

Chapter 18

Games Beyond the Screen: Festivals of Play Across the Western World

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces a phenomenon that has gone largely unaddressed in research since its emergence in western countries in the last decade: festivals of games and play. The bulk of the chapter is drawn from interviews with people involved in these festivals, including founders, current organizers and game designers, using this data to build on the work of researchers on play and playfulness. Taking an auto-ethnographic stance, the author speaks from personal experience as a participant and game designer in order to convey these festivals' unique qualities and potential as sites for public play.

INTRODUCTION

In the past ten years—and especially the last five—festivals presenting games and play to the public have spread across North America and Europe, beginning mainly with Come Out & Play in New York City in 2006. The emergence of these festivals has gone largely unnoticed within both the independent video game development community and research on games, yet the scope and number of these events continue to increase each year.

Because there has been little research on these festivals to date, there is no established terminology with which to discuss them. I will refer to them broadly as “festivals of games and play” to highlight the fact that while diverse in structure they all present to the public a broad range of physical and digital games.

The longest running of these festivals include GameCity in the United Kingdom, Freeplay in Australia, and IndieCade and Come Out & Play in the United States. More recently there have been festivals like Playpublik in Germany, w00t in Denmark, Playful Arts Festival in the Netherlands, and Plaython in Greece. Meanwhile, Come Out & Play expanded from New York to San Francisco in 2010, as did IndieCade from Los Angeles to New York in 2013.

These festivals' explicit themes range from “indie games” to “urban games” to “playful culture,” and the stories behind their establishment are similarly diverse. What they all have in common, however, is

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0261-6.ch018

that the games they feature utilize technology to varying degrees and sometimes not all; they embrace “games” and “play” in a broader sense than sitting in front of a screen using a controller or keyboard. Rather, screens and controllers are just a few potential tools for play. These games exist along a spectrum from digital to physical, exploring the space in between that has yet to be clearly demarcated.

As a physical game designer whose work has been featured at these festivals, a creator of a commercial video game, and someone who has written articles about video games for websites like Gamasutra, I have been following these trends closely. In order to learn more, I conducted twenty-two interviews primarily with founders and organizers of these festivals as well as with game designers whose work is featured there. I also spoke with people working in the more broadly defined fields of games and play.

In the first section of this chapter, I describe in detail six of the festivals—IndieCade, Playpublik, Come Out & Play, Come Out & Play SF, w00t and Plaython—to give a sense of their content and the differences among them. This section is based both on my experiences as an attendee and game designer, and on founders’ own words about their intentions and experiences.

In the second section, I consider the festivals’ position in the context of broader trends, sharing and analyzing comments from organizers and designers with whom I spoke. Drawing on scholarship about the transformative power of play, I open up space for research on these festivals in terms of their social and political significance.

In the last section I draw conclusions about changes in the conceptualization of “games,” “video games,” and “play” for developers, players and the general public.

METHODOLOGY

From September 2014 to May 2015, I spoke with twenty-two people involved professionally with games and play. Interview subjects were primarily selected based on their involvement either in long-running festivals such as Come Out & Play that have exerted considerable influence on other festivals, or in particularly unique festivals such as Plaython that reflect the diversity and potential of these events. With the exception of three interviews conducted in person in Germany, Denmark and Finland, the interviews were all conducted through Skype. They generally lasted one to one-and-a-half hours, during the course of which I sought to answer the following questions: What accounts for the sudden appearance and rapid spread of these festivals across the western world in the past ten years? Leading up to and through these festivals, how if at all have attitudes towards games and play changed, both among the general public and among those professionally involved with games and play?

In more concrete terms, I asked about the events and decisions leading up to the founding of each festival and how each festival has evolved since its inception. This also involved discussions of funding and institutional support, which were often closely tied to changes to the location and size of festivals. In cases where I had not personally attended a festival, I sought to understand its setting and the types of games shown there. Even in cases where I had attended, I asked for details about other years the festival had been held in order to better understand its development.

I took notes during the interviews and later used coding to analyze and establish common themes. These are presented both in the first section where I describe the festivals in detail and in the following section about related trends. I confirmed quotes and paraphrased comments with each interviewee afterwards by email, sometimes also asking follow-up questions.

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