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 Hunicke (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 Hunicke. 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—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.
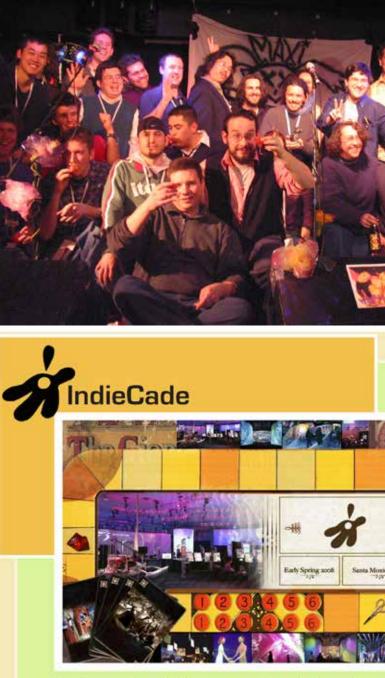
In March 2007, the three of us met in person for the first time at the Game Developers Conference. Our complementary backgrounds and shared commitment to promoting the potential of games as an expressive medium made for an instant rapport. All three of us were admirers of the conference's Independent 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.

IndieCade

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?