

SCREENS

Game Changer

How Austin's indie gaming scene got cooking as Juegos Rancheros

BY JAMES RENOVITCH, FRI., NOV. 18, 2011

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The applause at the HighBall rings a bit too polite following a trailer for local studio **LightBox Interactive's** upcoming release for PlayStation3. There are hulking figures on what looks like an oil rig in outer space, littered with explosions and futuristic flying contraptions. Impressive stuff, to be sure, but far from what this audience is used to seeing at the indie gaming meetings for **Juegos Rancheros**.

The trio from LightBox segues from a discussion of their upcoming console juggernaut, **Starhawk**, to a discussion of how their work on smaller projects keeps them from drowning creatively in the obsessively detailed minutiae that come hand in hand with a big-budget release. Afterward, attendees play the games and celebrate the birthday of Juegos' unofficial generalissimo and **Karakasa Games** founder **Wiley Wiggins** with cupcakes. The two other founders include chair of the **Independent Games Festival** **Brandon Boyer** and **Semi Secret Software** co-founder **Adam Saltsman**.

It's these smaller passion projects that resonate with attendees of the monthly open meetings of Austin's indie gaming culture collective. The drinking, presentations, and schmoozing are one of the first manifestations of a scene that has only recently blipped onto the Austin arts radar – well, "recently" at

least when compared to the rise of the local independent film and music scenes.

There is an argument, however, that the independent spirit of Austin gaming culture started in 1980 with a teenage Richard Garriott selling floppy discs of his game **Akalabeth** in Ziplocs and continued with his company Origin. Boyer drops some names from Austin's gaming lore: "**Warren Spector**, **Harvey Smith**, and **Randy Smith** – those people were crazy PC guys doing really neat stuff, and then that all just shut down." As business-types realized that games were not just a phase but a profitable art form, by most accounts the bulk of independent spirit fell to the wayside as large studios began vacuuming up the artistic and programming talent here and elsewhere. "Game culture in the sense that we're interested in was not being created or engaged with at all," says Saltsman.

Just like the overproduction of disco in the late Seventies spawned the backlash that was punk, the inflated studio system birthed from the tech bubble of the Nineties created perfect conditions for a rise of agile "garage" programmers to design games not from a profitability matrix but a desire to create something that resonates with them and hopefully at least a small audience. This trend grew throughout the latter half of the Aughties.



(l-r) Wiley Wiggins, Brandon Boyer, and Adam Saltsman of Juegos Rancheros (Photo by John Anderson)

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But as developers left larger studios to go out on their own or started small studios, a sense of community didn't automatically solidify around them. Even with the growing reputations of Semi Secret Software, **Tiger Style Games**, **Renegade Kid**, and others, the scene consisted of only a few half-successful initiatives. Wiggins' **Austin Creative Code** group was intended to bring artists and technical people together for the purposes of making digital multimedia experiments, but by his own admission the group "attracted a bunch of electronics hobbyists who scared off the traditional artists." And Saltsman's twice-yearly gathering of developers over sushi didn't quite constitute the beginnings of a movement, either.

When global indie-gaming czar Boyer moved to town, a group of indies and larger, like-minded studios started meeting more regularly over drinks at the Liberty, thus starting a tiny snowball's descent down the hill. (I know what you're thinking: "Global indie-gaming czar? Really?" If you don't believe me, this guy asked for \$50,000 to **Kickstart** his gaming culture website **Venus Patrol** a few months back. He made that in 24 hours and proceeded to get double the amount. So, yes, czar.) Boyer wanted to make the meetings something more formal, but he admits, "I didn't know how to get a venue or where the money would come from for a venue like that or how many people would come."

Like so many good things in Austin, it took a call from Tim League to get the ball rolling in earnest. Looking for a way to extend the brand of the Fantastic Fest's gaming arm year-round, League contacted Boyer, who reimagined the event with its own identity while keeping the association with the Drafthouse and Fantastic Arcade. One inspired pun later, and Juegos Rancheros was born this past May.

Juegos eschews the game industry meet-up model, opting instead to focus on the culture of gaming. The former dwells on tech and business, while the latter is more interested in the art and craft of play. Guests at Juegos Rancheros have included local developers like **Twisted Pixel**, which showed off its motion-

sensor-controlled game **Gunstringer**, and Tiger Style Games, which showed off part-action game, part-planet-reviving simulator **Waking Mars**. In a well-attended meet-up, the creator of Cartoon Network's cult hit **Adventure Time** joined the designers behind the interactive landscapes of **Sword & Sworcery EP** and chatted via the Internet about creative and professional topics before devolving into a contest of video-effects brinkmanship in a good balance of artistic insight and slapstick comedy.

Even as attendance grows each month, Juegos' goals are loftier than just regular drinks with kindred spirits. "We've been able to get people from big studios and people from tiny studios sitting down together eating burritos and talking about stuff, and that just seems good in the long term," says Saltsman. "I don't know if we've been able to get as many non-video-game people to come as we'd hoped initially, but we're still working on that."

One particularly successful meeting included playing an as-yet-unreleased game called **Johann Sebastian Joust** that isn't technically a video game since no screen is necessary to play. The game is simple: Grab your motion-sensing controller, pull the trigger to signify that you are ready to play, and keep your "jousting" hand from moving too quickly or you'll be out. Of course you will be encouraging your opponents to jostle their controllers and get eliminated. "Joust is kind of the poster child for introducing people to indie games," Wiggins says to explain its allure. "You can see the whole game right there physically, and it immediately makes sense." As Juegos attendees played, **Joust** managed to entice the tastemaking and often difficult-to-impress waitstaff at the HighBall, who were soon lining up to show their skills. Getting Austin to rethink the definition of a video game is step one in an ongoing attempt to encourage the local nongaming population to consider interactive media as something within their artistic purview.

Much like the Fantastic Arcade, Juegos Rancheros wants to introduce film people to the similarly multidisciplinary world of gaming. In the great Venn diagram of the arts, what's needed to make a game

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Juegos Rancheros meeting at the HighBall, Nov. 6, 2011 (Photo by John Anderson)

interdisciplinary world of gaming. In the great venn diagram of the arts, what's needed to make a game overlaps largely with the skills involved in making a film (e.g., music, animation, voice acting, script writing). Despite efforts to shed the classification of game development as code jockeying, it can be difficult to proselytize to the somewhat insular film community.

Allow Saltsman to elaborate in the form of a movie pitch: "I always imagine us in some weird dystopic sci-fi movie that happens in a hole. You can't see out of the hole, so you don't know they are in a perfectly normal place. They're this savage primitive society in a hole, but if we could climb slightly higher, we could see a house 10 feet away. That's the twist, we're in the backyard the whole time." In other words (I think),

the local arts community is the "water, water everywhere" and only now is the gaming community realizing it can drink from the larger artistic community that makes Austin what it is.

Leah Smith, the animation and video-game industries liaison at the [Texas Film Commission](#), has seen increasing interest from film and music professionals looking to make inroads into interactive art forms like gaming. She's also taken the reins of Juegos Rancheros' first community outreach project. OK, maybe not a community outreach project per se, but rather a kickass, free-to-play arcade cabinet stuffed with indie gaming goodness (which, truth be told, is currently housed in this very writer's kitchen). To date, the [Texatron](#), as it has come to be known, has had all of its components donated and is soon to be assembled by a crack team of amateur volunteers under the tutelage of a professional. If things go according to plan, once the longhorns are affixed to the top of the Texatron it will likely be placed in Domy Books, ready to shun your quarters and show Austin what noncommercial games look like.

The Juegos Rancheros jefes hope to expand into actual community outreach with a program similar to Toronto's Difference Engine, which empowers underrepresented groups to make games that reflect their perspectives. That may still be a ways off, but the HighBall meetings were never intended to be the end all be all of Juegos. Ideally, the meetings will reach a critical mass that leads to joint efforts and unexpected professional pairings. "I think people who come into games from another discipline are where great stuff comes from," says Wiggins. "It's the same with film. When you get people who are [Radio-Television-Film] majors, you get the same film over and over again, but when you get a magician or a photographer or a puppeteer, it's a different story."

The conclusion of the LightBox panel is accompanied by earnest applause as the roughly 50 Juegoers break up into groups of conversation. Darwin, a UT freshman, politely asks if these events are always so informal. The answer is yes, but regardless of his first impression, Darwin asks how he can help with the Texatron, and that marks an unmitigated success. Juegos Rancheros has always been more interested in getting people involved than impressing people with their professionalism. What kind of legitimate cultural movement starts with an impeccable PowerPoint presentation, anyway?

If you want to see the action in person, Juegos Rancheros' next meeting is Saturday, Dec. 10, at the HighBall. Go to www.juegosrancheros.com for more info and other updates.

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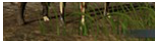
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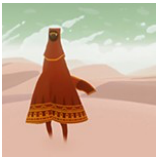
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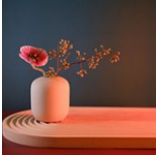
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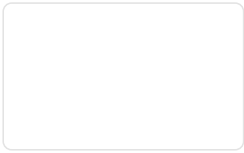
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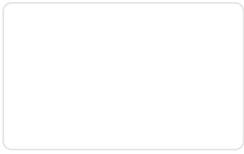
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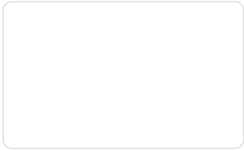
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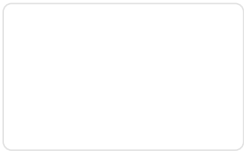
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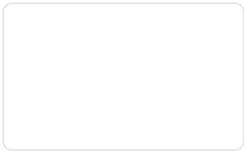
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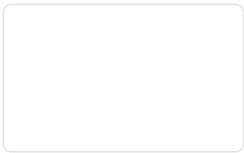
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