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Gamescape

Game On

As Baltimore's gaming industry embraces the local arts world's DIY ethos, Gamescape expands

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Gamescape 2013 (Leslie Furlong / July 21, 2012)

By Andrew Zaleski

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From their basement headquarters inside a rowhouse on Eastern Avenue, developers at Pure Bang Games are programming the final touches to a demo of "MUD," the latest video game from this Highlandtown gaming studio. The final version of the game—a fantasy "sandbox" project, gaming speak for a virtual world where game players can roam uninhibited through vast, open spaces—will allow players to create their own monsters and then pit their creations against their friends.

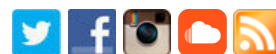
But, for now, they're only making a demo version where players take a character and embark on a tour through MUD's open world. It's the most the crew at Pure Bang can complete in the weeks before this year's Artscape festival, where they, along with 25 other independent and small gaming studios from Baltimore and beyond, will show off their pixel-based diversions at the fifth annual Gamescape exhibition.

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The showcase, an official part of Artscape since 2010, is about as quirky and unpretentious as the decades-old music and arts fest. Indie game developers traveling from multiple places—game-makers from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C., are joining others from the Baltimore metro area at this year's Gamescape—let anyone take their most recent mobile, console, and computer games for a spin. A Gamescape arcade is always on hand, courtesy of the organizers of the annual MAGFest music and gaming festival that takes place in the D.C. area; "Asteroids," "Missile Command," and a 6-foot-wide, six-player "X-Men" equipped with two 19-inch monitors are among the cabinets being brought in this year. Thanks to a bigger venue—the former home of the Everyman and Single Carrot theaters at 1727 North Charles St.—this Gamescape will also feature video game-themed music Friday and Saturday night from bands whose set lists include covers of the theme song from "Super Mario Bros." and original tunes reminiscent of characters or storylines from other popular console games.

"There's not a lot of things like this on the East Coast," says Ben Walsh, Gamescape's organizer and the founder of Pure Bang Games. "We've always gotten a lot of interest, and each year interest has grown and grown."

Just eight exhibitors shoved off to one corner of MICA's Brown Center marked Gamescape's first year. Technology, after all, isn't Artscape's main draw. But while computer technology might seem out of place at a festival for musicians and artists, exhibitors tend to highlight more of the creative processes that go into the making of their games, as opposed to focusing solely on the games themselves, says Nick Marinelli, who serves on the board of directors for MAGFest.

"Easiest way to make any nerd rage is to tell him that video games aren't art," he says. "He'll start listing off all the instances of video games being beautiful."

And the increasing popularity of Gamescape comes at a time when the video-game industry in the U.S.—and in Baltimore in particular—is undergoing a seismic shift.

For years Baltimore's gaming industry has been anchored by major studios: Big Huge Games, Impossible Studios, Zynga East. Over the last couple years all have closed down, although other large studios of repute still exist. Firaxis Games in Hunt Valley—founded in the mid-1990s by Sid Meier, the mind behind the Civilization series and a man regarded to be the father of PC strategy games—is probably best known. But it's mostly smaller studios now, like Pure Bang Games, Seven Hills Games, and Brinkbit—all three of which are located in the city and are exhibiting games at Gamescape—that have filled a void left by those larger studios closing, mainly because independent studios are more nimble and more poised to take advantage of the next wave in video gaming: downloadable games, available in app stores, for Android- and iOS-powered mobile phones.

"In the previous era of game development, you needed to work for a big company," says Jonathan Moriarty, who attended the first Gamescape as a member of the game developers club at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and will be returning for his fifth year as a full-time developer with Walsh's outfit. "The rise of the indie developers . . . it's something that's happening really the world over and it's the result of tool sets previously unavailable due to large amounts of money."

As the technology required to create games became simpler, not to mention cheaper, and the means of marketing and distributing those games became less complicated—with social media pushing potential buyers to digital storefronts—big studios with big budgets became less of a necessity for developers interested in building their own video games. That DIY ethos that's found in so many of the musicians and artists who perform and display works at Artscape is the same spirit pushing Baltimore's new gaming industry forward.

"The potential that we've been talking about for years has come to fruition," says Lindsay Grace, the director of the American University Game Lab. Last year at Gamescape he presented his own game, "Big Huggin'," in which players had to hug a 30-inch teddy bear to get the pixelated bear on the screen to jump rivers and rocks. "It's the idea that you don't need to have a \$30,000 license to make a game people are going to play. Now you've got a lot more autonomy, so it's possible to self-publish and pull some profit."

Of course, it's somewhat surprising that Baltimore was a hub of game development to begin with. "It doesn't strike you as a town that would be hot, hot tech," Marinelli says. "But ever since the mid-'90s, there have been gaming studios in Baltimore. . . . And Baltimore is now a hotbed for these indie groups to pop up."

"About four years ago there was really not much of an indie community at all," says Walsh. "Now you have several studios doing it as their full-time job."

And now Gamescape represents something more than only three days on a summer calendar.

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