2017 The Post-Publisher Era

IndieCade's 10-year celebration illustrated the transformation of the indie ecosystem during the preceding decade and revealed the community's cohesiveness in response to an industry in transition. Indies had managed to survive the so-called indiepocalypse, and the indie game community likewise held steady. As Molleindustria's Paolo Pedercini put it in his IndieCade Europe keynote that year, in spite of the fundamental conundrums of capitalism, "we won" (Pedercini 2017). By 2017, opportunities had grown, and it was commonplace to see IndieCade games published across a variety of platforms. Students were both entering and leaving college with aspirations of independence. For many, it became possible to make a living as an indie developer, often through a combination of creative strategies including contract work on other indies' projects, academic grants, and selling original work.

In 2016, VR settled into the mainstream. There had been no fewer than eight VR headset product launches the prior year, including the Oculus consumer headset, Sony VR, the HoloLens, and HTC Vive (also an IndieCade sponsor). In addition, there was a push by companies working in low-end VR, such as Google Cardboard and its imitators. For $12, you could drop your phone into a plastic headset and watch 3D films on YouTube. Indies that had been on the front end of the new wave of VR were rewarded with VR launch titles on PlayStation.

Major shifts were underway in terms of platforms. At E3 2017, Sony announced it was stepping away from publicly supporting indies, even while publishing a record number of them and announcing that they would start publishing on non-Sony platforms. Later that year, Microsoft shut down its Xbox Live Indie Games marketplace to make way for indie distribution on its newer platform, Xbox One. These developments may have appeared to some as proof of the impending indiepocalypse, but other trends suggested otherwise. In 2017, games remained the top category in the App Store. This was very far from an indiepocalypse. As it turns out, what was really going on was that consoles were declining incrementally while mobile was ascending at a much more rapid rate (Wijman 2018).

As some publishers' interest in indies seemed to be waning, so was publishers' relevance to indies. This manifested in a couple of ways. First, there were increasing avenues of self-funding and self-publishing that streamlined production and eliminated the need for publishers, as well as costly ports to proprietary platforms (which developers often had to furnish on their own dime). Indie game developers found, as musicians had in prior years, that they could actually make *more* money by self-publishing and selling fewer units than they might through a formal publishing relationship. Mobile, with its publisher-free model, became the biggest commercial driver in the space.

Crowdfunding enabled projects to have reasonable budgets without the need for creative compromise (although it took a *lot* of time and energy away from the development process). And while the *ratio* of video games getting funded on Kickstarter had decreased, overall, the *number* of games funded had plateaued and remained much the same since 2013. If you include tabletop games, 2017 was a record year, with over $162 million pledged to successful projects (Bidaux 2018). Valve's Steam publishing platform was a pioneer in enabling indies to reach a wider audience—but at the 2017 Festival, the buzz was, to quote developers who attended, "Steam is not your friend." The issue stemmed from a perceived lack of developer support and the sense that Steam Greenlight, which funded projects based on audience ratings, had created a "tyranny of the masses," inheriting some of the more toxic aspects of gamer culture.

On the other hand, there were platforms like Kickstarter, itch.io, and Twitch.tv, as well as festivals like IndieCade, that actively supported developers and enabled them to cultivate direct relationships with their fans. These allowed developers to interact directly with their audiences, eliminating the middleman. This meant that public-facing events like IndieCade, where fans could actually *meet* independent developers, became increasingly important. The ecosystem had thus evolved from the original model of getting your game in front of a publisher to getting it in front of the public. As such, getting into IndieCade's Showcase @ E3 had become more about press coverage and less about publishing deals.

At the same time, new players started getting into the game who were not game industry publishers in the traditional sense. Amazon and Google, for instance, started publishing games, and Oculus was both promoting and funding game development. Apple, which was arguably garnering the greatest benefit from the indie surge, would not come on board until a couple of years later. Finally, other game genres were becoming increasingly attractive to developers; board games actually began outpacing digital games on Kickstarter (Bidaux 2018).

In addition, emerging genres such as site-specific and event-based games, which included escape rooms, installations, and theatrical experiences, were radically changing the landscape. These borrowed from economic models more adjacent to theatre and attraction design. Escape rooms and immersive theatre were harbingers of where things were headed. While games of these types challenged IndieCade's own funding infrastructure, they also amplified the Festival's relevance: many IndieCade 2017 games could not be seen anywhere else.

Despite all this, in its 12th year of Showcases and 10th year of Festivals, IndieCade's mission had changed little: to celebrate and support creative innovation in games and interactive media.

The year 2017 was also challenging in terms of world events. To the dismay of many, the UK voted to exit the European Union, and Donald Trump went from an annoying quasi-celebrity troll to the most powerful man in the free world. He staffed his White House with many of the same people who had promulgated Gamergate. After experiencing that particular controversy firsthand in our own community, it was shocking to see that toxic culture rise to the highest levels of government. Game creators, like many other people worldwide, fell into a state of despair but responded the best way they knew how: by making games. Thus, activism became a ubiquitous theme in the indie games became of 2017. This tumultuous time called for flexibility and responsiveness, as well as introspection and engagement. Indie developers were thinking deeply about how to use their craft to address this new, frightening reality, as well as its underlying systems and historical contexts. At the same time, they were reconsidering their own position in the ecosystem.

Photo by Alex Greer

Uncredited Photo, Digital LA, October 9, 2017

#ResistJam

#ResistJam represented a coming together of the indie community in response to the shift in the global political climate that began in 2016. It was instigated by Retora Games' Tyler Coleman, whose *Night Lights* had been a 2012 IndieCade Official Selection and who had appeared on *Forbes* 30 Under 30 list; Damon Reece of the Vague Collective, the creators of *RE\VISION* and *Steal My Artificial Heart*; and Maize Wallin, an Australian audio designer and composer. IndieCade was a presenting partner, and other partners/sponsors included Global Game Jam, Games for Change, Raw Fury, and Devolver Digital. The jam was hosted on itch.io from March 3–11, and gamemakers created a diverse array of games around protest themes, generating publicity within the game press and even a little in the mainstream. The event description on the IndieCade website read:

> *#ResistJam is an online game jam about creating games that resist oppressive authoritarianism in all its forms, in partnership with IndieCade. It differs from most game jams in that we're providing mentorship and workshops from experienced members of the game industry to make sure that as many people as possible can participate, no matter their skill level. Our objective is to empower jammers to make amazing and powerful games by focusing on diversity and inclusion.*

The themes of the jam were:

- I <3 Diversity: Work in a diverse team.
- This is How it Feels: Raise awareness of the personal impact of hate speech.
- Hardware Accessibility: Can be played in a browser or on a low-end netbook.
- Nevertheless, She Persisted: Standing up against many.
- Everyone Can Play: Design your game with accessibility in mind.
- Other Shoes: A positive portrayal of someone with a different life experience from your own.
- Don't Censor Me, Bro!: A core theme of censorship and its impact.
- Localized: Make the gameplay require two languages.
- Freedom of Press: The game showcases press and journalism through gameplay.
- Folk: The game uses a folk or indigenous art style of your region.
- Migration Power: The value of migrants to a culture and economy.

By the end of the week, there were over 200 games from around the world, some of which were exhibited at the Showcase @ E3, including *The Cat in the Hijam* and *O for Oppression*.

The game industry is notorious for its lack of public engagement. Unlike other entertainment sectors, such as music and film, game developers have tended to remain aloof from politics, except in matters of censorship affecting the industry directly. It was therefore a subversive act in and of itself to bring these games to E3, a space that was typically not only apolitical but also widely criticized for its poor record of diversity both on and off the screen (Hall 2017; Salter and Blodgett 2017).

IndieCade Showcase @ E3 2017

Since IndieCade's Showcase @ E3 in 2007, there had been a significant shift in the relationship of indie games with the larger video-game ecosystem. As Stephanie Barish pointed out in her 2017 interview for *Vice's* Waypoint, games from IndieCade's Showcase @ E3 were now regularly migrating to other booths on the show floor (Waypoint 2017). By June 2017, Sony had published close to 1,200 indie games, the vast majority of them since the 2006 launch of its PlayStation Network, while Xbox had nearly half that number. Although Nintendo had faltered with the Wii, the company began to turn a corner with Nintendo Switch and, in 2017, would launch "Nindies."

By 2017, one-third of the twenty-four games shown at the first IndieCade Festival had been published on consoles. Nonetheless, in that same year, Sony—which had been by far the dominant player in the space—did an abrupt 180, pulling out of its IndieCade sponsorship and making what many saw to be a misstep by saying that indies were no longer "relevant" at its annual press event (despite the fact that most of their VR launch titles were from independent developers). This dismayed both fans and the press alike and led to, as one game journalist put it, "the internet getting out its pitchforks" (Barker 2017). In fact, Sony published a record number of independent games in 2017. The same year, Microsoft announced it was closing down Xbox Live Arcade, yet reporters noted that the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 booth was crawling with Microsoft executives as the company appeared to be ramping up its indie efforts (J. Conditt 2017).

Sony's public disavowal of indie games left a vacuum that made IndieCade's Showcase @ E3 presence even more relevant and also spurred the Indie MEGABOOTH, which had started at PAX East in 2012, to set up a fan-facing exhibition across the street from the Los Angeles Convention Center. As the primary place within E3 where indie games were highlighted, the IndieCade Showcase was jammed the entire three days of the expo, including press in search of new titles. Games from the booth that were covered in the mainstream press included *A Case of Distrust,* by The Wandering Ben, an elegant 1920s-era noir mystery with stylized art reminiscent of *Framed.*

While IndieCade had always been committed to promoting and rewarding activist games, they were especially prevalent in 2017. A number of Resist Jam games were exhibited at the IndieCade Showcase @ E3. *BORDERS,* by Gonzalo Alvarez, Jon DiGiacomo, and Genaro Vallejo Reyes, had a simple, retro pixel style with a powerful persistence mechanic: every time a player died, a skeleton remained on the game's landscape, present for future play-throughs—a powerful memorialization of individuals who died crossing the US-Mexico border. The game drew from Alvarez's father's experience of discovering a skeleton in the desert while coming to America. (Interestingly, Alvarez, who had never made a game before, was inspired to do so after attending IndieCade East.)

The booth also featured other politically themed titles, a genre that had been trending at IndieCade long before #ResistJam. Cinq-Mars Media's *PolitiTruth* was a trivia game that asked players to guess which statements made by politicians were true or false. Created in collaboration with *PolitiFact,* the designer was a programmer living in Trump Tower who wanted to do something about the new political environment. *Somewhere in the South,* by Wonderneer, was a game about the Underground Railroad that, much like 2014's *Thralled,* reenvisioned escape from slavery as a horror story. Another oppression-as-horror game that garnered accolades was *Detention,* by Taiwanese studio Red Candle, which was set in 1960s Taiwan under martial law; although published by Sony, it was only available for viewing in the IndieCade booth. In addition to being an inspiration for designers, the new regime had a direct effect on the IndieCade community in other ways. Due to the so-called "Muslim travel ban," the creator of *Snow VR,* Iranian developer Ali Eslami, was not able to get into the US to attend E3, so other developers stepped in to demo his game.

In addition to compelling screen-based games, there were a number of "off-the-screen" entrants, some of which also had political themes. An example that also captured the trend of physical escape rooms and puzzles was *Tracking Ida,* Lishan AZ's master's thesis project created with a team of USC students. The game told the true story of pioneering nineteenth-century journalist Ida B. Wells' crusade against lynching through fully integrated puzzles and clues hidden in secret compartments of an antique steamer trunk; it even included an original Edison cylinder phonograph in one of its puzzles. Finally, *Hackers of Resistance* was a live protest game run out of a tent that engaged players in activist art actions.

In this activist climate, the contrast between the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 was particularly sharp with the rest of the E3 show floor, which, in spite of global political turmoil, continued to exist within its own apolitical bubble.

IndieCade Festival 2017

IndieCade's 10th anniversary celebration was hosted at the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) in the heart of the Little Tokyo district of Los Angeles. The museum's mission—to "promote understanding and appreciation of America's ethnic and cultural diversity by sharing the Japanese American experience"—seemed particularly aligned with the themes dominating that year. Although concentrated in a single venue, as had been the case with the USC Festival the priory year, JANM was in a more central location surrounded by a diverse array of eateries and shops. IndieCade occupied a variety of different spaces within two buildings on the museum grounds, as well as the plaza between them. Nearly 150 games were exhibited across these three spaces. The Nominees were housed in a central gallery in the main museum with windows facing the plaza. The curated games were organized around themes, which included Documents, Friends, Friday Night Fights (the eSports track), Spaces, and Night Games, as well as Gaming for Everyone and Alumni games by former IndieCade Nominees.

The exhibit amplified trends in diversifying platforms and new genres. Of the 36 Nominees shown that year, about half were PC games, two were available on consoles, five were on iOS, and the rest ran the platform gamut: tabletop, VR, installations, vintage device hacks, custom and Arduino controllers, performance, and—once again—food.

A number of the activist games at the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 also made it into the Festival, such as *Detention*, *Hackers of Resistance*, and *Tracking Ida*, which won the Impact Award. They were joined by others, including several activist tabletop games including *Objectif*, a card game designed to prompt a dialogue about race, gender, and standards of beauty; *Sign: A Game About Being Understood*, by a team of game designer-linguists, about the invention of Nicaraguan sign language by a group of deaf children; and Dark Horse Award winner *Feast*, by Sharang Biswas & Sweta Mohapatra, a tabletop roleplaying game where characters are created based on flavors of food brought by participants. The tabletop trend was highlighted by the fact that *Exploding Kittens*, by 2012 IndieCade Trailblazer Elan Lee, was a major sponsor, peppering the venue with playful related activities, including giant "sandboxes" for visitors to frolic in.

Empathy pervaded as a subtopic within the activist theme via games that experimented with new forms of storytelling and agency. *Bury Me, My Love* was a mobile game that told its story via text messages between a Syrian woman leaving her homeland to seek refuge in Europe and the husband she left behind. *A Normal Lost Phone*, by Accidental Queens, used a similar narrative conceit, with the premise of finding a lost phone and trying to learn about its owner from the contents. *Four Horsemen* was an interactive visual novel about immigration, and Jordan Magnuson's PC game *Ishmael* used mixed media to explore similar themes through the eyes of a child.

The literary trend that was captured by Shakespeare games in 2016 continued in 2017 with *Walden, a game*, Tracy Fullerton's game based on the classic American novel, which simulated Henry David Thoreau's yearlong experiment living in harmony with nature. *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*, by Dim Bulb Games, was a collection of short stories by different authors about the failure of the American Dream (a timely topic) as told by a wandering storyteller in a Depression-era, *Grapes of Wrath*-inspired setting. The two games tied for IndieCade's Developers Choice Award.

The Grand Jury Award went to *Oikospiel Book I*, a digital game by David Kanaga of *Proteus* and *Panoramical* fame. Described as a "surrealistic dog opera," the game was inspired by Naomi Klein's book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* and took up the related topics of climate change and labor rights from the perspective of dogs revolting against humans (Gach 2017). The Media Choice award went to *Busy Work*, a multiplayer installation by Mouse & the Billionaire, which spoofed late-stage capitalist labor in a kind of "service economy" game version of Charlie Chaplin's classic film *Modern Times*. The Interaction Award went to IndieCade recidivist Natalie Lawhead of alienmelon for *Everything is going to be OK*, which perhaps ought to have been the mantra of 2017.

Two "new arcade" games introduced custom and hacked controllers: *Bleep Space*, by Andy Wallace and Dan Friel, which used a button-based interface with a horizontal screen that generated abstract animation and music, and *Atchafalaya Arcade*, by Tammi Duplantis, which transformed an old-school Gameboy into a chiptune synthesizer of sound and visuals.

Amid the VR hype, indies continued to experiment in unexpected ways. *Fear Sphere*, by USC team HNRY, used a handheld flashlight which was actually a projector to display a 3D world against the walls of an inflatable dome, creating a low-cost, shareable, immersive VR environment. *Santiago*, also by a USC team, blended AR and VR; players restored harmony to an underwater ecosystem by touching a physical sculpture of a fish, which lit up areas on the fish as seen through a VR headset. Finally, there was *Un-Destined*, a multiplayer hybrid escape room/VR installation in which a player in VR collaborated with another player to unlock real-world puzzles. One of the biggest draws among Nominees—Pawmigo's *Cat Sorter VR*—took the Aesthetic Award with its uproariously fun multiplayer mechanic of "fixing" cats with "assembly" issues. On the AR/transmedia side was *What Is it But a Dream*, which combined a book, cards, and an AR app that allowed players to explore the world of *Alice in Wonderland* from different perspectives.

The 2017 Conference included sessions on topics such as concept art, comedy in games, the benefits of having a diverse team, mistakes in VR, audio, the portrayal of mental illness in games, subversion, a *Well Played* session, and town hall and breakouts on politics in games. GameU sessions targeted newcomers, students, and aspiring game developers and included a University Game Show. Keynote highlights included Rami Ismael, recipient of the Game Changer Award that year, and a fireside chat with 2017 Trailblazer Award recipient Keita Takahashi and former Independent Games Festival Chair Brandon Boyer. Funomena showed their newest game by Keita Takahashi, *Luna*, in the Gaming for Everyone Pavilion.

As part of IndieCade's 10th celebration, a panel was assembled of people who had worked at the first IndieCade Festival in 2008, including Jason Rhorer, Keith Nemitz, Jenova Chen, Stephanie Barish, Tracy Fullerton, Sam Roberts, and myself. This session provided insight into IndieCade's impact on people's careers. Keith Nemitz said he had been introduced as an artist for the first time at IndieCade. Jason Rhorer added that IndieCade was a factor in his decision to primarily focus on game design. An audience member asked if IndieCade's mission had changed since its launch. Stephanie, Sam, and I looked at one another and said, "No, not really." Everything else had changed over the previous 10 years, but that was the one thing that hadn't.

IndieCade shared its 10th anniversary with the Global Game Jam, which had a key role in the indie ecosystem as the birthplace of numerous indie games, teams, and Festival awardees. To co-celebrate their synergistic, decade-long journey, IndieCade hosted a screening of the documentary film *Game Jam: The Movie*. The film was followed by a panel featuring Global Game Jam's co-founders—Susan Gold, Gorm Lai, Ian Schreiber, and Foaad Khosmood—who also received a special IndieCade Decade of Impact Award.

The 2017 awards gala took place at VR studio Survios (headed up by IndieCade advisor Robert Nashak), and a new annual award was introduced to honor longtime IndieCade friend Bernie De Koven. As the president of the New Games Foundation, which promoted alternative adult outdoor play in the 1960s and 1970s, and as author of *The Well-Played Game*, De Koven had been a major influence on both academics and indies (including his coinage of the term "game tasting"). He had been diagnosed with terminal cancer earlier that year, and IndieCade had proposed giving him an award—but he countered with the suggestion that instead one be given in his honor to others. Thus was born the Bernie De Koven Big Fun Award for an individual or group who had made an impact on advancing physical real-world play. The first Bernie De Koven Big Fun Award, decided on with Bernie himself, went to the creators of 2010 IndieCade Kids Award-winner *Humans vs. Zombies*.

The grand finale of the 2017 Festival was a live performance during Night Games of Alistair Aitcheson's *The Incredible Playable Show*, which combined a number of mini-games including *Codex Bash* (which was in the 2015 Festival and IndieCade East 2016). A participatory game show, *The Incredible Playable Show* managed to get an entire audience into the act by scanning one another with barcode readers, strapping iPads onto one another, solving puzzles distributed among audience members, and mashing giant colored buttons. The game earned Aitcheson the Jury Special Recognition Award, and it was the perfect embodiment of the 2017 zeitgeist: a blend of performance, technology, and social interaction designed for a context completely outside of the traditional publishing framework.
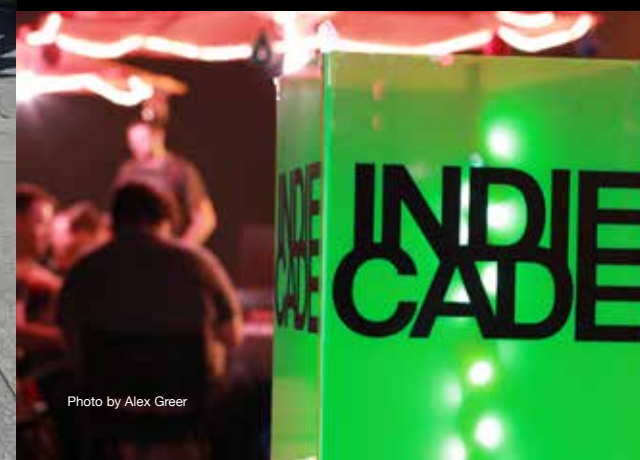
IndieCade Europe 2017

The curation strategy for the second IndieCade Europe blended games from US events as well as some that were exclusive to the Paris event. One crossover game was *Cosmic Top Secret*, published by Danish documentary film studio klassefilm and directed by filmmaker Trine Laier, which won the IndieCade Culture Award at the Festival. The autobiographical documentary game, which featured a child's quest to uncover her father's secret past as a Cold War spy, exemplified the expressive potential for documentary games and would go on to be included as part of the Sheffield Doc/Fest's *Alternate Realities* exhibition in 2018. A Cold War theme could also be found in *Atomic Days*, a beautifully crafted, computer-aided board game about bluffing, and, to some extent, in *Triple Agent*, by Sig Gunnarsson and Torfi Asgeirsson, a multiplayer iOS party game in which players must figure out who among them is a traitor by passing around a phone. Both games were IndieCade Europe exclusives. Another interesting use of the iPhone was *Gaze*, an ingenious installation developed by students at ICAN (Institut de Création et d'Animation Numériques), where players used smartphones to take photos of a 3D model from a particular angle in order to replicate the image they had been assigned via physical cards.

The activism theme present in the recent US IndieCade events carried through to Europe, but to a lesser degree. Perhaps the most apt of these was *Democrapcy*, a satirical board game by Swiss team Melissa Pisler, Yoann Douillet, Israel Viadest, and Marion Bareil, about public culpability when democracy goes wrong.

One of the standouts was Nominee and award-winner *Vignettes*, by Pol Clarissou, Armel Gibson, Pat Ashe, and David Kanaga. In this clever puzzle game—similar in some ways to *Shadowmatic* and 2015 Festival Nominee *GNOG*—objects were transformed through rotation.

Among the luminaries present was Sir Ian Livingstone, considered one of the founding fathers of the UK gaming industry, who gave a talk entitled "Life is a Game" (Börü 2017). Molleindustria's Paolo Pedercini nicely summed up the current state of the indie game ecosystem internationally with his keynote "Indiepocalypse Now" (quoted at the start of this chapter), which broke down the myth of the indiepocalypse, pointed out that the overall prognosis was good, and suggested bettering the indie outlook by both increasing leisure time and diversifying audiences and contexts for play (Pedercini 2017).

The second "La Petite INDéCADENCE" was co-organized by Adriel Beaver, chip-tunes musician Cyanide Dansen, developer Pierrick (aka echopteryx), void.garden, and IndieCade Europe Chair Simon Bachelier, and was sponsored by French game studio Accidental Queens, whose game *A Normal Lost Phone* had been shown at the 2017 Festival in Los Angeles.

One key distinction between IndieCade Europe and its US counterpart was their vastly different regional funding infrastructures. For the first IndieCade Festival in Bellevue, and subsequent Festivals in Culver City, the full extent of public funding came through the support of city governments, usually under the auspices of economic development. IndieCade Europe, by contrast, received significant support from both the regional and French governments, as well as the European Union. The paucity of public funding options in the US meant a heavy reliance on private and corporate funding. In this sense, IndieCade Europe bridged the relationship between art and commerce in games. To Europeans, an event like IndieCade provided both cultural and economic value, factors that were viewed more synergistically than in the US. According to its organizers, IndieCade Europe also helped serve as a catalyst for French indie developers to gel as a community.

Europe 2017 Photos by La Fille d'à Côté except where noted