

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.

