

INDIE CADE

October 3 - 6, Los Angeles
International Festival
of Independent Games

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//Why Richard Lemarchand Loves Indie Games, and IndieCade

by Ashley Zeldin, with contributions by Chris Cantoni

Richard Lemarchand believes all human beings are not only players but also creators of games.

"[Games are] the expression of a very profound impulse to play that human beings have, which isn't just to entertain ourselves or to distract ourselves, but a fundamental part of the richness of our life," he says. "Game design informs our lives in so many ways, social, cultural and political."

Game design also influences everyday activities, as the recent debate about gamification has proven, says Lemarchand, lead designer on the Uncharted series for Santa Monica's Naughty Dog.

"Because design is about the totality of human experience—about our perceptions and the way that we evaluate situations and make choices—and because the subject matter of game design is so broad, I think you can design a game about most anything," says Lemarchand. "That's why IndieCade is so exciting to me: the incredible diversity of games, even things that you might not label games in the strictest sense. There's room for all-comers."

Indeed, IndieCade's festival finalists range from Chaim Gingold's Geobook, an interactive lesson in geology, to Gamestar Mechanic, an adventure game in which players learn game design and systems thinking, the intricate relationship between things within a whole.

Systems—and their beauty—is one of the facets behind Lemarchand's upcoming IndieCade conference keynote, "Beauty and Risk: Why I Love Indie Games".

As a game designer, systems are "something that definitely appeals to the physicist and philosopher in me," says Lemarchand, whose dual honors degrees in physics and philosophy at Oxford University helped satisfy both his scientific and artistic inclinations.

"I'm always interested in the aesthetic beauty that the games in the IndieCade festival—and at the Independent Games Festival—embody, which is the kind of beauty we see a lot in other design disciplines, but I think we don't see as much as I would like in the mainstream world of video games," he says.

And therein lies the risk.

"Of course there are commercial imperatives that come to bear on mainstream games," says Lemarchand, so publishers are disinclined to take too many risks. "Indie games are a great proving ground for new ideas."

Yet he highlights "open-mindedness and ravenous curiosity about the human experience" as essential to designers of every kind. "To be interested in the world in a broad sense is good for a game designer."

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Though he himself is a fixture on the team producing the AAA title many hail as the flagship of the Playstation 3 platform, Lemarchand says indie culture has shaped his life, from reading indie 'zines and listening to indie music to playing what were, essentially, indie games.

"Growing up in the United Kingdom in the 1980s, some of the very first games I played were indie games," recalls the 42-year-old Lemarchand. "Most of the games that we played on our home computers had been put together by one- or two-person teams, probably working out of their homes rather than out of their office, with very little oversight in terms of content of the game. They were really just using their game design good sense and fighting against the limitations of these not-so-powerful machines to do the most amazing things they possibly could."

Indie media articulates experiences that aren't acceptable in the mainstream, Lemarchand says, and because of this very marginalisation, he considers it very important that they get heard.

"For some people it's probably strange that the lead designer of the Uncharted series is the keynote speaker at an indie games conference, but to the people who know Rich in the indie community, he's definitely more one of us than he is one of them," says John Sharp, with whom Lemarchand co-chaired the 2010 IndieCade conference. "I've always thought of him as being an indie designer in AAA clothes."

The Englishman insists he's not the only one.

"You'd be surprised how very many AAA game developers follow indie games very closely," Lemarchand says. "It's been my friends who have made the biggest difference in my indie game consumption." He credits Naughty Dog colleagues, like game designer Robert Cogburn, with introducing him to many indie games. "I think that we'll continue to see developers of mainstream AAA video games talk openly about their experiences with indie games in a positive light."

Indie games, he continues, provide "reinvigoration to the mainstream of game design, just in the way that indie film has repeatedly done throughout the history of cinema." Indie games too can "change the minds of people at mainstream studios about what our audience of gamers is receptive to," referencing the surprise smash hit Minecraft has become.

"I'd hope to see the big publishers continue to support indie games," Lemarchand says. "It's to everyone's advantage if we keep immersing ourselves in all the different avenues of this vibrant culture that we call video games."

IndieCade, the only stand-alone independent-focused game event in the United States, is the epitome of indie game culture, uniting independent games of every genre and platform from developers worldwide.



Richard Lemarchand

Lemarchand calls his involvement with IndieCade over the last two years "one of the most emotionally rich" experiences he's had.

Lemarchand's very involvement has enriched IndieCade in turn, says Sharp and 2011 conference co-chair Colleen Macklin.

"It was one of the best collaborative experiences I've had," says Sharp, a professor of interactive design and game development at Georgia Tech's . "We played off each other well. He'd take my highfalutin ideas and turn them into something more practical that can benefit developers."

Macklin, who worked with Lemarchand on a series of microtalks for the Games for Change festival exploring "digital games as an agent for social change", says she has been privileged to get a preview of Lemarchand's IndieCade keynote and promises he'll give an awesome talk.

"He's just a really gracious and smart person," Macklin says.

His intelligence is evident just hearing Lemarchand discuss game design, his graciousness in his hope for IndieCade: "I hope lots of people come along and play lots of games."

They'll get the chance to do just that, and hear Lemarchand's keynote speech at IndieCade this weekend, October 8th and 9th in Culver City, California.