

# 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