



**SUMMIT & CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS**

This year at the Game Developers Conference (GDC) in San Francisco, I signed up for the Summit + Conference Pass, which gave me access to both the Summit (Mon-Tues), and the Conference (Wed-Fri) presentations. The presentations, with durations from thirty minutes to a whole hour, usually consists of the three following formats: 1) a presentation by a single speaker (Post mortem of a game, etc.), 2) a microtalk involving multiple short presentations by different speakers, or 3) a panel talk involving free-flowing discussions between multiple speakers. These presentations are also categorized into different "tracks" targeted at specific disciplines, such as Audio, Programming, Art & Animation, or Design. Me being a game designer, I sat in presentations given by some of the most brilliant designers in the industry, notably Rob Davis, the lead level designer behind the highly-acclaimed title God of War (2018), and Chris Remo, a game designer from Campo Santo, the company behind the indie game Firewatch, among many others. Listening to their design challenges, processes, and solutions was an extremely useful experience, as it allowed me to self-reflect on how I approach designing video games.



**PANEL TALKS & PITCH PRESENTATIONS**

There's nothing more entertaining than seeing several designers having a heated conversation. Panel talks consist of multiple speakers, usually from different design backgrounds and companies, responding to the host's questions and riffing off one another. Quite often people would have different and sometimes conflicting opinions, and this goes to show how deep, subjective, and opinionated video game is as a medium, as an art form. Also, I sat in a number of pitch presentations, where teams of developers gave a 5-minute elevator pitch of their game ideas in front of a panel of pseudo-investors. I say pseudo here because I was not entirely sure if they were actual investors being pitched to or if it was merely a simulation "spectacle."



**SOFTWARE TUTORIALS & WORKSHOPS**

As with all IT-related industries, the technology behind video game development is changing at a lightning speed. As a game developer, you must be always on your toes, adopting the latest softwares and tools as they come. Open-source game engines - such as Unity and Unreal - have democratized game development, which has remained clandestine to those few privileged for decades. Walking around the Expo floor, I listened in some of the workshops covering the latest innovation in game development pipeline and workflow. Last year, real-time raytracing and collaborative editors were the big topics.



**ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS**

What makes the GDC and the video game industry as a whole special is in how tightly-knit the community is. I found that even the "celebrities," some of which I mentioned before, are really friendly and open when I approached them. Cory Barlog, the creative director behind the game God of War (2018), took the time after his presentation to talk with curious inquirers. People chimed in their own experiences as a designer following the creative direction of his/her superior, and it was interesting to see how Cory break down the design goals and intentions behind high-level direction, and how he managed to convince and embolden the entire development team in face of the tremendous risk the studio was taking. He responded positively to my own questions about the game and the design patterns within it, and at the end I found myself enlightened and surprised.

Hence it goes without saying how important networking is in the video game community, not just to keep oneself acquainted with the latest trends but also to keep oneself informed of where the industry is heading. I sat into a number of roundtables, which usually consists of the participants initially breaking off into teams to brainstorm on a prompt given by the host, and eventually engaging in a single whole conversation. You could liken it to a debate club. Some of the topics tackled were unionization of the video game industry, diversity and inclusion in video game studios, and the future of Artificial Intelligence as its possible implication to video games as a commercial product and its development as a creative process.



**HOP-IN BOARDGAMES**

While I was taking a break between the presentations, I sat down to play a board game with a group of strangers. We played Ticket To Ride, a game that challenges the players to build the most extensive railroad network possible. However, what I found most interesting wasn't the game itself - I have already played it a thousand times - but engaging with fellow game developers of various age group and ethnic background, having a few playful jokes here and there. While many other "networking" events feel a bit too formal, staged, and artificial, this felt like an authentic human-to-human interaction, which is why I still keep in contact with some of the people I've met this way.



**COMMUNITY SPACES**

The Community Spaces are designated zones on the Expo floor where, similar to the Board Game area, people can walk into an ongoing conversation / game at the table. However, the game is strictly prescribed, a card game about designing games. I found this to be a really unique experience, in that it was like having a brainstorming session with fellow industry veterans. It was extremely informative in talking through my design process and sharing my ideas with others, and taking constructive design critiques and building off of them to propose relevant solutions. At the end, I came away with many useful design approaches and questions that I learned second-hand.



**PORTFOLIO REVIEW**

The video game industry is an extremely competitive field, and the threshold of entry is getting higher and higher with each passing day. As a freshman who have recently broke into the industry, I found that expert mentorship and guidance were instrumental in how I developed my design sensibilities, but also in how I presented my projects in an effective manner to a potential employer. Prior to the conference, I contacted a number of designers, requesting portfolio reviews, who have gladly consented to provide feedback. I brought printed copies of my projects and design documents, and received many insightful critiques and suggestions to further improve how I communicate my thought process to others.



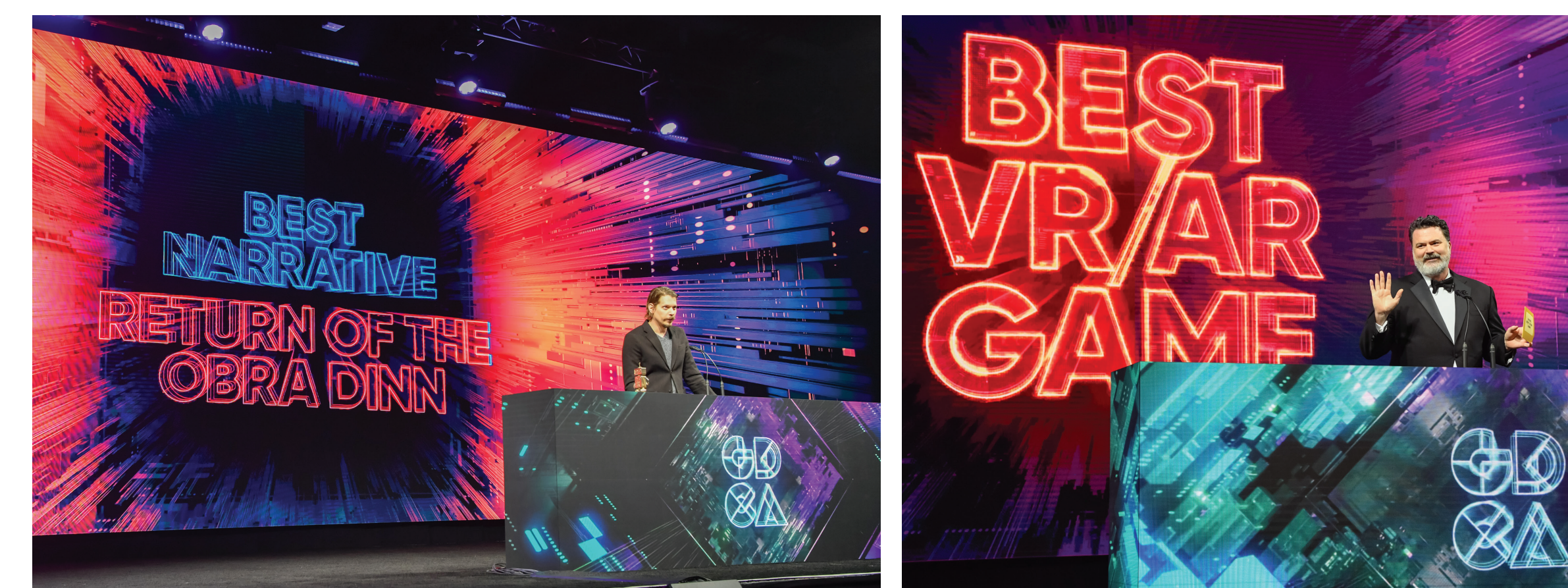
**EMERGING TECHNOLOGY & COMPANY PRODUCT DEMOS**

As an advocate of Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) media, I walked around the Expo floor trying out the latest applications of the said technology, in both the video game and related industries. At the time, I was an employee at a medical devices company based in San Francisco, working on a VR application-game to help stroke survivors rehabilitate lost motor (physical) and cognitive (mental) functionalities, so I was particularly interested to see the state of the technology. I tried out a VR experience (see picture above) where I felt like I was cycling through this alternate world in the headset. I personally think there's a great potential in enhancing the otherwise mundane tasks / chores / exercises by giving them meaning in a different context. On the other hand, I tried out other haptic interfaces and controllers - somewhat close to the arcade games - and was surprised to see how creatively people have used physical interactions to their games.



**INDEPENDENT DEVELOPERS DEMOS**

Independent video game development is somewhat a modern phenomenon, enabled by the accessibility of open-source game engines like Unity. And yet, this subculture nurtures some of the brightest minds to create original, truly unique games. I walked around the IGDA (International Game Developers Association) booths and tried out the games, some of which I've never heard of. I was fascinated to see how these indie developers leveraged limited resources and tools to create such compelling games, such as Gone Home or Firewatch. Also, I had the chance to talk to the developers about their development journeys - from the initial funding to the final shipping of the game - which were really interesting stories.



**INDIE GAMES FESTIVAL & GAME DEVELOPERS CHOICE AWARD**

On Wednesday, March 20th, I watched the annual Indie Game Festival & Game Developers Choice Awards ceremony. The event is one of the biggest celebration of the video game industry, and this year the legendary game designer Tim Schafer was hosting it. I was shocked, like most people, to see that the majority of awards went to indie titles, such as the Return of the Obra Dinn solely developed by the indie developer Lucas Pope. When seen in context and weighed against other AAA titles such as Red Dead Redemption 2 by Rockstar Games and Spiderman by Insomniac Games, it is all the more astonishing.

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