

2019 The World is a Game Platform

IndieCade Milestones

IndieCade Alumni Program Launched

IndieCade Events

IndieCade Showcase @ E3, June 11-13, Los Angeles Convention Center

IndieCade Festival, October 10-12, Center for Media and Design, Santa Monica College

IndieCade Europe, October 18-19, Bibliothèque nationale de France François-Mitterrand, Paris

For more than a decade, IndieCade has showcased what's underground, what's next and what's important in interactive storytelling. Perhaps more vitally, IndieCade puts the emphasis on individual developers, highlighting gaming's idiosyncratic voices who believe play is a language as much as it is a tool for a medium.

—Todd Martens, *LA Times*

2019 promises to be a great year in games. Innovation and competition will elevate the industry's offerings and drive more inclusivity among a broader range of audiences.

—Joost von Dreunen, *Tech Crunch*

It seems like every year in IndieCade's history saw dramatic transformations of the indie game ecosystem, but in 2019 particular developments were underway that portended a major shift. In anticipation of the release of next generation game consoles, publishers began restructuring for a new round of indie development. Microsoft acquired DoubleFine, the studio of 2010 IndieCade Trailblazer Award recipient Tim Shafer (Kuchera 2019). Sony, in turn, hired DoubleFine's Greg Rice to head up its indie team in anticipation of the PS5 launch (Grubb 2019). Meanwhile, the Nintendo Switch was outselling previous Nintendo offerings and supplanting PlayStation as the indie console of choice, fueled in part by its increasing attention to indies (Kain 2020). Valve was losing its dominance in PC distribution as Epic began lowering the cost of development with its Unreal game engine (van Dreunen 2019).

Although the steady drop in console sales was attributed to dips between next-generation hardware releases, the larger arc painted a different picture: console sales had been undergoing a steady drop for years (Whitson 2013), while PCs experienced gentle but steady growth despite decades-long forecasts of doom (NoodleFighter 2018; Bold Business 2018; Storey 2019); furthermore, developers continued to favor PCs over consoles (Richter 2019), perhaps due in part to the rise of Virtual Reality (VR) and self-publishing platforms such as itch.io and GOG. But the real news was that mobile had become the dominant gaming platform (Mobvista 2018; Wijman 2018; Richter 2019). No doubt this shift was aided by the continued growth of VR and Augmented Reality (AR) niche markets, which boosted both PC and smartphone sales (NoodleFighter 2018; Bold Business 2018; Storey, 2019).

As the "usual suspects" regrouped, a slew of newcomers with big bank accounts arrived, having suddenly noticed that games were already a major part of their businesses. In March at GDC and PAX, Google—which already had one toe in the water—announced Stadia, its new cloud-based gaming service. While games had consistently been the top-selling category in the iOS App Store, Apple began funding them for the first time in its history—Steve Jobs famously hated games (Martin 2008; Reichert 2019)—to populate its new Apple Arcade. Among the subscription service's launch titles, over one in four were former IndieCade Nominees, IndieCade Selections, or alumni games. The rise of mobile and the persistence of PC games ushered in a broader, more diverse audience, which was also reflected in IndieCade's offerings throughout the year.

This was also the year when immersive entertainment came into its own. Organized by *No Proscenium*, the first Immersive Design Summit launched in San Francisco in March of 2019, and featured several former IndieCade finalists and program chairs. In November, *Room Escape Artist*—an online publication by David and Lisa Spira—announced that it would launch the Reality Escape Convention (RECON) in 2020, which would be the first professional event to bring together the fastest growing sector of the game industry (Spira 2019). Finally, in an unprecedented nod to the AR genre, AMC announced that it would produce a series with actor Jason Segel based on the 2013 documentary film *The Institute* (Rothe 2013) about the 2010 IndieCade Story/World Award-winning AR experience *Nonbalance/The Jejune Institute* (Murrell 2019).



IndieCade Showcase @ E3 2019

While most of the E3 constituency was talking about Sony's cataclysmic departure from the Expo—particularly shocking because the global giant had been one of the founding members of ESA—IndieCade was following its own path. Sony was also missing from the IndieCade booth, and its absence said volumes about where things were trending—as did a number of other developments that underscored the sea change within the gaming industry.

A growing gaming audience also meant more room for niche titles, which was good news for indies—especially in terms of diversity. Among digital indies, the faces both on and behind the screens were noticeably diverse. Women, people of color, and LGBTQ protagonists featured prominently in games like *EarthNight*, *Knife Sisters*, and *Neo Cab*—which was the year's indie sleeper hit—as were Indigenous voices and stories. Even against the backdrop of gargantuan industry booths, IndieCade's selection garnered attention from mainstream press (Goldberg 2019; Martens 2019a).

One of IndieCade's hallmarks has always been showcasing innovative and experimental designs long before they would be seen in the commercial sphere, and it has been one of the few places in the US where members of the public could see games that used custom controllers. 2019 saw an unprecedented growth in the production of commercial game products that used custom hardware. Much of this can be attributed to crowdfunding, and particularly to Kickstarter, whose funding model helped bypass historically risk-averse venture capital gatekeepers. Novel devices shown at the IndieCade @ E3 Showcase included: Blinks, a smart-tile game system shown at E3 playing *Mortals*, which was created for the platform at the IndieCade East Blinks Game Jam in 2018; PiXXL Cube, a LED-covered box outfitted with an accelerometer that players rotate to navigate its *PiXXL Maze*; and *HOT SWAP: All Hands on Deck*, a co-op game where players swap 3D-printed controllers on a custom input box to maneuver a boat, which went on to win the Innovation in Interaction Design Award at the fall Festival. In related development, Sensible Object, known for *Beasts of Balance*, was acquired by Niantic, the creators of *Pokémon Go*, although this was more likely related to the ARG background of its founder Alex Fleetwood than the company's interest in custom controllers (Batchelor 2019).

In addition, both VR and AR—now collectively referred to as XR, or Extended Reality—came into their own. Ascend, a VR game that combines aerial combat with a leaning interface, made several Best of E3 Lists and was called "one of the best hidden gems at E3" (Joho 2019) as well as the "potential...next hot VR ESports title" (Vejnovic 2019). The E3 booth also featured *UndAR the Sea*, winner of the Google ARCore 2018 Game Jam, which transforms the real world into a magical underwater environment. These trends speak broadly to the continuing interplay between digital and physical spaces.

It was also at E3 that we introduced the IndieCade Alumni Program, headed up by Chris DeLeon. The Alumni Program was meant to celebrate past IndieCade finalists and selections. Presenters at IndieCade's E3 2019 Showcase were among the first to receive the enamel pins that would further circulate at the Festival in October.



IndieCade Festival 2019

The IndieCade Festival's return to the Center for Media and Design at Santa Monica City College for a second year allowed for an iterative design. As with the prior year, the exhibition and conference sessions took place on both floors of the complex, which wrapped around a central courtyard that became the event's social hub. Flash Jams (a cross between a game jam and a flash mob), outdoor play, and book signings took place in the courtyard throughout the weekend, accompanied by live music. And, in a reprise of my 2008 Festival-on-Crutches performance, I broke my ankle while larping a few weeks before the Festival, and attended both IndieCade Prime and IndieCade Europe on a knee scooter.

IndieCade 2019 saw the rise of a few notable trends. One was an explosion in co-op multiplayer games. Whether trying to make a giant bowl of ramen in the physical game *Ideal Meal*, switching controller schemes in *HOT SWAP: All Hands on Deck*, working together to stave off gentrification in *Co-Opoly* (an homage to the anti-capitalist origins of *Monopoly*), mixing drinks with swapped vision in *Mad Mixologist*, using barcodes to scan items in *Wizard's Warehouse: The Magik of Retail*, or solving the collaborative puzzles of *Tick Tock: A Tale For Two*, to name only a few, playing well with others was all the rage in 2019 (Pilon 2015).

Intersecting with this trend was the increasing cross-pollination across genres and sectors, particularly the influence of escape rooms and immersive theatre. Henry Smith, creator of the 2013 Interaction Award winner *Spaceteam*, took home the newly introduced Procedural Design Award for *Blabyrinth*—a rollicking multi-screen iOS co-op game modeled on escape room mechanics with procedurally generated levels. AR intersected with escape rooms in *ARBox*, created by some of the members of the USC teams behind 2016's *Beautiful Corner* and 2018's *Klaxo Radio Hour*, which offered a kit designed to turn any space into an Escape Room using props and mobile augmented reality. In a similar vein, *NEScape!* by KHAN Games brought modern-day escape room mechanics to a retro console system.

Many of 2019's co-op games overlapped with topics of relationships, dating, sex, and intimacy—popular IndieCade themes that remained rare in mainstream games. *Décorum*, for instance, was a tabletop co-op game in which a newly cohabitating couple must decorate their shared space while trying to anticipate one another's needs, likes, and peevs. Allison Cole's *Anthology of Intimacy*, a collection of larps in the same vein of 2016's *#feminism*, focused on intimacy as both a theme and a design process. *Red Flags*, by 2016 IndieCade awardee Capital W (*Hamlet-Mobile*), was a single-actor, single audience-member participatory theatre piece in which the player goes on a bad date. *The Headlands Gamble*, by First Person Travel, took one or two couples on a weekend mystery adventure in Marin County, CA. There was also a plethora of dating simulators and relationship games that included a spectrum of queer and nonbinary protagonists, such as *Skate & Date* and *Queering Spacetime*, a dating card game.

This brings us to another 2019 trend—the growing visibility of women, people of color, and LGBTQ people as both protagonists and creators. *Neo Cab*, which one reviewer called “the most captivating video game noir that's drifted into my life in the Trump era,” was noted for its diversity, earning both the IndieCade Award for Narrative Design and a finalist slot at the IGF the following year (Byrd 2019; Watson 2019). Indigenous creators were represented in multiple games, including *Woa Kanaka*, based on Kānaka Maoli stories, and *When Rivers Were Trails*, by Elizabeth LaPensée with the Indian Land Tenure Foundation, which received the Adaptation Award. It is worth noting that both of these games featured themes of nature and sustainability, which were also seen in a number of other works such as *PlastiCity*, the VR arcade game *ElemenTerra*, *Fujii*, and *Lost Ember*.

Tabletop games made a strong showing. *Shasn*, a board game about voting, won the Social Impact Award; *Inhuman Conditions*, based on the Voight-Kampff replicant detection interview from *Blade Runner*, took the Tabletop Award in Santa Monica; *Dialect: A Game About Language and How It Dies*, which also featured Indigenous designers, would go on to earn the Best Tabletop Game at IndieCade Europe. *Kroma*, an illuminated strategic board game about color blending, received the Audience Choice Award at the Festival. The game, designed by Carol Mertz, Kai Karhu, Francesca Carletto-Leon, and Temitope Olujobi, got its start as an NYU class project.



There were a number of standouts in hybrid digital and physical experimentation that introduced entirely new game genres. *Amā's Memento*, which took the Award for Location Based and Live Play, was a mixed reality installation that combined maps, artifacts, and AR components to explore the art collection of the designer's Taiwanese grandmother. Another entry was Tender Claws' *The Under Presents*, which realized the plot of Neal Stephenson's sci-fi book *The Diamond Age* (Stephenson 1998) by introducing live actors into a multiplayer virtual reality experience.

A number of core Festival awards went to digital games that pushed the affordances of the medium through game mechanics or story. The Grand Jury Prize went to designer Terry Cavanaugh for *Dicey Dungeons*, a delightful digital deck-building game that stood in contrast with his vexingly challenging 2010 award-winner, *VVVVVV*. The IndieCade Jury Prix went to *Grace Brusner Presents: The Haunted Island, a Frog Detective Game*, a charming and quirky take on the beloved adventure game genre. *Moncage*, a 3D narrative puzzle game that combined aspects of past finalists *Gorogoa* and *Vignettes* by matching objects in different scenes on the sides of a cube, won the Innovation in Experience Design Award. The Developers Choice Award went to *Patrick's Parabox*, an abstract game whose mechanic revolved around the principle of recursion: each of its puzzles could only be solved by first solving a puzzle on a different scale. These games all demonstrated that the creative possibilities in digital gaming were far from exhausted.

The conference was co-chaired by Elizabeth Swensen and myself, along with Jeremy Gibson-Bond and John Cassie who headed up the Educators Summit. The IndieXchange was led by Chris DeLeon and featured a number of networking events organized by the newly formed IndieCade Alumni Association of past finalists and organizers. Included were practical conversations on a range of topics from getting a side gig to running a game jam, as well as networking sessions sponsored by IndieCade industry partners like Kickstarter and Oculus. Other talks that weekend featured subjects including wearables, eSports, character costume design, games that generate music through play, and a special session on mass-producing custom game hardware.

One of the Festival highlights was a special session on kindness—a theme pervasive throughout the event that was also echoed in the co-op game trend. Ziba Scott of *Kind Words* (which would go on to win the Grand Prix Award at IndieCade Europe) spoke about the need for kindness, which spurred the game's creation, and the unanticipated community that later built up around it. A similar theme prioritizing community emerged in Gabe Lane's discussion on *Smile for Me*, made with Yugi Limbo, in which the goal is to cheer up non-player characters in a surreal spa. Leura Smith discussed how her game, *Pigeon*, in which the goal is to gently hold and care for birds, was a big hit with the developer's mom and her friends.

Another session highlight was a keynote with the founders of Bumblebear streamed live to the Festival via Twitch from the Bumblebash indie eSports Tournament in Chattanooga. Their *Killer Queen* had been in IndieCade as both a field game (2012) and an eight-player arcade cabinet (2013), and was now featured in the Festival's eSports tournament in its eight-player home incarnation, *Killer Queen Black*. Creators Josh DeBonis and Nikita Mikros gave a well-researched talk about the new golden age of arcade games.

Although many IndieCade contributors are also authors, 2019 was the first year that writing on and by indie developers was highlighted. Members of the design studio Local Number Twelve, Colleen Macklin and John Sharp, discussed their new book, *Iterate: Ten Lessons in Design and Failure* (The MIT Press 2019), which draws from a wide range of fields. There was also a keynote session on new and upcoming books on indie game history, including Jesper Juul on his recently published *Handmade Pixels* (The MIT Press 2019)—and me, talking about this book!

The courtyard of the SMC Center for Media and Design was transformed into an outdoor theatre for the awards show, hosted once again by Sarah Elmaleh and Asher Vollmer. Awardees left with steampunk creatures created by trophy designer Katie Diaz of KT's Creature Comforts. The second Bernie DeKoven Big Fun Award went to the founders of the Come Out & Play Festival, who pioneered the exhibition of physical and large-scale social games in 2007—and inspired IndieCade to integrate this style of game into our repertoire. The Game Changer Award went to the founders of the Game Devs of Color Expo, launched in 2017, to celebrate the group's impact in supporting broader representation in game making.

The next evening, the courtyard hosted Night Games—organized by LA game collective Glitch City—which featured a dizzying array of weird and wonderful offerings. Two games were particularly timely. *Early and Often*, by USC Games, integrated an actual voting booth from the 2000 Bush/Gore election—complete with chads! *WarTweets*, by Derek Curry and Jennifer Gradecki, was inspired by the 1983 film *WarGames* and involved intercepting Donald Trump's tweets (transformed into missiles) on a map filled with satirical targets like “The Gulf of Fake News” and “Collusionville.” *The Gentle Oraclebird*, a divination performance/game by Shing Yin Khor & Three Eyed Rat, was run out of a handmade cart by the artist wearing a bird mask. Perhaps the most talked-about Night Game was *Hellcouch*, a literal “couch co-op” game played on an interactive sofa created by Carol Mertz and Francesca Carletto-Leon, members of the *Kroma* design team.

The following day, we revived an IndieCade tradition from years gone by, and threw a barbecue at the home of Tracy Fullerton—conveniently located less than three miles from the SMC Center for Media Arts and Design. Music was provided by designer Rich Lemarchand, who had DJed a number of prior IndieCade parties.



IndieCade shows that the whole world is a gaming platform.

—Todd Martens, *LA Times*

IndieCade Europe 2019

IndieCade Europe's fourth year marked a turning point for the event, attracting over 3,000 people, roughly 50 percent more than the prior year. By this point, the LA Festival's European sister had gained momentum and drawn the attention of developers, press, and players, garnering greater international participation. Previously, according to its organizers, "all eyes had been on A MAZE. / Berlin," the Berlin festival that had dominated Europe since 2012. Although both festivals celebrated innovation and expression, IndieCade Europe complemented the more "outside the box" ethos of A MAZE. with a greater focus on commercial games—in part due to its partnership with Capital Games, an advocacy group supporting developers in the Île-de-France region that includes and surrounds Paris. This made for an interesting counterpoint to IndieCade Prime, which tended to be among the more artsy indie festivals in the United States. Still, IndieCade Europe continued to serve as an anchor for the French indie game community.

The change of venue from the CNAM/Arts et Métiers complex that had hosted the European festival the previous three years shifted the ambiance and logistics of the event significantly. As an organization, CNAM brought a kind of high-tech ethos in a historical wrapper with a building that some organizers characterized as a cliché of traditional French architecture—perhaps also lending its attraction to foreigners. The move to the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF) brought a sense of cultural cachet to the event. In contrast with Arts et Métiers, the iconic Modernist building provided a contemporary setting that was associated with traditional content. The larger centralized spaces, more robust technical infrastructure, and abundance of natural light gave the festival a feeling that was more legible, spacious, and contemporary.

Although the board of IndieCade Europe had built an event with a distinct identity and aesthetic, it still contained, as the organizers put it, "the IndieCade DNA." It featured a "European flavor" that was beautifully captured by the photographs of Anna-Célestine Barthélemy (aka La Fille d'à Côté, French for "the girl next door"), which are included in this chapter and the some of the other IndieCade Europe sections of this book. This was achieved by bringing together a broad range of curatorial voices, including key organizers Simon Bachelier from indie studio Accidental Queens, the creators of IndieCade 2017 finalist *A Normal Lost Phone*; Laura Fournier from ICO Partners; acclaimed Dutch artgame curator Zuraida Buter; Martin Pichlmair, academic, multiple IndieCade finalist, and Copenhagen Games Collective member; Claudia Molinari, a graphic designer and professor; Corinne Fenoglio, an artist and Main Curator for IndieCade Europe 2019, with support from Laurent Chicola and Romain Taupin of Capital Games. The committee managed to reach gender parity in their programming, and cultivated the safe and welcoming environment for diversity that had become a signature feature across all IndieCade events.



Extending the live performance theme that had inspired new awards at IndieCade Prime, the talk of IndieCade Europe was *The Aluminum Cat*, which won the European Innovation in Experience Design Award. This game featured live actors controlling characters in a 2D multiplayer digital format, similar to the VR game *The Under Presents*, which had been featured in the LA Festival. Another programming highlight was a presentation by the Kissinger Twins on their unique approach to interactive cinema and storytelling, which built on the ongoing dialogue at IndieCade on the importance of performers and the return of full-motion video. This trend was punctuated by 2019 Trailblazer Awardee Blast Theory. Interestingly, the British art collective was also an IndieCade Finalist for the first time in a decade with its live-streamed interactive film project, *Bloody Minded*. As pioneers of ARGs and pervasive games years before smartphones were in all our pockets, Blast Theory was one of the first studios to combine digital experiences with live actors and real physical space.

Like its American counterpart, IndieCade Europe filled a vital role as a bridge between art and commerce, bringing together innovative new works that skirted the boundaries between the two, and bringing together international creators, including some whose work had been celebrated at IndieCade Prime the week before. This included *Röki*, by British studio Polygon Treehouse, which was released in December on PC, Mac, and Nintendo Switch and had become something of an indie darling. IndieCade Europe's Innovation in Interaction Award went to *Cyberpet Graveyard* by Natalie Lawhead of alienmelon, known for her quirky and original "pixeltrash zine" games like the 2017 awardee *Everything is Going to Be Okay*; her *Electric Zine Maker* was also featured at the European event. The Grand Prix Award went to *Kind Words* by Popcannibal, whose founder Ziba Scott had been part of the Kindness panel in Santa Monica.

More broadly, the relationship between IndieCade Prime and IndieCade Europe was evolving. IndieCade Europe had come into its own as a major international event in the region, complimenting A MAZE. / Berlin by integrating commercial games more prominently into its purview. This served as a productive counterpoint to the American festival's reputation for bringing artgames to what had historically been a more commercial domain. The synergy between the two events was evolving, due in part to their close proximity in time, and the awards were now being coordinated across the two events in a more holistic way. This increasing collaboration foreshadowed the then-unforeseen challenge that would face us in 2020 with the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic. Even at this writing, the organizers of IndieCade Europe and IndieCade Prime are working together to create a global experience, bridging geography and time zones to reenvision the very concept of an international independent game festival.



Europe Photos by La Fille d'à Côté

