



# Indie'Games Festival 2005

Imran Ali & Steve Manthorp – 8<sup>th</sup> November 2004

## City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council

[www.bradford.gov.uk](http://www.bradford.gov.uk)

### Introduction

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On 18<sup>th</sup> March 2004, Bmedi@ held a *Third Thursday* event themed around the vibrant games industry in West Yorkshire. The panel discussion included:

- ▶ Mark Taylor                      Wanadoo's Technology Research think-tank
- ▶ Michael Crampton              Game Republic, a consortium of regional games publishers and developers
- ▶ Steve Manthorp                 Special Projects Officer for Bradford Council

Wanadoo described a broadband service provider's perspective on emerging trends and opportunities in the games industry. The Game Republic segment focussed on the problems and issues faced by small and medium sized games publishers and developers; particularly as production budgets for next-generation consoles will soon exceed \$20-30m. Finally Steve Manthorp presented a unique project harnessing the power of current games development technology to create an interactive experience of Bradford's Cartwright Hall art gallery and following with a programme of education for young games developers. What became apparent through the course of the discussion was that:

- ▶ The West Yorkshire region is a unique hub of international games design, development and publishing – evidenced by the diverse and successful membership of Game Republic.
- ▶ The dynamics of the games industry parallel Hollywood; spiralling production costs mean that publishers rely on franchises that guarantee high sales, but limit creativity and innovation – that is beginning to affect sales. Where Hollywood has vibrant independent filmmaking (i.e. Sundance), there are no coherent movements in gaming. Also, closed systems from Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo mean that the barriers-of-entry for creators are too high to sustain grassroots innovation – the very innovation that catalysed the medium.
- ▶ As audiences and technologies evolve, the games industry need no longer be limited to a hit-driven economy or indeed entertainment. Mobile platforms, new gaming formats and non-entertainment applications are all emerging as fertile new markets.

Based on these developments, Wanadoo's Imran Ali and Bradford Council's Steve Manthorp proposed that a broader *Independent Games Festival* could be convened to bring together consumers, publishers, innovators, developers and designers in an open dialogue on the future of games – in essence to create a videogame equivalent of the Sundance Festival, feeding creativity, ideas, opportunity and potential into the games industry and enabling the local hub to capitalising on emerging markets.

With proposed sponsorship and funding by bmedi@, Wanadoo's Imran Ali and Bradford Council's Steve Manthorp are proposing to launch a digital community in West Yorkshire, oriented around independent games.

## Other Games Industry Events

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The proposed event and supporting community is by no means unique in the gaming industry, though its uniqueness *can* be rooted in two central beliefs. Firstly, representing the emerging and successful regional games industry and secondly propelling the maturing and stagnating games industry into new markets, formats and opportunities.

However, much can be learned from other gaming events and festivals. The industry largely coalesces around events such as E3 each Spring in Los Angeles, but there are other events focussed on innovation and independent games. Indeed, it may be possible to affiliate the proposed event with a larger community and audience.

### **Gamasutra - [www.gamasutra.com](http://www.gamasutra.com)**

Gamasutra presents itself as a membership organisation promoting the art and science of making videogames – ranging from programming to design, art, production, audio and business models. Gamasutra holds an annual event, the GDC (Games Developers Conference) in the US.

### **International Games Festival - [www.igf.com](http://www.igf.com)**

The International Games Festival, or IGF, is also operated by the organisers of Gamasutra and the GDC. If any event is close to the proposed West Yorkshire festival in intent, it is the IGF – now into its fifth year. IGF presents itself as a community in support of independent games authors *'with small budgets, but big dreams'*.

### **Edinburgh International Games Festival - [www.eigf.co.uk](http://www.eigf.co.uk)**

Taking place during the Summer's Edinburgh Festival, EIGF is emerging as the UK's premier games event. Though the content is focussed around the mainstream games industry, a handful of sessions this year addressed the independent developer and innovation within the industry.

### **Classic Gaming Expo - [www.cgexpo.com](http://www.cgexpo.com)**

As the industry matures, 'retro-gaming' culture and the emerging market for older games is growing in popularity and commercial promise. New platforms such as mobile and handheld devices are emerging as natural formats for older games – as such events such as CGE offer pointers for new opportunities.

### **Serious Games Summit - [www.seriousgamessummit.com](http://www.seriousgamessummit.com)**

This month saw the first Serious Games Summit, hosted in Washington DC, to address non-entertainment, political, educational, analytics, predictive and commercial applications for gaming environments. SGS highlights a number of innovative and important opportunities for developers – indeed there appears to be a great demand for such games.

### **The Education Arcade - [www.educationarcade.org](http://www.educationarcade.org)**

Partnered with the Serious Games Summit, The Education Arcade has recently been hosted by E3 and highlighted the educational and pedagogical potential of videogames.

As can be seen from the events above, there is a great deal of potential and opportunity in alternative and independent gaming – potential and opportunity that can be harnessed in the service of the regional games hub, local academia and civic regeneration.

## IndieGame 2005

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The overriding objectives of the initiative should be to create a persistent community binding together academia, the local games & digital media sector, entrepreneurs, media companies, innovators, startups, consumers, local government, investors and the wider games industry.

The purpose of this community shall be to create a self-sustaining ecosphere for innovation in videogames - addressing content, technology, business models, skills and training, such that new concepts, technologies and ideas can be incubated and accelerated into the games industry. In essence a *virtuous circle* where universities, innovators, entrepreneurs and startups can find funding, support, distribution and an audience for their emerging ideas with publishers and developers.

Wanadoo, bmedi@ and Bradford Council proposed that the foundations for an innovative independent games community be laid in the West Yorkshire region by undertaking the following steps:

### **Phase I: A Digital Community**

By energising consumers and producers at the grassroots, the organisers can establish a groundswell of support through modest means. The authors of this report propose to launch a website offering reportage of independent gaming in order to build awareness of issues and lay the foundations for a persistent community. Inexpensive 'social software' services such as blogs and digital social networks can enable the authors to do this relatively quickly and with minimal expense. Over a period of several months, articles on various issues can be published in order to invite comment and build awareness for the movement. Finally, this community should persist and thrive beyond any event or festival that is held.

### **Phase II: A Call to Action**

As the digital community grows, the organisers can gauge interest for a public event and issue a call to action for contributors, such that keynote sessions, exhibitors, sponsors and content can be floated and also ideas collated from the readership. Local and industry organisations such as Game Republic, Leeds Media and bmedi@ can play a central role in building this awareness over time. As interest builds, there will hopefully be inevitability about launching an event to coalesce the emerging community. This event would incur a modest attendance fee for all delegates.

### **Phase III: A Catalysing Event**

Once a call for participants and papers has been answered, Summer 2005 or Winter 2005 would be valuable windows of opportunity in which to launch a two-day event, providing an umbrella for keynote speeches, workshops, exhibitors and potentially an awards programme.

### **Branding**

Of course, appropriate branding for the event would have to be agreed at an early stage in order for even the first phase to progress. Several names have been suggested for the initiative, including:

- ▶ FIG / FIGS (Festival Of Independent Gaming / Festival Of Independent Gaming Sector)
- ▶ IndieGame
- ▶ 1UP
- ▶ Cameo

Issues of branding need to be explored further and with appropriate expertise as the project unfolds.

## Content: Potential Themes & Sessions

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Given the diversity of delegates we wish to attract, it will be prudent to organise a multi-dimensional agenda consisting of a mixture of keynote speeches, panel sessions, breakout workshops, showcases and an exhibitor's open house. Also, given the nature of the medium, the event should be entertaining and fun – possibly a party, social or musical performance to conclude each day of the event.

### Potential Keynote & Panel Sessions

Keynotes speakers and panel discussions can be organised a number of compelling and relevant themes that speak to the independent and innovative ethos of the initiative. Some suggested themes may include:

#### Political Games

Building on Chris Crawford's *Balance Of Power*, the Syrian-made *Underash* and Newsgaming's *September 12 to KumaWar*, *America's Army* and the spate of games covering the US elections. A rich and compelling vein of games as geopolitical, political and propaganda media is emerging, offering new narrative and commercial potential for publishers and consumers alike.

#### Sourcing Stories

Games have traditionally been drawn from sports, film, science fiction and action franchises. Yet, many books, historical events and other media remain untapped. Can social software, news events, history, writing and novels be fused to create new gaming experiences for untapped audiences? Could *Six Feet Under* make a compelling RPG?

#### Big Games

*Nokia Game*, *Uncle Roy All Around You*, and the recent *Pacmanhattan* have popularise the concept of the 'Big Game'. Experiences which extend digital games into real-world locations using wireless and mobile technologies. What does the future hold for Big Games, are they a viable medium and how can this emerging medium be harnessed.

#### The Casual Gamer

Future industry growth could come from the casual gamer – from mobile users to viewers of *Sky Interactive* and *RealArcade*. Does this new audience category represent a more lucrative and accessible market, outside videogames currently narrow demographics?

#### Business Models

The videogame industry is very much hit-driven, leaving little room for innovation and creativity. Large franchises dominate the industry and those with original ideas have no platform to progress them. How can the industry utilise tools such as venture capital, completion bonds and investment from platform owners to empower and incentivise innovators and mitigate their own risks.

#### Emerging Technologies

MMOGs, mobile, IM networks, handheld and wireless technologies represent an inflection point in the history of videogames. At once offering new possibilities, but also extending videogames to casual gamers on technologically limited devices and also a new lease of life for older, classic 'retrogames'.

#### Game Design

With visual and sonic aesthetics now reaching a plateau, gamers are returning to *gameplay* as the essential ingredient. What are the essentials of create games design – from narrative, interactivity, storytelling. What are the theories of videogames that need to be uncovered and understood by all.

#### Skills & Tools

Developing games requires rare and expensive skills – a barrier which prevents new talent from readily emerging and innovating. How can the industry lower barriers for entry by improving toolkits, collaboration practices. Can these skills and tools empower users to create and extend existing content.

Speakers and contributors can be drawn from Game Republic member companies, contributors drawn from a call-for-papers and specially invited speakers such as Jon Orwant, teaching *Introduction to Game Design* at MIT, and Steven Poole, author of *Trigger Happy*, a celebrated text on the theory of videogames.

An internationally renowned keynote speaker would provide a focal nexus for the event, and assist in the marketing and publicising of the event. Potential Speakers could include: Demis Hassabis, youthful Creative Director of Elixir Studios, John Romero, co-creator of Doom, currently rebuilding his career and his reputation on low-end platform games after his spectacular fall from grace with Daikatana and Tom Arundel, creator of last year's bedroom-coded breakthrough superhit Uplink.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of themes, indeed areas such as identity in gaming and the use of games in enterprise and corporate environments – as predictive and analytic tools – are also compelling and relevant themes.

### **Workshops**

Running in parallel with keynote and panel sessions should be a series of workshops where experts and amateurs can learn from each other and potentially collaborate. One exciting possibility would be to use workshop sessions to take ideas and concepts to storyboard or prototype stage as part of a contest. This would enable participants to collaborate and seek out skills to undertake a small project.

For example:

- ▶ Translating an narrative & story-driven text-based adventure game or MUG for instant messaging networks
- ▶ Taking a current and topical news story and drafting a game concept
- ▶ Updating a classic game for new platforms
- ▶ Creating a 'big game' concept from scratch
- ▶ Translating a famous film or novel into a game concept
- ▶ Creating a game concept for a business application
- ▶ Creating a game concept for an untapped demographic – e.g. over 50s

These sessions would be highly interactive and hopefully attended by multidisciplinary groups of players, writers, artists, programmers, publishers and financiers. The workshops would allow participants to form new contacts as well as further explore the possibilities presented in the keynote sessions.

### **Showcase & Exhibition**

With such a diverse gathering of videogame interests, delegates would benefit from an open marketplace or exhibition space to serve a number of purposes:

- ▶ Allow innovators and creators to demonstrate and show concepts for new games
- ▶ Enable *Game Republic* and other paying companies to represent their products and services
- ▶ Provide a showcase for the games discussed in the keynote sessions and possibly the workshop sessions

A nice finishing touch would be to provide evaluation or trial copies of games discussed during the event on a CDROM, DVD or website made available to each delegate; particularly the winning workshop games.

In addition to the showcase and marketplace – it would be a fine gesture to involve games players and consumers in showcasing the unsung, alternative games that have had a profound effect on their games-playing experiences. Such, micro-sessions may only last a few minutes and indeed may be presented as short video pieces.

## Potential Partners

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Several contributing organisations, whether in terms of content, funding or sponsorship have been identified as potential partners

### Charter Members

As the organisations involved in the initial thinking behind the festival, Wanadoo, Bradford Council and bmedi@ are obvious Charter members, though Game Republic and their parent organisation Screen Yorkshire should also be given strong consideration for this status as the event seeks to principally assist the interests of the local games industry. The National Museum Of Photography, Film and Television, University of Bradford Electronic Imaging and Media Communications course and Media Technology R&D services company Simula, all have projects in the early stages of development which would appear to have significant areas of overlap with the vision set out in this document.

### Academic Partners

As well as University of Bradford, the festival should seek partners in local academia, with the universities of Huddersfield and Leeds; notably the creative technology, computing, electronic imaging, film and computing schools in these institutes. Also, looking beyond the region institutes such as Liverpool's International Centre for Digital Content and Dublin's Media Lab Europe would be valuable contributing partners and attendees.

### Industry Sponsors

The organisers should seek to invite representatives from involve large games platform owners, broadband operators, mobile networks and publishers such as Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft – all elements of the games value chain.

### Investment

One of the stated goals of the initiative will be to provide smaller, independent developers a platform for their productions. In many cases, moving beyond prototypes and proofs-of-concepts will require significant investments; to this end organisations such as Yorkshire Forward and York's Viking Fund venture capital organisation.

### Regional Partners

In addition to Yorkshire Forward, local and regional digital media organisations should be mobilised to participate and drawn in their respective memberships. Notably, Leeds Media, eHQ Leeds, the Huddersfield Media Centre and Creation York. Arts Council England-Yorkshire has expressed a strong interest in the project, and would consider an application for project funding.

## Conclusions

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In summary, a programme of events as outlined above should provide a unique, compelling and exciting agenda for the games industry and likely catalyse the industry into exploring alternative videogames whilst supporting and giving voice to innovators. It will also energise academia and local games developers into re-orienting their plans to support emerging video game opportunities.

Most importantly, the community generated prior to the event should persist beyond the event, helping to create a network of individuals, companies and institutions which energise West Yorkshire's videogames ecosphere by creating and sustaining a virtuous circle of growth between all participants – consumers, creators, developers, investors and publishers. If successful, this community will serve as a model of innovation and impendent, helping the wider games industry find its equivalent of the Sundance Festival and expand the potential of videogames as a medium.

## Further Reading

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<b>Ludology</b>	An online resource for videogame researchers <a href="http://ludology.org">http://ludology.org</a>
<b>America's Army</b>	Videogame recruitment tool for US Army <a href="http://www.americasarmy.com">www.americasarmy.com</a>
<b>Dare To Be Digital</b>	Annual Scottish contest to develop a game in 10 weeks <a href="http://www.daretobedigital.com">www.daretobedigital.com</a>
<b>DIGRA</b>	International Digital Games Research Association <a href="http://www.gamesconference.org/digra2005">www.gamesconference.org/digra2005</a>
<b>Edinburgh revels in games fest</b>	BBC News article on the 2 <sup>nd</sup> Edinburgh International Games Festival <a href="http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3542994.stm">http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3542994.stm</a>
<b>The Education Arcade</b>	Consortium exploring the new frontiers of educational videogames <a href="http://www.educationarcade.org">www.educationarcade.org</a>
<b>Child prodigy stands by originality</b>	Taking an uncompromising stance in a risk-averse industry <a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/online/story/0,3605,1299699,00.html">www.guardian.co.uk/online/story/0,3605,1299699,00.html</a>
<b>Game start-ups revise strategies &amp; hopes</b>	Revising entrepreneurial strategies to enter a clubby industry <a href="http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/3641006.stm">http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/3641006.stm</a>
<b>Games blur news and entertainment</b>	Reflecting on news events in videogames <a href="http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3653294.stm">http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3653294.stm</a>
<b>Games get serious in Washington DC</b>	Moving games beyond the sphere of entertainment <a href="http://www.gamespot.com/news/2004/10/21/news_6111102.html">www.gamespot.com/news/2004/10/21/news_6111102.html</a>
<b>Games industry 'forced to innovate'</b>	Do sequels and franchises mean innovation can no longer exist? <a href="http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3798237.stm">http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3798237.stm</a>
<b>Games too complex, Nintendo chief warns</b>	Games becoming increasingly complex and risk alienating customers <a href="http://www.theregister.co.uk/2004/05/26/nintendo_games_claim">www.theregister.co.uk/2004/05/26/nintendo_games_claim</a>
<b>Giants swallow the minnows</b>	Unlike UK developers, publishers are finding the going tough <a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/online/story/0,3605,1275818,00.html">www.guardian.co.uk/online/story/0,3605,1275818,00.html</a>

<b>In Video Games, Sequels Are Winners</b>	Games bank heavily effects, hits and a heavy reliance on sequels <a href="http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/20/technology/20game.html">www.nytimes.com/2004/09/20/technology/20game.html</a>
<b>Industry 'ignoring' casual gamers</b>	Games must try to attract people who only occasionally play <a href="http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3620518.stm">http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3620518.stm</a>
<b>Kuma War</b>	Play accurate re-creations of real-world war news events <a href="http://www.kumawar.com">www.kumawar.com</a>
<b>Next gen games prove a challenge</b>	Likely to be fewer games for the next generation of consoles <a href="http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3630726.stm">http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3630726.stm</a>
<b>Nintendo 'fears for games industry'</b>	Satoru Iwata warns the industry it must 'innovate or die' <a href="http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3743015.stm">http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3743015.stm</a>
<b>Play Games, Be Better Students?</b>	Teaching critical thinking through videogames <a href="http://www.wired.com/news/games/0,2101,63415,00.html">www.wired.com/news/games/0,2101,63415,00.html</a>
<b>Velvet-Strike</b>	Counter-military graffiti for <i>Half Life: Counterstrike</i> <a href="http://www.opensorcery.net/velvet-strike">www.opensorcery.net/velvet-strike</a>
<b>The role of play</b>	Games with political message used to win hearts and minds <a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/online/story/0,3605,1214955,00.html">www.guardian.co.uk/online/story/0,3605,1214955,00.html</a>
<b>Academics take on video games</b>	The impact of video games on culture and society <a href="http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3727932.stm">http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3727932.stm</a>
<b>Online video games as social comment</b>	Online video games are the newest for of political comment <a href="http://slate.msn.com/id/2070197">http://slate.msn.com/id/2070197</a>
<b>Fund4Games</b>	Project management and secured funding for UK videogame industry <a href="http://www.fund4games.com">www.fund4games.com</a>
<b>The "Velvet-Strike" underground</b>	Today's protestors wave their signs inside video games <a href="http://www.salon.com/tech/feature/2004/05/04/velvet_strike/index.html">www.salon.com/tech/feature/2004/05/04/velvet_strike/index.html</a>
<b>UN creates game to tackle hunger</b>	Forthcoming video game aims to teach children about global hunger <a href="http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3548230.stm">http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3548230.stm</a>
<b>Tempting art students into gaming</b>	Trying to persuade students to consider careers in games <a href="http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3644736.stm">http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3644736.stm</a>
<b>September 12</b>	Game essay on the War On Terror <a href="http://www.newsgaming.com/games/index12.htm">www.newsgaming.com/games/index12.htm</a>
<b>Quick, After Him Pac-Man Went Thataway</b>	In Greenwich, a student was running around in a Pac-Man outfit <a href="http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/09/fashion/09GAME.html">www.nytimes.com/2004/05/09/fashion/09GAME.html</a>