

2016 Beyond Screens

IndieCade Milestones

IndieCade Festival leaves Culver City

IndieCade Europe Launches

Launch of IndieCade Twitch Store

IndieCade Events

IndieCade East, April 29–May 1, Museum of the Moving Image, New York City

IndieCade Showcase @ E3, June 14–June 16, Los Angeles Convention Center

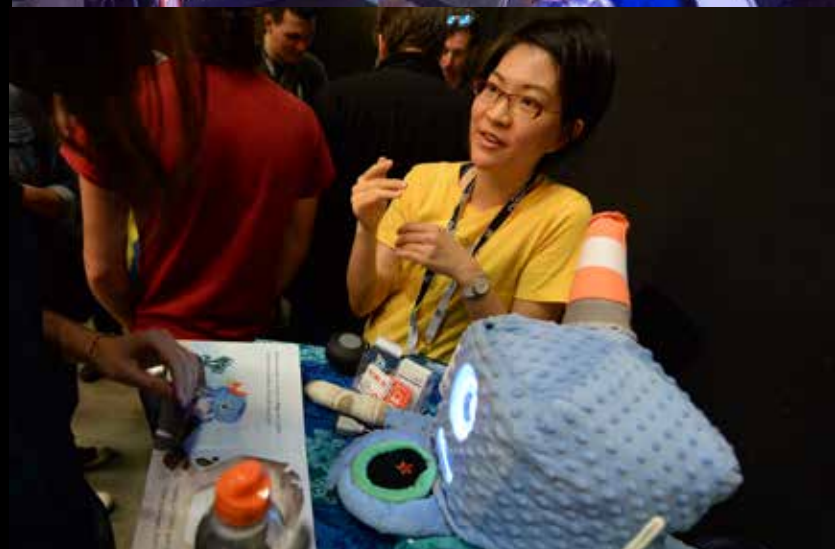
IndieCade Festival, October 14–16, USC School of Cinematic Arts, Los Angeles

The two big stories of 2016 were the arrival of commercial VR—the release of the Oculus Rift consumer headset and Sony VR (formerly Project Morpheus)—and the mainstreaming of alternate reality in the form of *Pokémon GO*. Indie games were an integral part of both developments. *Pokémon GO* was the successor of ARG cult-favorite *Ingress*, created by Niantic, which spun out of Google in 2015. By the end of summer 2016, *Pokémon GO* had 500 million downloads worldwide (Perez 2016). The game became so mainstream that presidential candidate Hillary Clinton made reference to it on the campaign trail, with the infamous quip-gone-meme, “*Pokémon Go* to the polls!” (Grebeby 2016).

By the time Version 1 of the Oculus Rift consumer headset launched, two generations of its developer kit had already been in the wild. As a result, with the complicity of IndieCade, there were already numerous developers working on the platform and playing one another’s games on Steam by the time the consumer device went live. Sony was also in the process of cutting deals with indies for launch titles for its own VR headset, which included many developers they met through IndieCade. Both devices were released the week of the 2016 Festival.

This same year, the Festival moved from Culver City to USC’s Los Angeles campus. Diversity continued to grow, as reflected by its leadership and awards. Mattie Brice, designer of 2013 Official Selection *Mainichi*, joined the staff as Associate Director, and a record number of LGBTQIAP+ creators—particularly transgender gamemakers—took home trophies.

In 2016, IndieCade also launched its downloadable game store on itch.io, which helped address the “discoverability” issue by creating a centralized place for people to access games that had been in the Festival.



IndieCade East 2016

IndieCade’s 2015–2016 season culminated with the fourth IndieCade East. The schedule at the Museum of the Moving Image enabled a shift to late April/early May, avoiding the snowstorms that had plagued the event in previous years. The Co-Chairs were Toni Pizza, who had exhibited several games in previous IndieCade events, and Simon Ferrari, who had spearheaded IndieCade’s eSports initiatives.

The 2016 IndieCade East exhibition, *Strange Arcade*, carried over from the 2015 trend of custom and embodied controllers, a theme that would grow even more at the main Festival later that year. *Strange Arcade* showcased a wide range of experiments that were both literally and figuratively “outside the box.” Curated by GJ Lee and Brian S. Chung (aka The Sheep’s Meow), with Sam Roberts and Museum of the Moving Image’s Jason Eppink, the exhibition focused on a wide array of new physical and embodied control schemes.

There were games using stuffed animals as an interface, including *Butt Sniffin Pugs* and *Veterinarian’s Hospital: Ruff Day*. *Anamorphic Agency*, a game about sleep paralysis, used a NeuroSky brainwave reader in conjunction with an Oculus Rift headset. *Hello, Operator!* by Em Lazer-Walker used Arduino controllers to convert an antique 1920s-era telephone switchboard through which players answered the phone and connected calls using old-school patchbay cables. *Crank Tank* used a homemade wooden crank to operate a digital tank.

Many of these games had a spectator aspect, such as *MASK* by Laura Juo-Hsin Chen, which used a series of wearable mobile VR headresses to connect to the virtual world. Alternative controllers were also used to make social statements, such as *Infinit-O*—an installation piece by Los Angeles artist Corazon Del Sol with Glitch City co-founder Archie Prakash and indie Oscar Alvarez—about female power and expression, which was played with a plush vagina controller created by Louis Roots of Melbourne-based SK Games (a connection made in part through IndieCade).

The “Beyond Screens” trend also extended into weekend events. Night Games included *RainboDisko*, a tabletop game played on a record player. *In Time* used people’s bodies as electrical conductors to navigate consent while getting into a variety of funny poses with one another. Holy Wow Studios’ *Icarus Proudbottom’s Typing Party* was played with two keyboards plugged into the same computer. *Sboal*, an illuminated table game by Owen Bell, Tony Higuchi, Titouan Millet, Tobias Wehrum, and Kailin Zhu, asked players to care for an ecosystem.

There were also local massively multiplayer games such as Em Lazer-Walker’s *Chirp Club*, an arcade-style jousting game which up to 100 players could join via web browser on their phones. *The Adventure Society*, a single-player participatory/immersive theatre piece by The State of Play (not to be confused with the digital game studio State of Play), foreshadowed a trend in participatory performance that would come into full view at IndieCade West later that year.

The IndieCade East 2016 Conference, chaired by Jennie Robinson Faber (co-founder of Dames Making Games and Gamma Space) and Henry Faber (co-founder of Bento Miso, an IndieCade jury hub) of Toronto, had three overarching themes: Alternate Universe, which focused on design lessons from other indie media; System Update, focused on communities, commerce, and institutions; and Weird Science, about tools and technologies that were changing games. Some speaker and topic highlights included: keynote Richard Marks from Sony’s PlayStation Magic Lab on best practices for creating VR; Los Angeles media artist Kate Parsons on interdisciplinary art and technology performances; Yetunde Folajimi, on Nigeria Geek Girls Club, her organization that teaches African girls how to code; and Felan Parker, a Toronto-based professor, curator, and indie-games scholar, on diversity. IndieCade’s serial Conference Co-Chair, John Sharp, and I staged a conversation about the challenges of working within an arts context, which dovetailed into an initiative to better address the distinct needs of artgames practitioners. Given the wide interest in this topic, it’s fitting that the after-party was once again held at New York’s hippest “artcade”/gallery, Babycastles.

IndieCade Showcase @ E3 2016

The two big trends of the 2016 E3's mainstream offerings were a continuing battle for fidelity at the expense of gameplay innovation and the release of Sony VR, scheduled for an October launch that would coincide with the IndieCade Festival. The fare at IndieCade's Showcase @ E3 distinguished itself with an array of diverse voices and characters. Two standouts—games that you would never expect to see at E3—both focused on empathy and went on to win awards at the Festival. *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* was a unique take on the first-person shooter in which the player was a photojournalist assigned to cover the 1979 Iranian Revolution while trying to avoid being killed, which won the Grand Jury Award. In *We are Chicago*, by Culture Shock Games, which was developed in collaboration with residents of Chicago's South Side, players had to solve the disappearance of the protagonist's friend while navigating the complexities and dangers of a troubled neighborhood. It would go on to win the Developers Choice Award. Although conventional in some ways, these games demonstrated that video games could be an art form that tackled tough topics in meaningful ways.

The Showcase also featured two explicitly feminist works: *#Feminism*, presented by co-editor Lizzie Stark, an anthology of live action role-playing (larp) games with themes of gender and feminism; and Corazon Del Sol's *Infinit-O*, featuring a furry vagina controller, which also featured in the *Strange Arcade* exhibition at IndieCade East 2016. In spite of challenging the E3 status quo, *Infinit-O* received a Best of E3 award from *GAMBIT Magazine*, which captured the game's stunning contrast with the rest of E3:

I loved my time with the game, but what I found most interesting was that people kept walking by laughing, or chatting uncomfortably about the game and its controller. It's really funny how one can get done playing a game that lets you take a chainsaw to people, run over civilians, kill innocents . . . and all sorts of insane and realistic brutality, but the idea of a female body part made people uncomfortable. (Luis 2016)

By the 2016 Showcase @ E3, it was clear that local multiplayer games were here to stay. Gamemakers were continuing to play with the multi-player affordances of tablets with games like *Clapper*, by Bridgeside Interactive, which used an ingeniously simple patty-cake mechanic where players clapped their hands together above a prone iPad, which captured their input through the camera and microphone. A PC standout was *INVERSUS*, by Hypersect, an action/territory game where players shot to create paths in their own colors; the game was released a month later on PlayStation 4.

The tabletop game selection included *Pass the Buck: A Game of Corporate Responsibility Management* by Carol Mertz, in which players tried to slough off their corporate job assignments to others while avoiding getting caught. Another was Cardboard Fortress' *RESISTOR_*, a game where players try to build a circuit to their opponents by flipping cards. A great example of the various interdependencies in the indie ecosystem, *RESISTOR_* was initially created at a monthly game jam at Cipher Prime Studios, whose games *Auditorium* and *Fractal* were both Nominees in the 2010 Festival. *RESISTOR_* was funded in a 2015 Kickstarter where the team's ask of \$9,500 ballooned to \$23,346 by the time the pledge period ended.

The influence of escape rooms was also rippling through the indie scene. A fairly new form with roots in digital-adventure games, according to a 2016 report on the *Room Escape Artist* website, the industry had gone from zero escape rooms at the start of 2014 to around 1,000 in the US by the time of E3 2016 (Spira & Spira 2018). *Escape Room in a Box: The Werewolf Experiment*, by Wild Optimists Ariel Rubin and Juliana Patel, translated the collaborative puzzle-solving of an escape room and repackaged it as a tabletop game full of unique tangible artifacts. Martzi Campos' USC MFA project, *Beautiful Corner*, was a kind of fairytale-escape-room-meets-adventure-game composed of a lovingly crafted physical room with puzzles and clues to help players piece together the story.



After seven years of growth in the heart of Culver City, the parking lot that had transformed annually into IndieCade Village was finally slated for development. Without this critical space, the Festival was impossible to execute, leaving it homeless. Tracy Fullerton stepped up to the plate and offered to host the Festival at the USC's School of Cinematic Arts.

One of the strengths of the USC facility was that it was more compressed than the sprawling, diasporic layout of Culver City—but it was also more isolated. Intermingling with the general public had been a great way to gain exposure for the Festival, especially in the early days, yielding a spate of local drop-ins amid the residential neighborhoods and highly trafficked businesses. However, USC's professional-grade cinematic sound stages afforded a higher degree of aesthetic control, infrastructure, and technology, and powering IndieCade Village had complex logistics. The School of Cinematic Arts also had courtyards and parklike areas that were ideal for tabletop, big, and night games; large on-site theatres for keynote and panel sessions; and a screening room that was spacious enough to host IndieCade's awards gala.

It was ironic that the 2016 Festival was hosted at USC's School of Cinematic Arts during a year that saw a dramatic reduction in the number of games played on screens. From its inception, IndieCade had embraced games that broke the mold, but screen-based games had still dominated for most of its lifespan. Now, games were moving beyond screens in a range of ways.

This was enabled in part by many new developments in the game ecosystem. The availability, accessibility, lower cost, and ease of devices like Arduino microcontrollers, RFID (radio-frequency identification), and infrared allowed for new hybrid physical-digital approaches and inspired creators to think further outside the box and use conventional hardware in novel ways. One example was Technology Award recipient *Threadsteading*, by Gillian Smith and Disney Research, a strategic territory board game played on an electronic embroidery machine attached to an Arduino controller.

IndieCade Festival 2016

While this was a one-off installation, conventional wisdom held that trying to mass-produce custom hardware was a losing battle (although Harmonix had already disproven this assertion with *Guitar Hero* over a decade earlier). But games like 2015 IndieCade Technology Award Winner *Beasts of Balance* paved the way for new game genres that included mass-produced custom devices, such as 2016 Nominee *Blinks* (then called *Automatiles*), a set of intelligent illuminated tiles that could be reprogrammed to create a wide array of games. Like Harmonix, *Blinks* began as a master's project of an MIT Media Lab student, Jonathan Bobrow, who used it to launch his company, Move38. Another was *Octobo*, by Thinker-Tinker, which also began its life as a master's thesis project, although it was more of a tangible media/mixed-reality product. An iPhone inserted into the front of a stuffed octopus created its animated face, bringing the character to life and allowing the player to interact with it through detachable objects found in an accompanying book. Although it would have been a longshot as a commercial product even five years earlier, by the time of this writing, *Octobo* was in production and taking pre-orders.

In 2016, the "potential" for VR touted by pundits was finally being realized and exceeded by people working outside of traditional media. Some examples were Logan Olson's *SoundStage*—an immersive "one-person band" that allowed players to position their own instruments from a variety of options, had an elegant interface design, and was fun to watch people play—earned the Audio Award. Other standouts included *Floor Plan*, by Turbo Button, a comical game where players solved puzzles by going between floors in an elevator, and David O'Reilly's *Everything* (later released on PlayStation 4), where players could choose to inhabit any object and see the world from its perspective.

Because of its longstanding support of VR, IndieCade was a perfect resource for building a robust catalog. Samsung had released its Gear VR (with underlying technology from Oculus) a little less than a year before, and Google was also investing in the VR mobile space. In addition, a number of hybrid AR/VR platforms were on the horizon, some of which looked to IndieCade and the indie community for new content.



IndieCade Festival 2016 (Con't)

And then, of course, there was the dizzying array of innovations being carried out with unaided physical objects. *Thug Life*, Horseshoe Games' board game about urban street warfare, launched its successful Kickstarter the week of the Festival. *Go Extinct!*, by STEAM Galaxy, had a core mechanic revolving around building evolutionary trees. The Interaction Award for 2016 went to an edible board game—*The Order of the Oven Mitt* by Jenn Sandercock—a Global Game Jam game inspired by the theme of ritual, in which players' induction into knighthood is executed by playing (and eating) a cookie-based strategic board game.

Even as *Pokémon GO* had brought the ARG and AR forms into the mainstream, indie developers were continuing to push the envelope in a genre that had long been an IndieCade favorite. *Sherlock Holmes and the Internet of Things*, by Columbia Digital Storytelling Lab and Nick Fortugno (one of the founders of the Come Out & Play Festival), used augmented reality and smart objects to allow players to create stories about crime scenes. The designs for the game artifacts—based on objects from Sherlock Holmes stories—were crowdsourced through an online MOOC (Massively Open Online Course).

As these various areas continued to flourish, 2016 brought some new emerging genres and communities to IndieCade that had not previously been engaged, including immersive theatre and escape rooms, and, in some cases, both. Live action role-playing games (larps) had long been a part of IndieCade, but they became particularly prevalent in 2016. On the comical side was *Ghost Court*, by Jason Morningstar of Bully Pulpit Games, a comical courtroom reality show that played out civil trials between ghosts and the living. Night Game *Clue House*, by longtime favorite Wise Guys Events, was a live-action adaptation of the classic board game *Clue*, with players trying to commit murder by getting alone in a room with one other player and a specific weapon. On the more serious side was *Keeping the Candles Lit*, by Shoshana Kessock, about three generations of Jewish women impacted by the Holocaust.

Alongside larps, IndieCade had also been tracking the rise of immersive theatre, which was slower to come into the fray. But the 2016 Festival saw multiple entries in this category. One, *Hamlet-Mobile* by Capital W, was a reinterpretation of Shakespeare's classic play deployed to multiple locations via minivan, which won the Game Design Award.

Hamlet-Mobile was not the only Nominee inspired by the Bard's classic tragedy. *Elsinore*, a digital game by Golden Glitch Studios, is best described as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* meets *Groundhog Day* from the point of view of Ophelia, who, looping through the same sequence of events, tries to avert tragedy.

In addition to escape rooms and immersive theatre were hybrids that combined live and digital elements. *Séance*, from Twocan Consortium, used its supernatural context to integrate artifacts, puzzles, and special effects. *Six Ghosts and a Pie* was described as a "micro amusement park" ride by its creators at Two Bit Circus, whose founders included Brent Bushnell (son of the inventor of *Pong*), former designers from Walt Disney Imagineering and IDEO, and the former Creative Vice President of MTV. In *Bad News*, by University of Southern California, Santa Cruz's Expressive Intelligence Studio, a live actor interacted with a single player via prompts from a sophisticated artificial intelligence program.

Digital Games shown in 2016 tackled complex personal, political, and cultural issues. *Civil Unrest*, by IV Productions/Leonard Menchiari, looked at protest through a systems lens, creating a realistic crowd-control simulation to explore the social dynamics between police and protesters during a riot. Quicksand Games presented *Antariksha Sanchar: Episode Zero*, a science-fiction adventure game and the first major culturally driven game to come out of India. *Lieve Oma*, by Florian Veltman, was a lyrical game—almost an interactive painting—with the simple premise of picking mushrooms with your grandmother. *Liyla and the Shadows of War*, by Rasheed Abueideh, used stylized black-and-white animation to tell the story of a Palestinian girl trapped in the perpetual war zone of the Gaza Strip.

Games continued to grow as an expressive art form through examples like *Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor*, by Sunday Month, which upended classic science-fiction tropes by putting players in the role of low-skilled workers in a futuristic world. *Killing Time at Lightspeed*, a Twine adventure game, was a dark comedy conveying the deterioration of humanity via text messages as players hurtled further away from their home planet. And, as always, indie developers made cool games about programming, like *Beglitched* by Hexacutable (Jenny Jiao Hsia and AP Thomson), which immersed players in a magical world of hacking and debugging.

Alongside the exhibition were a range of sessions targeted to specific subcommunities. IndieXchange, which took place the day before the Festival, included a number of practical sessions ranging from hands-on workshops such as paper-and-pencil prototyping (a standard practice in digital game design), creating non-photorealistic VR, community building, starting your own company, and game design as a form of protest.

The Conference was restructured to more of a summit format and rebranded Think:Indie. A number of topics were explored, including the challenge of maintaining sustainable careers in both indie and artgames—an issue that John Sharp had brought to the fore in his blog post following the previous year's Festival—as well as the sustainability of IndieCade itself. Keynote conversations included Tessa Blake and Tracy Fullerton on "Creative Leadership in the 21st Century," which dealt, in part, with issues around diversity in leadership. Another was "Visiting the Past and Future of Games" with Cyan Worlds' Rand Miller—creator of *Myst*—who received the Trailblazer Award that year. Having written my PhD dissertation, and later a book (Pearce 2009), about refugees in Miller's online game *Uru*, the two of us had a lot to talk about. Our conversation spanned the origins of his first independent game, *The Manhole*, to his newest indie game-in-progress, *Obduction*, which his studio had funded through Kickstarter.

The GameU program supported aspiring and beginner game designers with presentations about designing "games for change," best practices in VR, and cinematic storytelling. I ran a board game modification workshop with some school groups using Mary Flanagan's *Values at Play Grow-A-Game Cards*, as well as a team-building speed-dating game I designed in which people had to create superhero characters of themselves with game-design stats.

Held in USC's luxurious Norris Cinema Theatre, the 2016 awards stage was by far the most diverse in IndieCade history. The Grand Jury Award went to *1979 Revolution: Black Friday*, and the Developer Choice Award went to *We Are Chicago*. Many of the award-winners were teams led by women, which put a decidedly feminine spin on gaming; *The Order of the Oven Mitt* won Interaction Design, *Threadsteading* won the Technology Award, *Infinite-O* won Visual Design, and *Hamlet-Mobile* won Game Design. The Story/World Design Award went to *Diary of a Spaceport Janitor*.

Audience Choice went to *Bad News*, while Media Choice went to *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter*, by Seemingly Pointless Games (James and Joe Cox), an ASCII game about a teenager looking at pornography for the first time. The 2016 Game Changer was Toni Rocca, co-founder of GaymerX and MidBoss, and the Trailblazer Award went to Rand Miller for his pioneering contribution to the adventure-game genre. The awards gala was hosted by game actress Sarah Elmaleh, who had previously contributed to IndieCade through her volunteer efforts, and Asher Vollmer, who had shown games in IndieCade since he was in high school. As part of the IndieCade family, both brought a lively spirit and levity to the proceedings.



IndieCade Europe 2016

Although IndieCade had hosted prior showcases at GameCity Nottingham in its early years, there was a longtime aspiration to launch a self-contained event in Europe. European studios had been engaged from the very beginning, making up over a third of games in the inaugural Festival. Through an introduction made by Global Game Jam's Susan Gold, Stephanie collaborated with Olivier Lejade, who connected her with curator Simon Bachelier and Capital Games. The first official IndieCade Europe was hosted at the Conservatoire national des arts et métiers (CNAM) in Paris on November 18–19, 2016. The event was supported by Capital Games, the City of Paris, Île-de-France regional government, the French government (DIRECCTE), and the European Union (ERDF).

The Programme Chair was Martin Pichlmair, a member of the Copenhagen Game Collective and Head of the Games Programme at IT University of Copenhagen, who had worked on *And Yet It Moves* (2009) and *Radio Flare* (2008), among other IndieCade games. Martin worked alongside Simon Bachelier and Vlambeer's Rami Ismael, a Dutch-Egyptian developer known for his talks on diversity, who helped with networking and organizing.

IndieCade seemed right at home as the twenty-first century counterpart to CNAM's artifacts of art, design, innovation, and technology, which included protobicycles and medieval flying machines. Its cozy café served as a social hub throughout the weekend. A smaller-scale version of the US Festival with a focus on European developers, IndieCade Europe 2016 included the typical range of digital and analog games, as well as a VR showcase.

Speakers included Rami Ismael, who talked about his experiences as an indie making his hit *Ridiculous Fishing*; Adriel Wallick, who discussed putting on Train Jam, an annual game jam that takes place on a train in the US en route to the Game Developers Conference; Michel Ancel, creator of the *Rayman* franchise. The keynote was by Siobhan Reddy, co-founder and studio director of Media Molecule, which had leveraged the success of its indie cult-hit *Rag Doll Kung Fu* to create the Sony PlayStation hit *LittleBigPlanet*.

Over 40 games were shown, including sponsor games, some drawn from prior events that year. Games that were new for IndieCade Europe included *Shadowmatic* by Triada Studio, an iPad game where the player rotates an abstract object until it resolves into a recognizable shadow, and *Metrico+* from Digital Dreams, whose 3D world and game mechanics revolved around infographics.

Two IndieCade Europe exclusives stand out for their playful approaches to intimacy. The first was *Smooch Station*, created by "The Smoochers," whose team included former IndieCade intern and then-IT University of Copenhagen student Raghav Bashyal. This 2015 ALT CTRL Game Jam winner had each player manipulate and send feedback with their mouth via a (disinfected) pacifier. The other game was *Surrender* by Zack Wood, an American ex-pat living in Berlin, along with Sarah Homewood, Olli Harjola, and Johannes Følsgaard. Created at Lyst (pronounced "loost"), an annual summit and game jam held in Denmark around themes of sex and intimacy, it involved two players competing to touch a third player's hands with objects in order to produce the most pleasurable effect.

IndieCade Europe included its own award show, which was produced and hosted by the Copenhagen Game Collective, whose roots were entangled with IndieCade. Among the awards given was a Media Choice Award for *Old Man's Journey*, by Broken Rules, which went on to win 16 more awards at other festivals, bringing the studio full circle from its first year at IndieCade.

Following the first IndieCade Europe, freelance artist Adriel Beaver organized an unofficial after-party entitled "La Petite IND&CADENCE," a playful mashup of English and French words. Promoted as an alt-game and music event with an emphasis on diversity, it was hosted at a nightclub/restaurant called La Panthère Ose, also a pun that loosely translates into both "The Pink Panther" and "The Audacious Panther."

