one game journalist put it, "the internet getting out its pitchforks" (Barker 2017). In fact, Sony published a record number of independent games in 2017. The same year, Microsoft announced it was closing down Xbox Live Arcade, yet reporters noted that the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 booth was crawling with Microsoft executives as the company appeared to be ramping up its indie efforts (J. Condit 2017).

Sony's public disavowal of indie games left a vacuum that made IndieCade's Showcase @ E3 presence even more relevant and also spurred the Indie MEGABOOTH, which had started at PAX East in 2012, to set up a fan-facing exhibition across the street from the Los Angeles Convention Center. As the primary place within E3 where indie games were highlighted, the IndieCade Showcase was jammed the entire three days of the expo, including press in search of new titles. Games from the booth that were covered in the mainstream press included *A Case of Distrust*, by The Wandering Ben, an elegant 1920s-era noir mystery with stylized art reminiscent of *Framed*.

While IndieCade had always been committed to promoting and rewarding activist games, they were especially prevalent in 2017. A number of Resist Jam games were exhibited at the IndieCade Showcase @ E3. *BORDERS*, by Gonzalo Alvarez, Jon DiGiacomo, and Genaro Vallejo Reyes, had a simple, retro pixel style with a powerful

## IndieCade Showcase @ E3 2017

persistence mechanic: every time a player died, a skeleton remained on the game's landscape, present for future play-throughs—a powerful memorialization of individuals who died crossing the US-Mexico border. The game drew from Alvarez's father's experience of discovering a skeleton in the desert while coming to America. (Interestingly, Alvarez, who had never made a game before, was inspired to do so after attending IndieCade East.)

The booth also featured other politically themed titles, a genre that had been trending at IndieCade long before #ResistJam. Cinq-Mars Media's *PolitiTruth* was a trivia game that asked players to guess which statements made by politicians were true or false. Created in collaboration with *PolitiFact*, the designer was a programmer living in Trump Tower who wanted to do something about the new political environment. *Somewhere in the South*, by Wonderneer, was a game about the Underground Railroad that, much like 2014's *Thralled*, reenvisioned escape from slavery as a horror story. Another oppression-as-horror game that garnered accolades was *Detention*, by Taiwanese studio Red Candle, which was set in 1960s Taiwan under martial law; although published by Sony, it was only available for viewing in the IndieCade booth. In addition to being an inspiration for designers, the new regime had a direct effect on the IndieCade community in other ways. Due to the so-called "Muslim travel ban," the creator of *Snow VR*, Iranian developer Ali Eslami, was not able to get into the US to attend E3, so other developers stepped in to demo his game.

In addition to compelling screen-based games, there were a number of "off-the-screen" entrants, some of which also had political themes. An example that also captured the trend of physical escape rooms and puzzles was *Tracking Ida*, Lishan AZ's master's thesis project created with a team of USC students. The game told the true story of pioneering nineteenth-century journalist Ida B. Wells' crusade against lynching through fully integrated puzzles and clues hidden in secret compartments of an antique steamer trunk; it even included an original Edison cylinder phonograph in one of its puzzles. Finally, *Hackers of Resistance* was a live protest game run out of a tent that engaged players in activist art actions.

In this activist climate, the contrast between the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 was particularly sharp with the rest of the E3 show floor, which, in spite of global political turmoil, continued to exist within its own apolitical bubble.





# IndieCade Festival 2017

IndieCade's 10th anniversary celebration was hosted at the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) in the heart of the Little Tokyo district of Los Angeles. The museum's mission—to “promote understanding and appreciation of America's ethnic and cultural diversity by sharing the Japanese American experience”—seemed particularly aligned with the themes dominating that year. Although concentrated in a single venue, as had been the case with the USC Festival the prior year, JANM was in a more central location surrounded by a diverse array of eateries and shops. IndieCade occupied a variety of different spaces within two buildings on the museum grounds, as well as the plaza between them. Nearly 150 games were exhibited across these three spaces. The Nominees were housed in a central gallery in the main museum with windows facing the plaza. The curated games were organized around themes, which included Documents, Friends, Friday Night Fights (the eSports track), Spaces, and Night Games, as well as Gaming for Everyone and Alumni games by former IndieCade Nominees.

The exhibit amplified trends in diversifying platforms and new genres. Of the 36 Nominees shown that year, about half were PC games, two were available on consoles, five were on iOS, and the rest ran the platform gamut: tabletop, VR, installations, vintage device hacks, custom and Arduino controllers, performance, and—once again—food.

A number of the activist games at the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 also made it into the Festival, such as *Detention*, *Hackers of Resistance*, and *Tracking Ida*, which won the Impact Award. They were joined by others, including several activist tabletop games including *Objectif*, a card game designed to prompt a dialogue about race, gender, and standards of beauty; *Sign: A Game About Being Understood*, by a team of game designer-linguists, about the invention of Nicaraguan sign language by a group of deaf children; and Dark Horse Award winner *Feast*, by Sharang Biswas & Sweta Mohapatra, a tabletop roleplaying game where characters are created based on flavors of food brought by participants. The tabletop trend was highlighted by the fact that *Exploding Kittens*, by 2012 IndieCade Trailblazer Elan Lee, was a major sponsor, peppering the venue with playful related activities, including giant “sandboxes” for visitors to frolic in.

Empathy pervaded as a subtopic within the activist theme via games that experimented with new forms of storytelling and agency. *Bury Me, My Love* was a mobile game that told its story via text messages between a Syrian woman leaving her homeland to seek refuge in Europe and the husband she left behind. *A Normal Lost Phone*, by Accidental Queens, used a similar narrative conceit, with the premise of finding a lost phone and trying to learn about its owner from the contents. *Four Horsemen* was an interactive visual novel about immigration, and Jordan Magnuson's PC game *Ismael* used mixed media to explore similar themes through the eyes of a child.

The literary trend that was captured by Shakespeare games in 2016 continued in 2017 with *Walden, a game*, Tracy Fullerton's game based on the classic American novel, which simulated Henry David Thoreau's yearlong experiment living in harmony with nature. *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*, by Dim Bulb Games, was a collection of short stories by different authors about the failure of the American Dream (a timely topic) as told by a wandering storyteller in a Depression-era, *Grapes of Wrath*-inspired setting. The two games tied for IndieCade's Developers Choice Award.

The Grand Jury Award went to *Oikospiel Book I*, a digital game by David Kanaga of *Proteus* and *Panoramical* fame. Described as a “surrealistic dog opera,” the game was inspired by Naomi Klein's book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* and took up the related topics of climate change and labor rights from the perspective of dogs revolting against humans (Gach 2017). The Media Choice award went to *Busy Work*, a multiplayer installation by Mouse & the Billionaire, which spoofed late-stage capitalist labor in a kind of “service economy” game version of Charlie Chaplin's classic film *Modern Times*. The Interaction Award went to IndieCade recidivist Natalie Lawhead of alienmelon for *Everything is going to be OK*, which perhaps ought to have been the mantra of 2017.

Two “new arcade” games introduced custom and hacked controllers: *Bleep Space*, by Andy Wallace and Dan Friel, which used a button-based interface with a horizontal screen that generated abstract animation and music, and *Atchafalaya Arcade*, by Tammi Duplantis, which transformed an old-school Gameboy into a chiprune synthesizer of sound and visuals.

Amid the VR hype, indies continued to experiment in unexpected ways. *Fear Sphere*, by USC team HENRY, used a handheld flashlight which was actually a projector to display a 3D world against the walls of an inflatable dome, creating a low-cost, shareable, immersive VR environment. *Santiago*, also by a USC team, blended AR and VR; players restored harmony to an underwater ecosystem by touching a physical sculpture of a fish, which lit up areas on the fish as seen through a VR headset. Finally, there was *Un-Destined*, a multiplayer hybrid escape room/VR installation in which a player in VR collaborated with another player to unlock real-world puzzles. One of the biggest draws among Nominees—Pawmigo's *Cat Sorter VR*—took the Aesthetic Award with its uproariously fun multiplayer mechanic of “fixing” cats with “assembly” issues. On the AR/transmedia side was *What Is it But a Dream*, which combined a book, cards, and an AR app that allowed players to explore the world of *Alice in Wonderland* from different perspectives.

The 2017 Conference included sessions on topics such as concept art, comedy in games, the benefits of having a diverse team, mistakes in VR, audio, the portrayal of mental illness in games, subversion, a *Well Played* session, and town hall and breakouts on politics in games. GameU sessions targeted newcomers, students, and aspiring game developers and included a University Game Show. Keynote highlights included Rami Ismael, recipient of the Game Changer Award that year, and a fireside chat with 2017 Trailblazer Award recipient Keita Takahashi and former Independent Games Festival Chair Brandon Boyer. Funomena showed their newest game by Keita Takahashi, *Luma*, in the Gaming for Everyone Pavilion.

As part of IndieCade's 10th celebration, a panel was assembled of people who had worked at the first IndieCade Festival in 2008, including Jason Rhorer, Keith Nemitz, Jenova Chen, Stephanie Barish, Tracy Fullerton, Sam Roberts, and myself. This session provided insight into IndieCade's impact on people's careers. Keith Nemitz said he had been introduced as an artist for the first time at IndieCade. Jason Rhorer added that IndieCade was a factor in his decision to primarily focus on game design. An audience member asked if IndieCade's mission had changed since its launch. Stephanie, Sam, and I looked at one another and said, “No, not really.” Everything else had changed over the previous 10 years, but that was the one thing that hadn't.

IndieCade shared its 10th anniversary with the Global Game Jam, which had a key role in the indie ecosystem as the birthplace of numerous indie games, teams, and Festival awardees. To co-celebrate their synergistic, decade-long journey, IndieCade hosted a screening of the documentary film *Game Jam: The Movie*. The film was followed by a panel featuring Global Game Jam's co-founders—Susan Gold, Gorm Lai, Ian Schreiber, and Foad Khosmood—who also received a special IndieCade Decade of Impact Award.

The 2017 awards gala took place at VR studio Survios (headed up by IndieCade advisor Robert Nashak), and a new annual award was introduced to honor longtime IndieCade friend Bernie De Koven. As the president of the New Games Foundation, which promoted alternative adult outdoor play in the 1960s and 1970s, and as author of *The Well-Played Game*, De Koven had been a major influence on both academics and indies (including his coinage of the term “game tasting”). He had been diagnosed with terminal cancer earlier that year, and IndieCade had proposed giving him an award—but he countered with the suggestion that instead one be given in his honor to others. Thus was born the Bernie De Koven Big Fun Award for an individual or group who had made an impact on advancing physical real-world play. The first Bernie De Koven Big Fun Award, decided on with Bernie himself, went to the creators of 2010 IndieCade Kids Award-winner *Humans vs. Zombies*.

The grand finale of the 2017 Festival was a live performance during Night Games of Alistair Aitcheson's *The Incredible Playable Show*, which combined a number of mini-games including *Codex Bash* (which was in the 2015 Festival and IndieCade East 2016). A participatory game show, *The Incredible Playable Show* managed to get an entire audience into the act by scanning one another with barcode readers, strapping iPads onto one another, solving puzzles distributed among audience members, and mashing giant colored buttons. The game earned Aitcheson the Jury Special Recognition Award, and it was the perfect embodiment of the 2017 zeitgeist: a blend of performance, technology, and social interaction designed for a context completely outside of the traditional publishing framework.

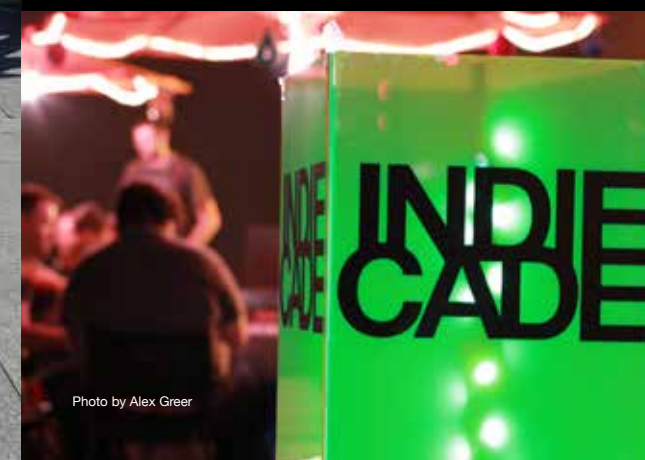


Photo by Alex Greer



Photo by Alex Greer



Photo by Alex Greer



# IndieCade Europe 2017

The curation strategy for the second IndieCade Europe blended games from US events as well as some that were exclusive to the Paris event. One crossover game was *Cosmic Top Secret*, published by Danish documentary film studio klassefilm and directed by filmmaker Trine Laier, which won the IndieCade Culture Award at the Festival. The autobiographical documentary game, which featured a child's quest to uncover her father's secret past as a Cold War spy, exemplified the expressive potential for documentary games and would go on to be included as part of the Sheffield Doc/Fest's *Alternate Realities* exhibition in 2018. A Cold War theme could also be found in *Atomic Days*, a beautifully crafted, computer-aided board game about bluffing, and, to some extent, in *Triple Agent*, by Sig Gunnarsson and Torfi Asgeirsson, a multiplayer iOS party game in which players must figure out who among them is a traitor by passing around a phone. Both games were IndieCade Europe exclusives. Another interesting use of the iPhone was *Gaze*, an ingenious installation developed by students at ICAN (Institut de Création et d'Animation Numériques), where players used smartphones to take photos of a 3D model from a particular angle in order to replicate the image they had been assigned via physical cards.

The activism theme present in the recent US IndieCade events carried through to Europe, but to a lesser degree. Perhaps the most apt of these was *Democracy*, a satirical board game by Swiss team Melissa Pislser, Yoann Douillet, Israel Viadest, and Marion Bareil, about public culpability when democracy goes wrong.

One of the standouts was Nominee and award-winner *Vignettes*, by Pol Clarissou, Armel Gibson, Pat Ashe, and David Kanaga. In this clever puzzle game—similar in some ways to *Shadowmatic* and 2015 Festival Nominee *GNOG*—objects were transformed through rotation.

Among the luminaries present was Sir Ian Livingstone, considered one of the founding fathers of the UK gaming industry, who gave a talk entitled "Life is a Game" (Börü 2017). Mollindustria's Paolo Pedercini nicely summed up the current state of the indie game ecosystem internationally with his keynote "Indiepocalypse Now" (quoted at the start of this chapter), which broke down the myth of the indiepocalypse, pointed out that the overall prognosis was good, and suggested bettering the indie outlook by both increasing leisure time and diversifying audiences and contexts for play (Pedercini 2017).

The second "La Petite INDÉCADENCE" was co-organized by Adriel Beaver, chip-tunes musician Cyanide Dansen, developer Pierrick (aka echopteryx), void.garden, and IndieCade Europe Chair Simon Bachelier, and was sponsored by French game studio Accidental Queens, whose game *A Normal Lost Phone* had been shown at the 2017 Festival in Los Angeles.

One key distinction between IndieCade Europe and its US counterpart was their vastly different regional funding infrastructures. For the first IndieCade Festival in Bellevue, and subsequent Festivals in Culver City, the full extent of public funding came through the support of city governments, usually under the auspices of economic development. IndieCade Europe, by contrast, received significant support from both the regional and French governments, as well as the European Union. The paucity of public funding options in the US meant a heavy reliance on private and corporate funding. In this sense, IndieCade Europe bridged the relationship between art and commerce in games. To Europeans, an event like IndieCade provided both cultural and economic value, factors that were viewed more synergistically than in the US. According to its organizers, IndieCade Europe also helped serve as a catalyst for French indie developers to gel as a community.





# 2018 Still Taking Risks

## IndieCade Milestones

Move to Santa Monica City College

## IndieCade Events

IndieCade East, February 16–18, Museum of the Moving Image, New York City

IndieCade Showcase @ E3, June 12–14, Los Angeles Convention Center

IndieCade Google Playing TogethAR Google ARCore Game Jam @cp

IndieCade Festival, October 11–13, Center for Media and Design, Santa Monica College

IndieCade Europe, October 19–20, Conservatoire national des arts et métiers, Paris (CNAM)

## Ecosystem Milestones

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)*

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

—Schindel et al, *Hyperallergic*

# IndieCade East 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 Molleindustria/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 archrival, 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.

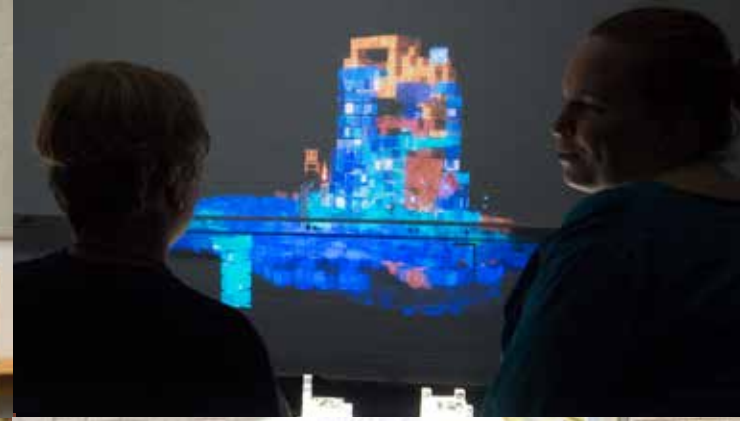
The trend in live performative games continued to grow, producing several highlights of the 2018 Festival. *Puppet Pandemonium* combined a live puppet show with a video game to create a seven-player theatrical experience, and had earned *alt.ctrl.GDC* award earlier that year. *Asta Grande*, by Pietro 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."



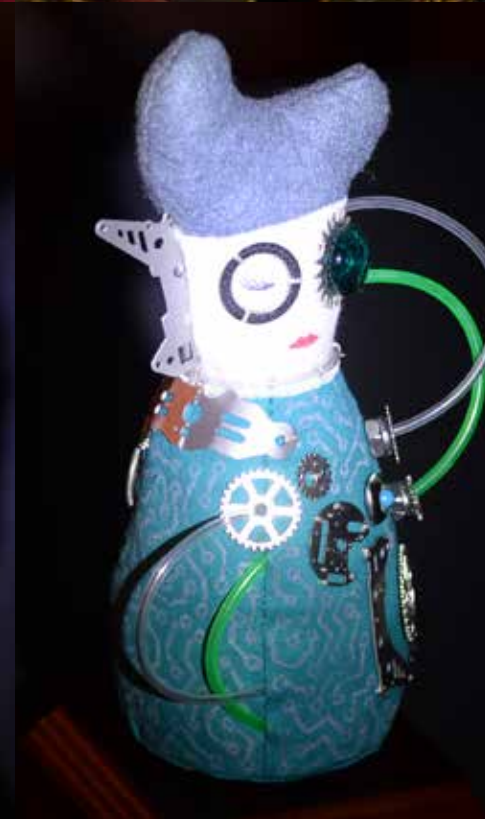


# IndieCade Festival 2018 (Con't)

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 went 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.





# 2019 The World is a Game Platform

## IndieCade Milestones

IndieCade Alumni Program Launched

## IndieCade Events

IndieCade Showcase @ E3, June 11-13, Los Angeles Convention Center

IndieCade Festival, October 10-12, Center for Media and Design, Santa Monica College

IndieCade Europe, October 18-19, Bibliothèque nationale de France François-Mitterrand, Paris

**For more than a decade, IndieCade has showcased what's underground, what's next and what's important in interactive storytelling. Perhaps more vitally, IndieCade puts the emphasis on individual developers, highlighting gaming's idiosyncratic voices who believe play is a language as much as it is a tool for a medium.**

—Todd Martens, *LA Times*

**2019 promises to be a great year in games. Innovation and competition will elevate the industry's offerings and drive more inclusivity among a broader range of audiences.**

—Joost von Dreunen, *Tech Crunch*

It seems like every year in IndieCade's history saw dramatic transformations of the indie game ecosystem, but in 2019 particular developments were underway that portended a major shift. In anticipation of the release of next generation game consoles, publishers began restructuring for a new round of indie development. Microsoft acquired DoubleFine, the studio of 2010 IndieCade Trailblazer Award recipient Tim Shafer (Kuchera 2019). Sony, in turn, hired DoubleFine's Greg Rice to head up its indie team in anticipation of the PS5 launch (Grubb 2019). Meanwhile, the Nintendo Switch was outselling previous Nintendo offerings and supplanting PlayStation as the indie console of choice, fueled in part by its increasing attention to indies (Kain 2020). Valve was losing its dominance in PC distribution as Epic began lowering the cost of development with its Unreal game engine (van Dreunen 2019).

Although the steady drop in console sales was attributed to dips between next-generation hardware releases, the larger arc painted a different picture: console sales had been undergoing a steady drop for years (Whitson 2013), while PCs experienced gentle but steady growth despite decades-long forecasts of doom (NoodleFighter 2018; Bold Business 2018; Storey 2019); furthermore, developers continued to favor PCs over consoles (Richter 2019), perhaps due in part to the rise of Virtual Reality (VR) and self-publishing platforms such as itch.io and GOG. But the real news was that mobile had become the dominant gaming platform (Mobvista 2018; Wijman 2018; Richter 2019). No doubt this shift was aided by the continued growth of VR and Augmented Reality (AR) niche markets, which boosted both PC and smartphone sales (NoodleFighter 2018; Bold Business 2018; Storey, 2019).

As the "usual suspects" regrouped, a slew of newcomers with big bank accounts arrived, having suddenly noticed that games were already a major part of their businesses. In March at GDC and PAX, Google—which already had one toe in the water—announced Stadia, its new cloud-based gaming service. While games had consistently been the top-selling category in the iOS App Store, Apple began funding them for the first time in its history—Steve Jobs famously hated games (Martin 2008; Reichert 2019)—to populate its new Apple Arcade. Among the subscription service's launch titles, over one in four were former IndieCade Nominees, IndieCade Selections, or alumni games. The rise of mobile and the persistence of PC games ushered in a broader, more diverse audience, which was also reflected in IndieCade's offerings throughout the year.

This was also the year when immersive entertainment came into its own. Organized by *No Proscenium*, the first Immersive Design Summit launched in San Francisco in March of 2019, and featured several former IndieCade finalists and program chairs. In November, *Room Escape Artist*—an online publication by David and Lisa Spira—announced that it would launch the Reality Escape Convention (RECON) in 2020, which would be the first professional event to bring together the fastest growing sector of the game industry (Spira 2019). Finally, in an unprecedented nod to the AR genre, AMC announced that it would produce a series with actor Jason Segel based on the 2013 documentary film *The Institute* (Rothe 2013) about the 2010 IndieCade Story/World Award-winning AR experience *Nonbalance/The Jejune Institute* (Murrell 2019).



## IndieCade Showcase @ E3 2019

While most of the E3 constituency was talking about Sony's cataclysmic departure from the Expo—particularly shocking because the global giant had been one of the founding members of ESA—IndieCade was following its own path. Sony was also missing from the IndieCade booth, and its absence said volumes about where things were trending—as did a number of other developments that underscored the sea change within the gaming industry.

A growing gaming audience also meant more room for niche titles, which was good news for indies—especially in terms of diversity. Among digital indies, the faces both on and behind the screens were noticeably diverse. Women, people of color, and LGBTQ protagonists featured prominently in games like *EarthNight*, *Knife Sisters*, and *Neo Cab*—which was the year's indie sleeper hit—as were Indigenous voices and stories. Even against the backdrop of gargantuan industry booths, IndieCade's selection garnered attention from mainstream press (Goldberg 2019; Martens 2019a).

One of IndieCade's hallmarks has always been showcasing innovative and experimental designs long before they would be seen in the commercial sphere, and it has been one of the few places in the US where members of the public could see games that used custom controllers. 2019 saw an unprecedented growth in the production of commercial game products that used custom hardware. Much of this can be attributed to crowdfunding, and particularly to Kickstarter, whose funding model helped bypass historically risk-averse venture capital gatekeepers. Novel devices shown at the IndieCade @ E3 Showcase included: Blinks, a smart-tile game system shown at E3 playing *Mortals*, which was created for the platform at the IndieCade East Blinks Game Jam in 2018; PiXXL Cube, a LED-covered box outfitted with an accelerometer that players rotate to navigate its *PiXXL Maze*; and *HOT SWAP: All Hands on Deck*, a co-op game where players swap 3D-printed controllers on a custom input box to maneuver a boat, which went on to win the Innovation in Interaction Design Award at the fall Festival. In related development, Sensible Object, known for *Beasts of Balance*, was acquired by Niantic, the creators of *Pokémon Go*, although this was more likely related to the ARG background of its founder Alex Fleetwood than the company's interest in custom controllers (Batchelor 2019).

In addition, both VR and AR—now collectively referred to as XR, or Extended Reality—came into their own. Ascend, a VR game that combines aerial combat with a leaning interface, made several Best of E3 Lists and was called "one of the best hidden gems at E3" (Joho 2019) as well as the "potential...next hot VR ESports title" (Vejnovic 2019). The E3 booth also featured *UndAR the Sea*, winner of the Google ARCore 2018 Game Jam, which transforms the real world into a magical underwater environment. These trends speak broadly to the continuing interplay between digital and physical spaces.

It was also at E3 that we introduced the IndieCade Alumni Program, headed up by Chris DeLeon. The Alumni Program was meant to celebrate past IndieCade finalists and selections. Presenters at IndieCade's E3 2019 Showcase were among the first to receive the enamel pins that would further circulate at the Festival in October.





# IndieCade Festival 2019

The IndieCade Festival's return to the Center for Media and Design at Santa Monica City College for a second year allowed for an iterative design. As with the prior year, the exhibition and conference sessions took place on both floors of the complex, which wrapped around a central courtyard that became the event's social hub. Flash Jams (a cross between a game jam and a flash mob), outdoor play, and book signings took place in the courtyard throughout the weekend, accompanied by live music. And, in a reprise of my 2008 Festival-on-Crutches performance, I broke my ankle while larping a few weeks before the Festival, and attended both IndieCade Prime and IndieCade Europe on a knee scooter.

IndieCade 2019 saw the rise of a few notable trends. One was an explosion in co-op multiplayer games. Whether trying to make a giant bowl of ramen in the physical game *Ideal Meal*, switching controller schemes in *HOT SWAP: All Hands on Deck*, working together to stave off gentrification in *Co-Opoly* (an homage to the anti-capitalist origins of *Monopoly*), mixing drinks with swapped vision in *Mad Mixologist*, using barcodes to scan items in *Wizard's Warehouse: The Magik of Retail*, or solving the collaborative puzzles of *Tick Tock: A Tale For Two*, to name only a few, playing well with others was all the rage in 2019 (Pilon 2015).

Intersecting with this trend was the increasing cross-pollination across genres and sectors, particularly the influence of escape rooms and immersive theatre. Henry Smith, creator of the 2013 Interaction Award winner *Spaceteam*, took home the newly introduced Procedural Design Award for *Blabyrinth*—a rollicking multi-screen iOS co-op game modeled on escape room mechanics with procedurally generated levels. AR intersected with escape rooms in *ARBox*, created by some of the members of the USC teams behind 2016's *Beautiful Corner* and 2018's *Klaxo Radio Hour*, which offered a kit designed to turn any space into an Escape Room using props and mobile augmented reality. In a similar vein, *NEScape!* by KHAN Games brought modern-day escape room mechanics to a retro console system.

Many of 2019's co-op games overlapped with topics of relationships, dating, sex, and intimacy—popular IndieCade themes that remained rare in mainstream games. *Décorum*, for instance, was a tabletop co-op game in which a newly cohabitating couple must decorate their shared space while trying to anticipate one another's needs, likes, and peevs. Allison Cole's *Anthology of Intimacy*, a collection of larps in the same vein of 2016's *#feminism*, focused on intimacy as both a theme and a design process. *Red Flags*, by 2016 IndieCade awardee Capital W (*Hamlet-Mobile*), was a single-actor, single audience-member participatory theatre piece in which the player goes on a bad date. *The Headlands Gamble*, by First Person Travel, took one or two couples on a weekend mystery adventure in Marin County, CA. There was also a plethora of dating simulators and relationship games that included a spectrum of queer and nonbinary protagonists, such as *Skate & Date* and *Queering Spacetime*, a dating card game.

This brings us to another 2019 trend—the growing visibility of women, people of color, and LGBTQ people as both protagonists and creators. *Neo Cab*, which one reviewer called “the most captivating video game noir that's drifted into my life in the Trump era,” was noted for its diversity, earning both the IndieCade Award for Narrative Design and a finalist slot at the IGF the following year (Byrd 2019; Watson 2019). Indigenous creators were represented in multiple games, including *Woa Kanaka*, based on Kānaka Maoli stories, and *When Rivers Were Trails*, by Elizabeth LaPensée with the Indian Land Tenure Foundation, which received the Adaptation Award. It is worth noting that both of these games featured themes of nature and sustainability, which were also seen in a number of other works such as *PlastiCity*, the VR arcade game *ElemenTerra*, *Fujii*, and *Lost Ember*.

Tabletop games made a strong showing. *Shasn*, a board game about voting, won the Social Impact Award; *Inhuman Conditions*, based on the Voight-Kampff replicant detection interview from *Blade Runner*, took the Tabletop Award in Santa Monica; *Dialect: A Game About Language and How It Dies*, which also featured Indigenous designers, would go on to earn the Best Tabletop Game at IndieCade Europe. *Kroma*, an illuminated strategic board game about color blending, received the Audience Choice Award at the Festival. The game, designed by Carol Mertz, Kai Karhu, Francesca Carletto-Leon, and Temitope Olujobi, got its start as an NYU class project.



There were a number of standouts in hybrid digital and physical experimentation that introduced entirely new game genres. *Amā's Memento*, which took the Award for Location Based and Live Play, was a mixed reality installation that combined maps, artifacts, and AR components to explore the art collection of the designer's Taiwanese grandmother. Another entry was Tender Claws' *The Under Presents*, which realized the plot of Neal Stephenson's sci-fi book *The Diamond Age* (Stephenson 1998) by introducing live actors into a multiplayer virtual reality experience.

A number of core Festival awards went to digital games that pushed the affordances of the medium through game mechanics or story. The Grand Jury Prize went to designer Terry Cavanaugh for *Dicey Dungeons*, a delightful digital deck-building game that stood in contrast with his vexingly challenging 2010 award-winner, *VVVVVV*. The IndieCade Jury Prix went to *Grace Bruxner Presents: The Haunted Island, a Frog Detective Game*, a charming and quirky take on the beloved adventure game genre. *Moncage*, a 3D narrative puzzle game that combined aspects of past finalists *Gorogoa* and *Vignettes* by matching objects in different scenes on the sides of a cube, won the Innovation in Experience Design Award. The Developers Choice Award went to *Patrick's Parabox*, an abstract game whose mechanic revolved around the principle of recursion: each of its puzzles could only be solved by first solving a puzzle on a different scale. These games all demonstrated that the creative possibilities in digital gaming were far from exhausted.

The conference was co-chaired by Elizabeth Swensen and myself, along with Jeremy Gibson-Bond and John Cassie who headed up the Educators Summit. The IndieXchange was led by Chris DeLeon and featured a number of networking events organized by the newly formed IndieCade Alumni Association of past finalists and organizers. Included were practical conversations on a range of topics from getting a side gig to running a game jam, as well as networking sessions sponsored by IndieCade industry partners like Kickstarter and Oculus. Other talks that weekend featured subjects including wearables, eSports, character costume design, games that generate music through play, and a special session on mass-producing custom game hardware.

One of the Festival highlights was a special session on kindness—a theme pervasive throughout the event that was also echoed in the co-op game trend. Ziba Scott of *Kind Words* (which would go on to win the Grand Prix Award at IndieCade Europe) spoke about the need for kindness, which spurred the game's creation, and the unanticipated community that later built up around it. A similar theme prioritizing community emerged in Gabe Lane's discussion on *Smile for Me*, made with Yugi Limbo, in which the goal is to cheer up non-player characters in a surreal spa. Leura Smith discussed how her game, *Pigeon*, in which the goal is to gently hold and care for birds, was a big hit with the developer's mom and her friends.

Another session highlight was a keynote with the founders of Bumblebear streamed live to the Festival via Twitch from the Bumblebash indie eSports Tournament in Chattanooga. Their *Killer Queen* had been in IndieCade as both a field game (2012) and an eight-player arcade cabinet (2013), and was now featured in the Festival's eSports tournament in its eight-player home incarnation, *Killer Queen Black*. Creators Josh DeBonis and Nikita Mikros gave a well-researched talk about the new golden age of arcade games.

Although many IndieCade contributors are also authors, 2019 was the first year that writing on and by indie developers was highlighted. Members of the design studio Local Number Twelve, Colleen Macklin and John Sharp, discussed their new book, *Iterate: Ten Lessons in Design and Failure* (The MIT Press 2019), which draws from a wide range of fields. There was also a keynote session on new and upcoming books on indie game history, including Jesper Juul on his recently published *Handmade Pixels* (The MIT Press 2019)—and me, talking about this book!

The courtyard of the SMC Center for Media and Design was transformed into an outdoor theatre for the awards show, hosted once again by Sarah Elmaleh and Asher Vollmer. Awardees left with steampunk creatures created by trophy designer Katie Diaz of KT's Creature Comforts. The second Bernie DeKoven Big Fun Award went to the founders of the Come Out & Play Festival, who pioneered the exhibition of physical and large-scale social games in 2007—and inspired IndieCade to integrate this style of game into our repertoire. The Game Changer Award went to the founders of the Game Devs of Color Expo, launched in 2017, to celebrate the group's impact in supporting broader representation in game making.

The next evening, the courtyard hosted Night Games—organized by LA game collective Glitch City—which featured a dizzying array of weird and wonderful offerings. Two games were particularly timely. *Early and Often*, by USC Games, integrated an actual voting booth from the 2000 Bush/Gore election—complete with chads! *WarTweets*, by Derek Curry and Jennifer Gradecki, was inspired by the 1983 film *WarGames* and involved intercepting Donald Trump's tweets (transformed into missiles) on a map filled with satirical targets like “The Gulf of Fake News” and “Collusionville.” *The Gentle Oraclebird*, a divination performance/game by Shing Yin Khor & Three Eyed Rat, was run out of a handmade cart by the artist wearing a bird mask. Perhaps the most talked-about Night Game was *Hellcouch*, a literal “couch co-op” game played on an interactive sofa created by Carol Mertz and Francesca Carletto-Leon, members of the *Kroma* design team.

The following day, we revived an IndieCade tradition from years gone by, and threw a barbecue at the home of Tracy Fullerton—conveniently located less than three miles from the SMC Center for Media Arts and Design. Music was provided by designer Rich Lemarchand, who had DJed a number of prior IndieCade parties.



**IndieCade shows that the whole world is a gaming platform.**

—Todd Martens, *LA Times*



# IndieCade Europe 2019

IndieCade Europe's fourth year marked a turning point for the event, attracting over 3,000 people, roughly 50 percent more than the prior year. By this point, the LA Festival's European sister had gained momentum and drawn the attention of developers, press, and players, garnering greater international participation. Previously, according to its organizers, "all eyes had been on A MAZE. / Berlin," the Berlin festival that had dominated Europe since 2012. Although both festivals celebrated innovation and expression, IndieCade Europe complemented the more "outside the box" ethos of A MAZE. with a greater focus on commercial games—in part due to its partnership with Capital Games, an advocacy group supporting developers in the Île-de-France region that includes and surrounds Paris. This made for an interesting counterpoint to IndieCade Prime, which tended to be among the more artsy indie festivals in the United States. Still, IndieCade Europe continued to serve as an anchor for the French indie game community.

The change of venue from the CNAM/Arts et Métiers complex that had hosted the European festival the previous three years shifted the ambiance and logistics of the event significantly. As an organization, CNAM brought a kind of high-tech ethos in a historical wrapper with a building that some organizers characterized as a cliché of traditional French architecture—perhaps also lending its attraction to foreigners. The move to the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF) brought a sense of cultural cachet to the event. In contrast with Arts et Métiers, the iconic Modernist building provided a contemporary setting that was associated with traditional content. The larger centralized spaces, more robust technical infrastructure, and abundance of natural light gave the festival a feeling that was more legible, spacious, and contemporary.

Although the board of IndieCade Europe had built an event with a distinct identity and aesthetic, it still contained, as the organizers put it, "the IndieCade DNA." It featured a "European flavor" that was beautifully captured by the photographs of Anna-Célestine Barthélemy (aka La Fille d'à Côté, French for "the girl next door"), which are included in this chapter and the some of the other IndieCade Europe sections of this book. This was achieved by bringing together a broad range of curatorial voices, including key organizers Simon Bachelier from indie studio Accidental Queens, the creators of IndieCade 2017 finalist *A Normal Lost Phone*; Laura Fournier from ICO Partners; acclaimed Dutch artgame curator Zuraida Buter; Martin Pichlmair, academic, multiple IndieCade finalist, and Copenhagen Games Collective member; Claudia Molinari, a graphic designer and professor; Corinne Fenoglio, an artist and Main Curator for IndieCade Europe 2019, with support from Laurent Chicola and Romain Taupin of Capital Games. The committee managed to reach gender parity in their programming, and cultivated the safe and welcoming environment for diversity that had become a signature feature across all IndieCade events.



Extending the live performance theme that had inspired new awards at IndieCade Prime, the talk of IndieCade Europe was *The Aluminum Cat*, which won the European Innovation in Experience Design Award. This game featured live actors controlling characters in a 2D multiplayer digital format, similar to the VR game *The Under Presents*, which had been featured in the LA Festival. Another programming highlight was a presentation by the Kissinger Twins on their unique approach to interactive cinema and storytelling, which built on the ongoing dialogue at IndieCade on the importance of performers and the return of full-motion video. This trend was punctuated by 2019 Trailblazer Awardee Blast Theory. Interestingly, the British art collective was also an IndieCade Finalist for the first time in a decade with its live-streamed interactive film project, *Bloody Minded*. As pioneers of ARGs and pervasive games years before smartphones were in all our pockets, Blast Theory was one of the first studios to combine digital experiences with live actors and real physical space.

Like its American counterpart, IndieCade Europe filled a vital role as a bridge between art and commerce, bringing together innovative new works that skirted the boundaries between the two, and bringing together international creators, including some whose work had been celebrated at IndieCade Prime the week before. This included *Röki*, by British studio Polygon Treehouse, which was released in December on PC, Mac, and Nintendo Switch and had become something of an indie darling. IndieCade Europe's Innovation in Interaction Award went to *Cyberpet Graveyard* by Natalie Lawhead of alienmelon, known for her quirky and original "pixeltrash zine" games like the 2017 awardee *Everything is Going to Be Okay*; her *Electric Zine Maker* was also featured at the European event. The Grand Prix Award went to *Kind Words* by Popcannibal, whose founder Ziba Scott had been part of the Kindness panel in Santa Monica.

More broadly, the relationship between IndieCade Prime and IndieCade Europe was evolving. IndieCade Europe had come into its own as a major international event in the region, complimenting A MAZE. / Berlin by integrating commercial games more prominently into its purview. This served as a productive counterpoint to the American festival's reputation for bringing artgames to what had historically been a more commercial domain. The synergy between the two events was evolving, due in part to their close proximity in time, and the awards were now being coordinated across the two events in a more holistic way. This increasing collaboration foreshadowed the then-unforeseen challenge that would face us in 2020 with the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic. Even at this writing, the organizers of IndieCade Europe and IndieCade Prime are working together to create a global experience, bridging geography and time zones to reenvision the very concept of an international independent game festival.



Europe Photos by La Fille d'à Côté





# IndieCade Next

IndieCade was conceived with the aim of celebrating and bringing bold new works in interactive media and games to a broader public, privileging innovation and creativity over marketing. This meant being, at once, apart from and integral to the larger indie ecosystem—including the very hegemonic industry from which it sought to distinguish itself. As a cultural intermediary, IndieCade serves as a hub between its many components, including developers themselves (Parker, Whitson, and Simon 2017). Ultimately, the IndieCade story illustrates the complex web of interdependencies that make up the indie game ecosystem, including the inherent contradictions of holding indie ideals within a larger hegemonic, capitalistic system.

This tension manifested itself through IndieCade’s very first Showcase @ E3, the peak of the indie console era, the second wave of VR, the rise of mobile platforms, the board game renaissance, and the emergence of new genres of play completely outside of traditional markets.

While IndieCade has changed in many ways over the years, its fundamental mission has not. The IndieCade community has grown larger and more diverse than its founders could have possibly imagined, producing increasingly varied works in a wide range of technologies and genres. The festival has gone from a small, intimate group in a single gallery space to an army of organizers and volunteers occupying an entire downtown area, and distributed throughout museums and college campuses. Through all that, what remains unchanged is the creativity and experimentalism that lives within the spirit of play.

Perhaps more than anything, the IndieCade story illustrates the importance of community. It is the story of an inclusive group of people coming together to share and celebrate play, as well as to support and push one another’s creativity and vision—a community of play and practice. In the end, independence is not—and cannot be—synonymous with isolation, though it can sometimes feel like a lonely struggle. In that sense, IndieCade is an amalgam of the stories of every person and system that has intersected with it over the past dozen-plus years, stories that will almost certainly comprise a sequel to this book.

The challenge we face as a community—both as individuals and as an organization—is that creative innovation is often at odds with economic sustainability. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of innovation is that it tends to precede markets. This entails taking both creative risks also financial risks. IndieCade has always been a few steps ahead of markets; we often show works that cannot be sold in a traditional sense at a particular moment in time. At the same time, we have been instrumental in bringing indie games to mainstream and emerging platforms, before games on these platforms had a viable market. When we started hosting events in 2007, it was exceedingly rare to see an indie game on a video game console; today, it’s commonplace. Indie games once had very few funding models; now we have everything from crowdsourcing to art grants. Visibility was a major challenge, in part because indie games were only being seen at places where media practitioners circulated, gaining them little exposure to larger audiences. Based on both experience and instinct, IndieCade has always ridden these waves on the principle that innovation precedes marketing, the precise opposite of how business operates. Thus, IndieCade shares with its constituents both their emancipatory aspirations and the very practical need for sustainability. It may be a risky prospect, but very precarity of independence requires a sense of interdependence.

As IndieCade moves into its next phase, games are increasingly starting to pour off the screen into the real world; whether in the form of immersive theatre, escape rooms and installations, alternate, augmented or virtual reality, indie creators continue to stay ahead of the curve. These developments are emerging at a time of renewed interest in the so-called “experience economy,” which has been fueled by relatively new discoveries in the “science of happiness,” research that shows that experiences are much more effective in promoting happiness than material goods (Cassano 2015; Pozin 2016).

Meanwhile, the digital game ecosystem is undergoing massive transformations. The console market, once viewed as a panacea (Whitson 2013), has become less and less relevant to developers (Richter 2019). Recent reports suggest that the mainstream video game industry is on the brink of a crisis. On the one hand, its economic model of rising production costs while retail pricing remains flat is unsustainable (O’Donnell 2014; Rivera 2019). Furthermore, the industry’s sexism and the abusive labor practices needed to support its unsustainable model are gaining broader attention outside of the industry (McNeill 2019; Minhaj and Preuss 2019).

At the same time, a wave of new players are jumping into the fray fueled in part by the rise of indie games. Apple Arcade has been called the “art house gaming platform” (Johnson 2019). Google Stadia is striving to become the Netflix of games (Chan 2017). Oculus continues to dominate the VR market in part due to its heavy investment in content. China remains the sleeping giant, with a growing presence at IndieCade presaging a potentially massive shift in market scale. These developments open up new opportunities for IndieCade to remain relevant and influential in an ever-changing indie ecosystem.

These trends also portend well for both indie creators and audiences driven by the desire for meaningful interactive experiences. They provide new opportunities for IndieCade, as a cultural intermediary, to help expand the reach of diverse play experiences. This means maintaining a balance in interdependencies with other elements within the indie ecosystem. It means broadening the reach of independent games to other genres, markets, and audiences. It also means devising new strategies to support our financial sustainability. This has included introducing Alumni and Membership programs, building new business models for supporting development, and turning to some of the very methods that have served our constituents, such as Kickstarter. We must be forward-looking in order to sustain our mission, to help us continue to support our community while being responsive to the evolving ecosystem and remaining ahead of the curve.

At this writing, we are in the midst of multiple global and regional challenges. First, the coronavirus pandemic has inspired IndieCade to reinvent itself once again—this time as IndieCade Anywhere & Everywhere, a global distributed event that will bridge the European and American festivals. We are taking this on as a creative challenge to broaden our reach, create a truly international embrace, and remove the barrier of travel expense that still limits many indies from participating in our events. Second, the current social unrest in the US is a searing reminder that we have much work to do in terms of diversity and inclusiveness, as well as giving voice to the underrepresented. The topic of discrimination and marginalization is not new to IndieCade. Independent gamemakers have for some time been leveraging our medium’s unique ability to promote the kind of empathy and unity that is sorely needed now. We put this into practice in 2017 with our ResistJam, and in 2020 with both our ClimateJam and Jamming the Curve, our COVID-19 Game Jam, and we will continue finding ways to give gamemakers a voice in these troubling times.

Marcus Garrett’s *Top Shelf Gaming* article on IndieCade’s 2018 Festival leads with the headline, “As IndieCade loses mainstream relevance, its importance in pushing the gaming industry forward grows” (2018). This distinction is the key to understanding how IndieCade continues to reinvent itself and redefine the terms “independent,” “games,” and “festival” in response to a changing indie ecosystem and larger societal shifts. Importantly, relevance to the mainstream video game industry was never IndieCade’s goal. In fact, IndieCade was envisioned as an alternative to the mainstream game industry, as the “anti-E3” in many ways. That it was born in the caldron of E3 was both fortuitous and ironic. In many respects, IndieCade actively worked to circumvent the hegemonic capitalistic system that measures success only through profits, while both supporting that system and depending on it for its survival. At the same time, IndieCade has tried to redefine success from an artistic perspective to emphasize creative motivation, innovation, and independence from the pressures of marketing that dominate the mainstream industry. Although IndieCade has always supported, enabled, and celebrated the financial success of its constituents, no gamemaker ever received an IndieCade award for number of units sold.

Most importantly, IndieCade is a creative community of play and practice. It provides gamemakers with a context to have their work appreciated on its own merits, show and share their work, talk about creative challenges, inspire one another, and enter into a positive, play-driven feedback loop within an “all boats rise” ethos. The IndieCade philosophy has always been that experiencing a broader array of games and contexts serves to elevate the field as a whole, as well as to push the creative and expressive affordances of games and play. This means showing artgames and activist games alongside commercial games, board games alongside mobile games, escape rooms alongside VR and AR, immersive theatre alongside alt-ctrl games, interactive literature and adventure games alongside local multiplayer games, and installation-based work alongside pervasive games. The principle is to gravitate towards innovation where it’s happening and expose creators to the range of ideas and approaches being explored by diverse creators across the broad field of play. Marcus Garret captures this spirit nicely with the opening and closing paragraphs of his IndieCade 2018 review:

*I grew up in the church and while my relationship with it has changed in recent years, I still crave the earnest passion of a tight-knit spiritual community. Rarely have I felt as connected to my community and united in my ideals with others than my regular church-attending days. But for the last five years, my soul has found solace at the IndieCade Festival in Los Angeles.*

*I’ve seen IndieCade change considerably over the last half-decade. Yet despite these changes, my commitment to going every year is unwavering. What remains is what always has: a collection of gamers and game makers sharing their hearts and time with one another. It’s a place where creativity flourishes and diverse ideas are welcomed. It’s a place where adults teach kids how to create fun and kids remind adults how to have fun. It’s a place that feels safe: safe for families, safe for trans folk, safe for racial minorities like myself. Amid the usual eclectic mix of computer games and tabletop games, games controlled through unconventional methods like actual puppets or one-button NES controllers, female-presenting folk with brightly colored hair, and tall boys with long beards, lies a community of people earnestly trying to make the world a better place for everyone. Now that’s a church I’m willing to go [to]. (Garrett 2018)*



ANYWHERE  
AND  
EVERYWHERE

Illustration by Jamie Parreno



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