

# 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*, *Akrasia*, *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 Schutte) 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 Edo 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



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