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Forget Davos, Ludicious Is Switzerland's Hottest (Gaming) Event

Swiss games have yet to break out like neighboring countries Germany and France, but they're trying.

Ludicious

By John Gaudiosi

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Before President Trump and world leaders from politics and industry convened in Davos today, some of the leaders from the Swiss and global video game industry met in Zurich - just 92 miles away.

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When you think about Switzerland, things like watches, chocolate and cheese come to mind. Video games; not so much. But the country is trying to change that. And a key focus for both the city of Zurich and the Swiss cultural agency Pro Helvetia over the past four years has been showcasing home-grown talent through the international lens of Ludicious - Zurich Game Festival.

Ludicious is a combination of the Latin (ancient Roman language) word "ludus" (meaning play) and the English word "delicious." And that's a good summary of what occurs over the four days of the event each January (this year it was held Jan. 18th to Jan. 21st). This year more than 500 game developers, students, publishers, industry insiders and venture capitalists gathered for panels, meetings, accelerator programs, contests, food truck meals and a banquet dinner.

That attendance figure doesn't include the public, which is invited to purchase tickets for entrance on Saturday and Sunday to play the mobile, PC, console and virtual reality games that are on display inside the Kasernenareal, which is a massive former military barracks that dates back to 1864. Like the city of Zurich itself, the Kasernenareal is a celebration of cutting-edge technology and Swiss ingenuity. Ludicious' office is located on the second floor of these barracks, which have been updated with Wi-Fi and all the technology necessary to run a modern-day video game conference.

Some of this year's speakers included Alden Kroll (Valve), Eric Zimmerman (NYU Game Center), Antoine Milliez (Industrial Light & Magic), Jason della Rocca (Execution Labs), Kate Edwards (Take-This), Ezra Hanson-White (Outbounds), Chris Bourassa, Trudi Castle and Keir Miron (Red Hook Studios), and Daniel Dociu (Amazon Game Studios).

Ludicious was the brainchild of Dominik Marosi, who spearheaded the festival through its first three years. In that time the festival grew from 200 attendees to over 500, bolstered by the funding of the city of Zurich and ProHelvetia. A key part of the festival is a contest that features games from local colleges like the Zurich University of the Arts, which has run its game design program for over a decade, and Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (ETH), one of the top technical universities in Europe.

Chris Bergstresser, an ex-pat who has called Switzerland home for seven years and serves as president of Ludicious, said the festival was originally designed to not only give Swiss developers a platform they could call their own (and in their back yard), but also a platform for learning and sharing between the Swiss games community and the rest of the world.

"We have kept this original essence, but we have also evolved it to bring in students of game design/development and really small indie studios from around the world to learn, share and collaborate with big names in the games business," Bergstresser said.

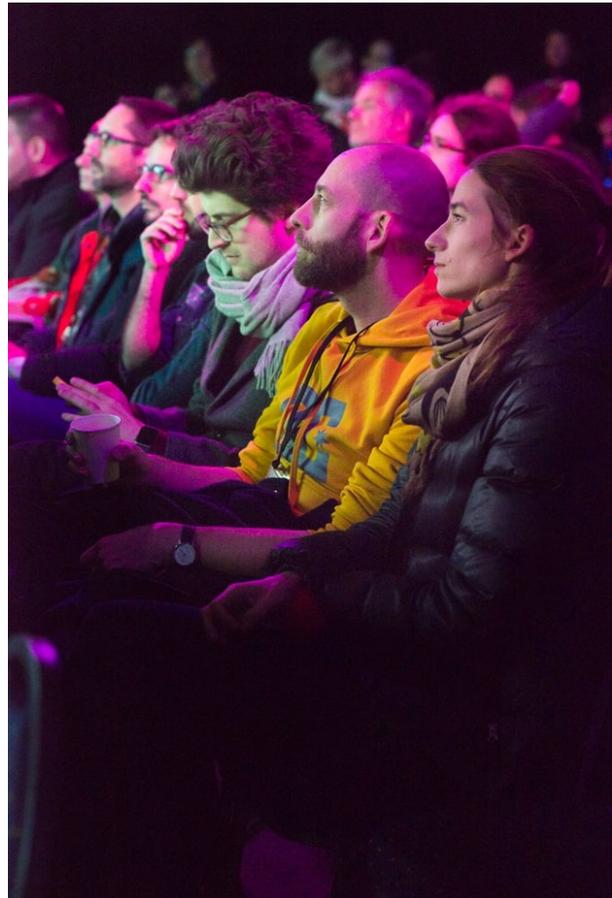Marosi said the idea behind Ludicious was to bolster local talent, while also incentivizing companies to set up shop in Switzerland – something countries like Sweden, Finland and Canada have done well. Disney Research has done just that, setting up a lab in Zurich in 2010. Two years ago Facebook-owned Oculus VR purchased ETH startup Zurich Eye, which developed inside out tracking for Oculus Rift. And Apple acquired real-time facial tracking company Faceshift in 2015.

There have also been successes in the video game business. By now, gamers around the globe know of Giant Software's Farming Simulator franchise, which sold over four million copies worldwide. Urban Games connected with sim fans through its Train Fever and Transport Fever titles. Cloud-based startup AirConsole, which turns any screen into a gaming platform using mobile devices as controllers, has been gradually building out its audience. Sunnyside Games is developing mobile games like

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Towaga and The Firm. Apelab is creating VR games like Watchout! and AR games like Ko'Ko's Curse. And Struckd.com is building out a network of shareable games.

According to Sylvain Gardel, head of special focus on culture and business at Pro Helvetia, over the past seven years, Switzerland has seen the number of game development teams grow from five to about 100. While many of these teams are small indies, Gardel said it does correlate nicely with the success of Ludicious over the past four years.

"The high schools and colleges are pushing out talent, which comes to the festival," Gardel said. "And we're showing them international role models from game developers and leaders in the industry. When we started, people wanted to become programmers for banks and corporations, and now everybody wants to be a game developer. Having studios that have had success on an international level has changed the mindset of the young game makers. We're a small country. Everybody can see what the other is doing, and when one team has success the next feels they can do it as well."

Kate Edwards, CEO of Geogrify, judged the student competition at Ludicious this year. The former president of the International Game Developers Association has served as a judge at game conferences from Sao Paulo to Berlin to Taiwan, and she's impressed by the six student games she played in Zurich.

"The quality was very high," Edwards said. "It was clear that they have the basic mechanics down very well; the artistic skills, the programming skills, the fundamentals are all there. And there's a high level of innovation that shows you that there's a community. This is the kernel of the game industry for the city and the region, if not the country."

Jason Della Rocca, co-founder of Execution Labs, said the Swiss indie game scene has taken on a very arts-oriented approach.

"The country is full of amazingly talented artists and designers coming out of world-class arts schools, so Swiss games tend to be quite beautiful," Della Rocca said. "They have some catching up to do when it comes to the business side of things, but that is somewhat the case for game developers across the globe."

The Swiss are also open to other cultures. Case in point, Ludicious is currently run by managing director Mike Reaney (a native of the Isle of Man) and artistic director Tobias Kopka (from Cologne, Germany).

"From an international perspective, Ludicious is one of the rare places where art, tech and business come together," Kopka explained.

Kopka pointed to Ludicious' curated matchmaking, which saw a mix of publishers and platform holders from across the globe, a curated expo with games from many places around the world like Iran, Chile, the U.S., Belgium, Denmark and Israel, and a second curated room in the expo representing all language and cultural regions in Switzerland. Multiple awards were handed out across the Swiss Game Developers Association, the Ludicious Awards and another finalist for the ongoing Nordic Games Awards contest.

And while the event takes place within walking distance of Zurich's historic city center, Reaney said increasingly it's drawing in projects and partners from the Swiss Romandy areas like Geneva and Vaud, as well as the Ticino area like Blenio.

There's also been a cultural shift through Ludicious, according to Matthias Sala, founder of mixed reality game studio Gbanga and president of the SGDA. He launched his game company a decade ago in Silicon Valley, but decided to move operations back to his native Switzerland to be close to fellow graduates from ETH.

"The startup culture is new to the Swiss lifestyle," Sala explained. "We normally go to big companies and work there. And the Swiss mentality is to be suspicious against the accumulation of power, so sharing your knowledge and your experiences is new to our ecosystem. In Silicon Valley, they talk about ideas all the time and competitors talk to each other, and now we have that here thanks to Ludicious."

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Sala pointed to the SGDA Swiss Game Awards that occurred during the Friday evening Ludicious dinner gala. After the mayor of Zurich, Corine Mauch, stopped by to reinforce the importance of game development to the local and national economy, game makers sat together and shared ideas. They even voted via mobile devices for the SGDA Audience Choice Award.

And while Ludicious may not have the size and scope of a Game Developers Conference in San Francisco or a Quo Vadis in Berlin, that's just fine with Edwards.

"This is what the community can produce in terms of their creativity and the design vision that they have," Edwards said. "It's not gigantic, but it doesn't need to be. I actually think the more effective conferences tend to be smaller."

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