

# 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 InKling 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