

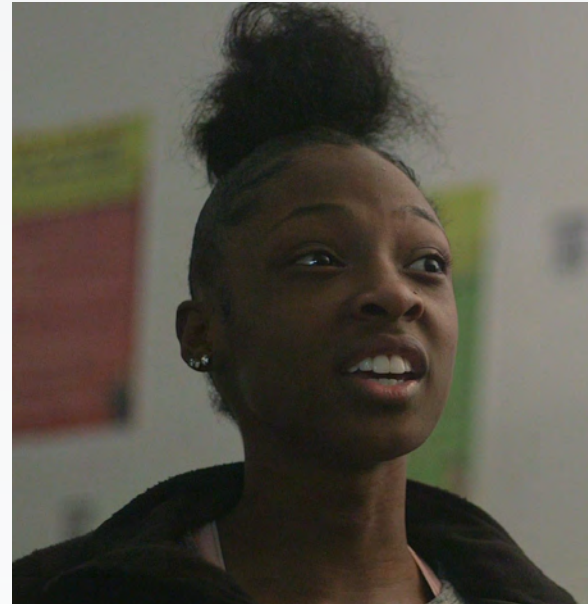
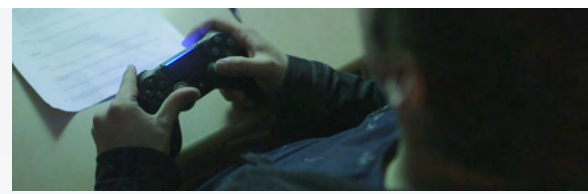


2021 ANNUAL REPORT

Building Community in Service of Teen Thriving

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SUPPORTING TEEN THRIVING THROUGH PLAY

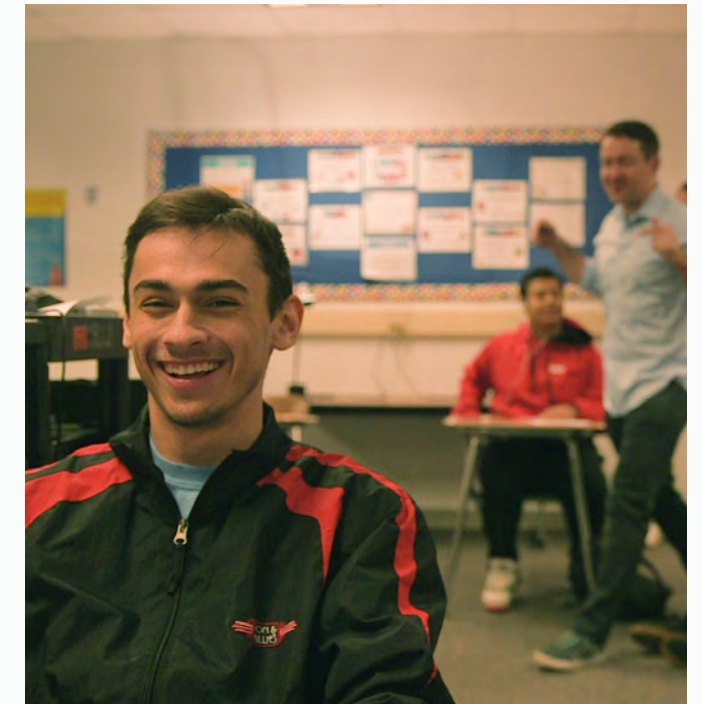
iThrive Games is 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that uses games and game design to support teen thriving. The strands of our DNA are composed of:



SOCIAL AND
EMOTIONAL LEARNING



CONNECTIVE PLAY



ENGAGEMENT
WITH TEENS



A LETTER FROM THE FOUNDER AND BOARD CHAIR

The time for deepening community is now.

Support for the advancement of human thriving through the social and emotional realms is at the core of my dedication to iThrive Games. This last year has posed tough questions for those of us who care deeply about teens. How do teens thrive during a global pandemic, increased environmental threats, and economic and political uncertainty? How can we create the conditions for teens to access their deep resilience as they rise to the challenges and opportunities of today? What role might teens have to play in creating solutions for sustainability, from the environment to democracy?

Our answer to this at iThrive Games has been to raise the bar of what's possible for teens in the classroom by infusing social and emotional skill-building opportunities into civics role-playing scenarios and game-based learning units in humanities classes. In addition to seeing the use of our iThrive Sim role-playing simulation games in classrooms in the U.S. and as far as Israel, this past year our approach was adopted more widely in museums, homeschool pods, and college preparatory programs. I'm inspired to see how much more we can do to foster embedded social and emotional skill building.

The multiple awards and grants that iThrive Games has won for its educational experiences have inspired me to think deeper about additional ways to forge new paths for teen thriving. Teens love meaningful experiences and iThrive is dreaming up new ways to co-create those contexts. The team is exploring the role that more immersive experiences such as virtual reality might play in supporting mental health. While we appreciate engaging with teens while they are at school, the team is also exploring creations that would enliven teens while they are at home or out in the world. We are envisioning additional ways to support educators, parents, and others who care about and work closely with teens.

In looking forward to the next year for iThrive Games, I see us making more experiences that invite teens and the adults who care about them into an experience of collective well-being. We are ready to innovate in the service of well-being beyond the walls of the classroom. The time for deepening connection and community is now.

It's my strong belief that the vast majority of the people on this planet are kind and caring and if they have access to knowledge and opportunity, necessary tools, and a path forward, they will make choices that support the whole. Our focus on teens supports them in building a better world.

Dorothy Batten, MBA, MS, PPSyD
Founder and Board Chair, iThrive Games Foundation
Founder, DN Batten Foundation



A LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Connection promotes healing.

Whether you connect with teens as an educator, a parent, or a counselor, you know that connection can be the difference between fracture and repair. In our work with teens across the country in 2021, we marveled at the extent to which they leaned into the power of connection.

If this last year has taught us anything, it's that we have to flex all of our social and emotional skills to navigate the many different ways that people see and experience the world. Teens drew on these skills daily while they experienced school virtually, in person, or in hybrid formats; contended with the changes to their social worlds as a result of the pandemic; and prepared for adulthood in an increasingly complex world. And through it all, connection and community, within the classroom and outside of it, were key.

Teens who played a scenario from iThrive Sim, our civics-oriented role-playing simulation, shared learnings such as "...you really need to communicate with your team to have all of the information," and "how challenging, complicated, and stressful it is to lead through crisis, and how important it is to work with your team in those situations." And since plenty of research suggests that learning happens at an accelerated rate when play is involved, it brought us joy to hear teens who used the simulation in their classrooms say, "It was fun to work through as a group."

iThrive supports the practice of social and emotional skills by embedding social and emotional learning opportunities within our humanities offerings, from civics to English Language Arts. We know that teens have the energy, genius, and creative potential to build and imagine a better world. We spent the year creating and refining experiences that support

them in developing the social and emotional competence to think for themselves and collaborate towards a better future with others, with both empathy and curiosity. These experiences are vital to their learning and thriving.

One of the best days of 2021 came when I got to share the news with SEED Institute's youth designers that their game, *The Run Around*, had won Serious Play's gold medal. The SEED Institute is a partnership created this year in Massachusetts with Transition HOPE and the Black Ministerial Alliance. SEED Designers created *The Run Around* based on their experiences in and research on the juvenile justice system in support of dismantling inequities in the system. To see on their faces the way their creativity had made an impact reaffirmed my belief in play as transformative for everyone involved.

With updates to *iThrive Sim: Lives in Balance* and the wide release of new simulations *iThrive Sim: Follow the Facts* and *iThrive Sim: Leading Through Crisis*, we lived into our commitment to create role-playing simulations as educational experiences that bring civics to life. Our new English Language Arts unit, *iThrive Curriculum: A Moment in Time*, offers teachers a new way to support students in exploring grief, loss, and resilience all in the context of play and deep reflection. And with the release of *Game Design Studio Toolkit*, we support adults in working with teens to use game design to lead systems change.

From the youth designers who created *The Run Around* to the teen playtesters who helped us shape and refine our role-playing simulations, our greatest joy in 2021 came from being shoulder to shoulder with teens. In them, we see the bright light of the future.

In service,

Susan E. Rivers, PhD

Executive Director and Chief Scientist, iThrive Games Foundation
Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of Games, Self, & Society*





HOW WE WORK

Teens are at the center of all that we do at iThrive Games.

We create for and with teens and the educators who teach them. Our offerings help high school educators tap into teens' natural need to probe and challenge the status quo in service of deepening their understanding of themselves, others, and the world. The game-based tools and experiences we design help foster connection and support teens in developing the social and emotional competencies they need to engage responsibly in society.

Teen thriving is our north star.

We center equity and Universal Design for Learning principles to ensure that everything we co-create is accessible to all teen learners. We actively seek partnership with museums, libraries, educational institutions, and other organizations that want to engage young people in their genius and support them in developing the social and emotional skills to thrive in the world they will one day inherit. Bridging our partners' subject matter expertise with [our co-design approach](#), we embed meaningful SEL opportunities into their youth-serving programs and products, creating meaningful experiences with them that use play to power learning.



OUR TEAM AND OUR VALUES

The iThrive Games team consist of experts in psychology, social and emotional learning, psychology, adolescent development, and inclusive and equitable teaching practices. Each member is committed to upholding our **eight core values** in the work we do with and for young people.

"We are constantly learning, from teens, from educators, and from our partners. It's incredibly joyful to design with multi-generational teams who offer their inspiring lived experiences and expertise to create transformational learning experiences with us."

SUSAN RIVERS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND CHIEF SCIENTIST,
creating integrated SEL experiences for over 18 years

"Our co-design process ensures that those using our materials will find meaning and joy in them. Getting to listen to the voices of educators and students steadily helps us create truly transformative learning experiences, and we're continually energized and inspired by them."

SIERRA MARTINEZ, PROGRAM COORDINATOR
facilitating immersive learning experiences for over three years

"For iThrive, there's no one-size-fits-all solution; we're constantly pushing ourselves beyond what we thought was possible to realize the potential that teens, educators, and collaborators see in our learning experiences. We are always striving to make our offerings more impactful, more accessible, and more engaging."

MICHELLE BERTOLI, SENIOR DIRECTOR OF LEARNING
developing embedded SEL experiences for over 13 years



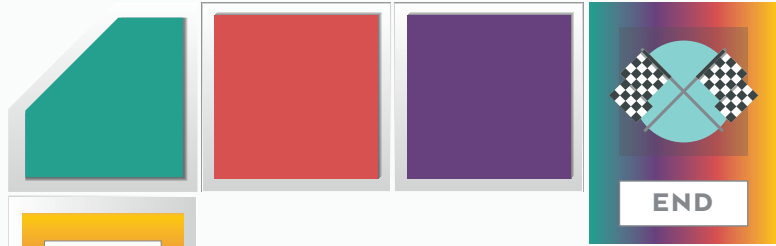
VALUE #1:
WHOLE SELF

VALUE #2:
CONNECTION


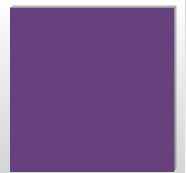
VALUE #3:
JOY

VALUE #4:
COMMUNICATION


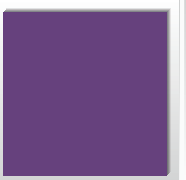
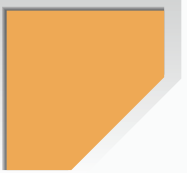
VALUE #5:
INTEGRITY



VALUE #8:
IMPACT-DRIVEN INNOVATION



VALUE #7:
COMMITMENT TO LEARNING



VALUE #6:
DIVERSITY & INCLUSION



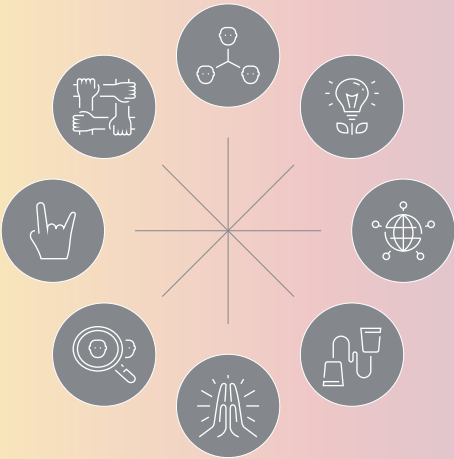
"Pulling together the insights and creativity we get from youth and matching it to best practices from education, psychology and game-design ensures we're creating meaningful products and programs, and it also means we get to learn something and have fun every single day!"

JANE LEE, SENIOR DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS
directing projects, working with teens, and co-designing products for 10 years



"The needs, stories, and perspectives of young people along with those of the adults who serve them propel our work and our creativity at iThrive, and it's truly been an honor to listen, imagine, design, and iterate in service of their thriving."

EGHOSA ASEMOTA, MANAGER OF MARKETING,
executing youth-centered storytelling campaigns for over 5 years



Learn more about our values and how they inform our work at iThrive [here](#).



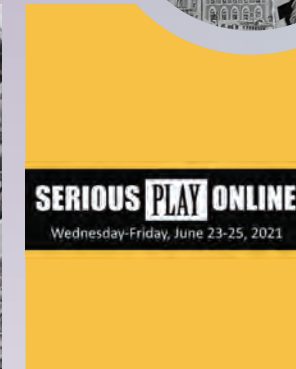
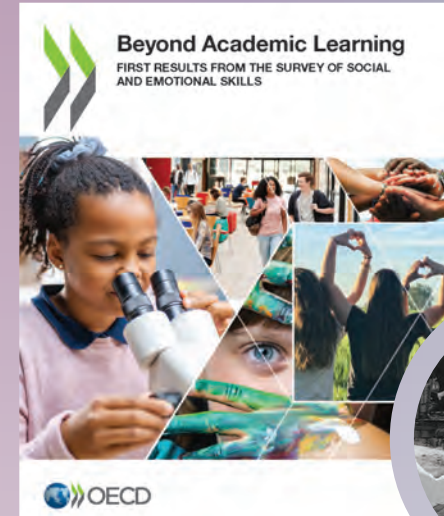
CONFERENCES AND COLLABORATIONS

Knowledge Building and Knowledge Sharing

Whenever we are in community with others, we create a context for sharing ideas, building knowledge, and co-creation. At iThrive, our commitment to learning and sharing brought us to several shared spaces last year, where we connected, learned from, and shared with game designers, researchers, educators, administrators, policymakers, and other intersectional experts across the globe.

In the summer, for example, we joined Re-Imagining Migration, Got History? | The History CO:LAB, the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, and the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum for [*Moving Stories: From Personal to Policy*](#), a collaborative workshop sparked by a desire to support civics and social studies teachers in facilitating challenging conversations with their students around migration and other events in history.

Our commitment to building and sharing knowledge also brought us to virtual conferences and events hosted by Games for Change, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), Serious Games, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In each of these virtual spaces, we found fellowship with and inspiration from many who care deeply about teens.



"Approaches to migration in schools are often fragmented or incomplete. Programs like [Moving Stories] are essential because they build understanding and support for reimagining the way we talk and teach about these foundational experiences."

ADAM STROM
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
RE-IMAGINING MIGRATION





LEARNING BY DOING

iThrive Sim

In 2021, we connected with teens and educators to test, create, and launch new transformative learning experiences that enlist the power of play to support teen thriving. With iThrive Sim, created in 2020, we continued to bring immersive role-playing simulation games to high school classrooms across the nation, in person and online.

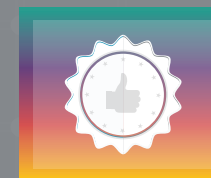
As students play and interact within the iThrive Sim platform, they share and receive primary source documents, news stories, memos, photos, and social media content, both pre-populated and written by fellow players. This information fuels real-time interactions with peers and impacts their individual and group decisions that move the simulation forward.

A teacher-friendly interface that allows teachers to facilitate and steer iThrive Sim scenarios in their classrooms will be available in 2022.



**Gold Award, 2020 Response,
2021 Muse Awards**
(iThrive Sim: Lives in Balance)

**Bronze Award, Interactive &
Immersive, 2021 GLAMi Awards**
(iThrive Sim: Lives in Balance)



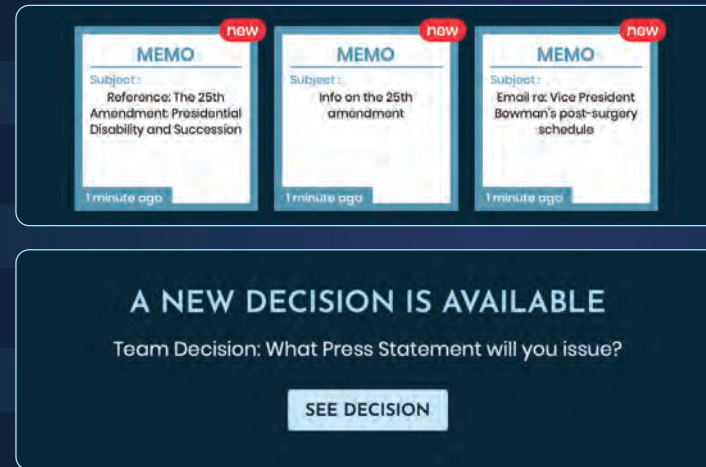
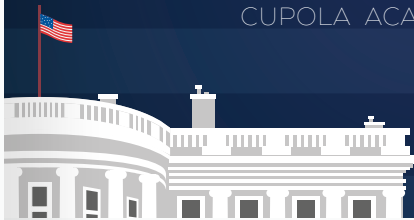
**Finalist, Games for Learning/Simulation
Solution, New Products and Services,
2021 EdTech Awards** (iThrive Sim)

NEW IMMERSIVE CIVIC LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Through funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and in partnership with the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, the iThrive Sim library expanded with two new role-playing simulation scenarios, *iThrive Sim: Leading Through Crisis* and *iThrive Sim: Follow the Facts*.

“iThrive Sim is a component of what we strive to achieve in all our programming—creating community and connection.”

MICHAEL HILBERT
CO-DIRECTOR,
CUPOLA ACADEMY

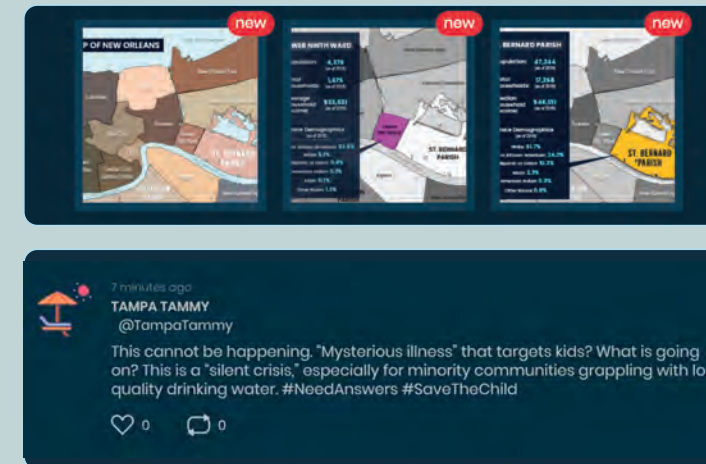


ITHRIVE SIM: LEADING THROUGH CRISIS

A groundbreaking law is about to pass. Crises at home and abroad shock the world. The clock is ticking and the public wants answers. *Leading Through Crisis* invites high school students to work together as members of the president’s Crisis Management Team to find them. As they play, teens make high-stakes decisions and weigh competing priorities, building critical social and emotional skills while doing so. Students at [Cupola Academy](#) and [the World Affairs Council \(WAC\) of Philadelphia’s Summer Global Leadership Seminar](#) were among the first to play *Leading Through Crisis* after its launch, creating experiences that fostered connection at a time of social distancing and remote learning.

ITHRIVE SIM: FOLLOW THE FACTS

Media literacy informs responsible civic engagement. In *Follow the Facts*, high school students practice these skills in a simulation that places them in the role of a reporter or editor at a local newspaper trying to find the truth amongst competing stories. As they play, teens practice effective sourcing of information, become aware of and describe bias, and practice collaboration and communication. In the summer, high school students enrolled at [the Summer Journalism Institute at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University](#) used the game to flex and strengthen these crucial 21st-century skills as part of their prep as burgeoning journalists.



“I learned that getting the facts or right information depends on how you choose your sources.”

TEEN AT THE
SUMMER JOURNALISM
INSTITUTE AT ASU

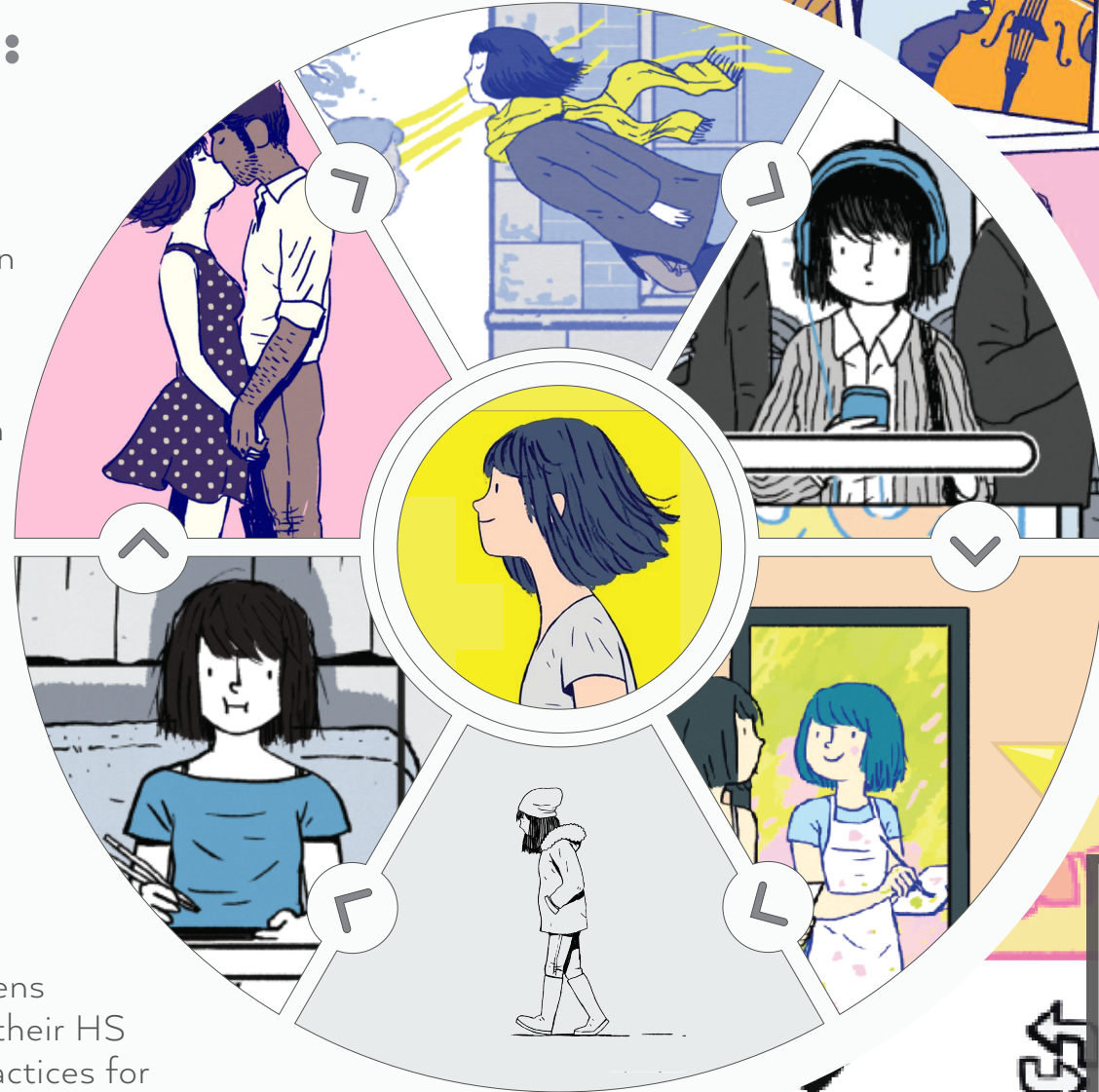


RELEVANT SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

iThrive Curriculum: A Moment in Time

During a year where grief and loss were so pervasive, we wanted to design a resource that met teens' needs, supporting their reflection and processing of life shifts. *A Moment in Time*, our newest iThrive Curriculum game-based learning unit, provided an opportunity for teachers to broach meaningful subjects and relevant themes while meeting students where they are—in the digital world.

Launched in May 2021, *A Moment in Time* invites students to play Florence, a mobile game that follows the story of Florence Yeoh as she navigates a relationship and learns a lot about herself in the process. As teens work through the eight-lesson unit in their HS English classrooms, they engage in practices for self-reflection and self-awareness around emotions and emotional expression.



"Showing [students] that grief over the loss of so many things in their lives is not only normal but also incredibly understandable and expected is so important for teenagers who often lack the coping skills to grapple with such ponderous emotions. *iThrive Curriculum: A Moment in Time* opens up the door to these ideas."

LAUREN GESCHEL

HIGH SCHOOL ELA TEACHER &
CO-AUTHOR, *A MOMENT IN TIME*

"Verbal communication isn't always the best way of expressing yourself, so having this lesson really opened my eyes about ways to express feelings or read someone else without talking."

TEEN

PHILADELPHIA, PA

CONTINUED REFLECTION AND ACTION

An Eye on Equity

Early last year, we published a commitment to [designing with equity](#) as a core value. We doubled down on our promise to use an anti-racist lens while creating our educational offerings to ensure all students who engage with them feel valued, seen, and supported as learners. Our continued reflection and action was motivated by our work with Jessica Grady Heard, a racial equity and curriculum development expert, who reviewed our curricular materials and identified opportunities for expansion and refinement.

Jessica underscored existing strengths in iThrive Curriculum's *Museum of Me* and *Sam's Journey*, like their tie-in of Universal Design for Learning principles and the equal weight both units give to English Language Arts and social and emotional learning (SEL) standards. She also pointed us to new ways to respond to the needs of remote learning, suggesting camera-off tie-ins, pacing changes for teachers who want flexibility, and SEL activities that account for students' personal, local, and immediate contexts. From Jessica's review come new equity-centered goals for iThrive, such as translating our iThrive Curriculum units into additional languages and exploring professional development offerings to ensure teachers have proper support as they bring our units to their classrooms.



"Equity reviews are a way to support continued reflection, dialogue and action among iThrive staff to ensure that their offerings are accessible and empowering for young people of all backgrounds. We look at ways to more thoroughly embed social emotional learning, trauma-informed practices, and culturally responsive teaching."

JESSICA GRADY HEARD

EQUITY AND CURRICULUM
DEVELOPMENT CONSULTANT

Symphony: A Digital Portal to Meaningful Learning

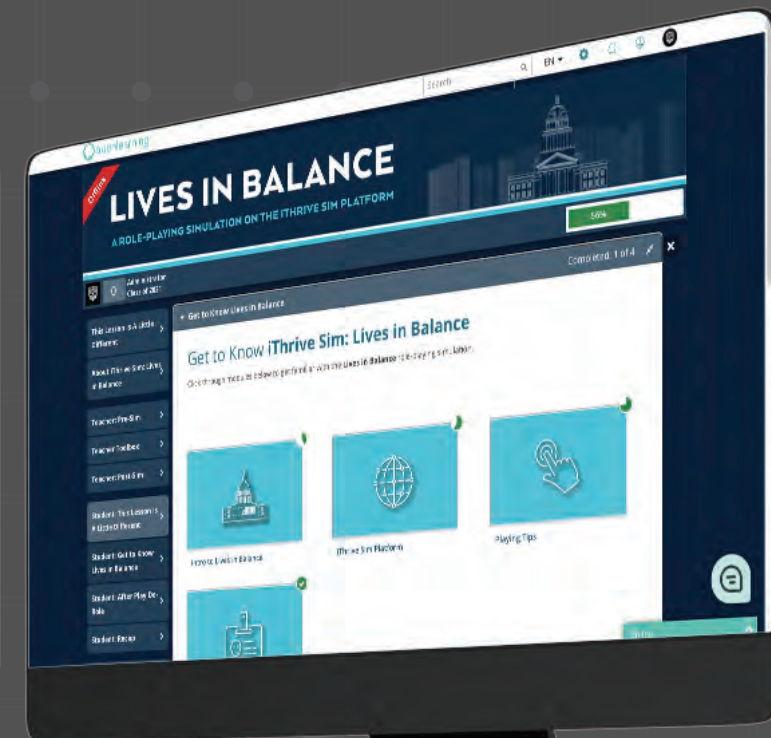
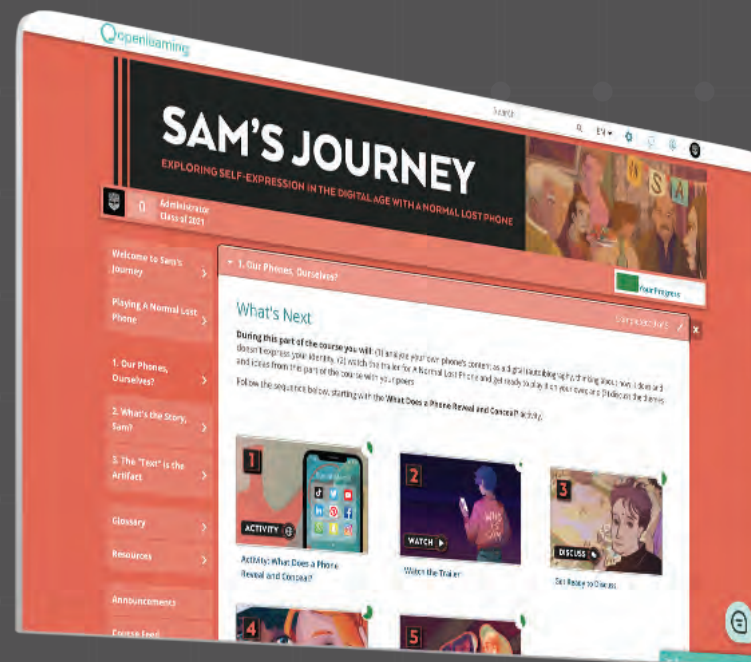
Online learning was pervasive in 2021. To meet this need and help to raise the standards for online offerings for teens, we have been working with High Resolves Group, Rise, and our shared content partners to curate and transform high-impact, in-person lessons into online, student-centered experiences.

In 2021, we started working to make these experiences widely available on Symphony, a new digital platform that supports self-directed learning. Our goal is to provide widespread, global access to high-quality, SEL-infused content for civic education, human responsibility, and more. iThrive tests all content with teens to ensure that their voices and needs shape the learning experiences designed to engage their minds and hearts. These experiences on Symphony will be available for middle and high school students in 2022.

“The iThrive co-design approach has ensured we retain a very high quality standard for user experiences.”

MEHRDAD BAGHAI

CO-FOUNDER & CEO,
HIGH RESOLVES GROUP



INNOVATING AND TRANSFORMING LEARNING WITH ITHRIVE SIM

Another bright spot from 2021 was working with key partners to develop new, engaging, and relevant learning experiences for young people hosted on iThrive Sim’s award-winning platform. These experiences merge play, immersive tech, and social and emotional learning to support teen capacity-building.



Expanding Disaster Preparedness Efforts with FEMA

With the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), we’re co-designing a new iThrive Sim role-playing scenario that will promote emergency preparedness in teens. The goal is to increase FEMA Region VIII’s reach in underserved and rural communities and to enable a greater understanding of the crucial role teens can play in supporting the preparedness and resilience of their communities. Teens will begin playtesting the game in 2022.



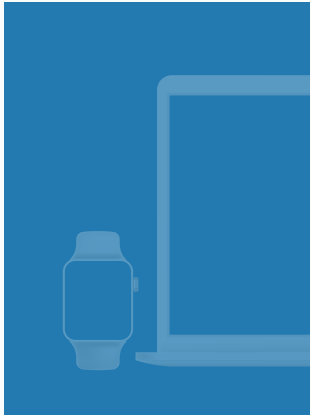
“iThrive’s unique co-design approach is illuminating how to mobilize young people’s creativity and distinct strengths in the service of building mindsets and skills needed for resiliency across disaster preparedness, response, and recovery.”

**DANIEL NYQUIST AND
STEPHANIE POORE**
FEMA REGION VIII



Combatting Radicalization with DHS and Middlebury Institute

In partnership with the Middlebury Institute of International Studies and with funding from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), we’re co-developing a new iThrive Sim scenario that will support teens in recognizing and resisting online radicalization efforts. In 2022, we’ll begin a series of co-design sessions with teens that will inform the scenario’s storyline.



“Because iThrive co-designs their simulations with teens, the chances of buy-in and impact are exponentially higher than with existing approaches.”

JASON BLAZAKIS
DIRECTOR
CTEC, MIDDLEBURY INSTITUTE



Digitizing the CO₂ Simulation with High Resolves

High Resolves Group came to iThrive with an existing role-playing game called CO₂. Their ask: To weave in social and emotional learning and expand the game’s delivery method into the digital space. The resulting game, CO₂: Global Climate Negotiations, was playtested with dozens of teens whose feedback steered modifications and improvements to the game.



“Our collaboration with iThrive enabled us to retain the deeply engaging feel of the simulation while allowing us to run the simulation remotely online.”

MEHRDAD BAGHAI
CO-FOUNDER & CEO
HIGH RESOLVES GROUP

GAME DESIGN AND SYSTEMS CHANGE

Game Design Studio Toolkit

Games are microcosms of the real world, making play and game design springboards for exploring new ways of doing and being. In 2021, we launched the Game Design Studio Toolkit, a resource for youth-serving organizations and programs that invites teens to connect, reflect, and critically examine the systems they care about and want to change.

Created in partnership with EdTogether, and across five years of inspiring collaboration with teens and adults across the nation, the Game Design Studio Toolkit supports teens in leading systems change. The Toolkit uniquely merges social and emotional learning and design thinking in 50+ activities that support teens in understanding the human needs involved in complex social issues and creating and testing games that prompt new solutions.

Teens have the creativity, expertise, and genius to build and imagine a better world. As they work through the Game Design Studio Toolkit, they nurture and exercise skills essential for individual and collective well-being, embodying the actions and attitudes that support our collective thriving.

“As teens are developing their social and emotional skills, game design gives them an opportunity to reflect on what kinds of changes they want to see in the world, and explore the kind of role they want to play in creating that change.”

BARBARA CHAMBERLIN, PHD
DIRECTOR, GAMES LEARNING LAB AT
NEW MEXICO STATE UNIVERSITY

WARM-UP



EMPATHIZE



DEFINE



IDEATE



PROTOTYPE



TEST



SOCIAL &
EMOTIONAL
LEARNING



DESIGN
THINKING



SOCIAL
JUSTICE

“Game design offers an innovative approach that allows youth to use and develop social and emotional skills while also engaging in activities that require both critical and systems thinking.”

LORA HENDERSON, PHD
CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST & ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
AT THE JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY



“Supporting [young people] to give them the space to assist us as adults who have the connection and have the network can open the doors, and really that’s all we’re doing—we’re opening the doors and helping them to walk through and make those decisions.”

JANELLE RIDLEY, MA

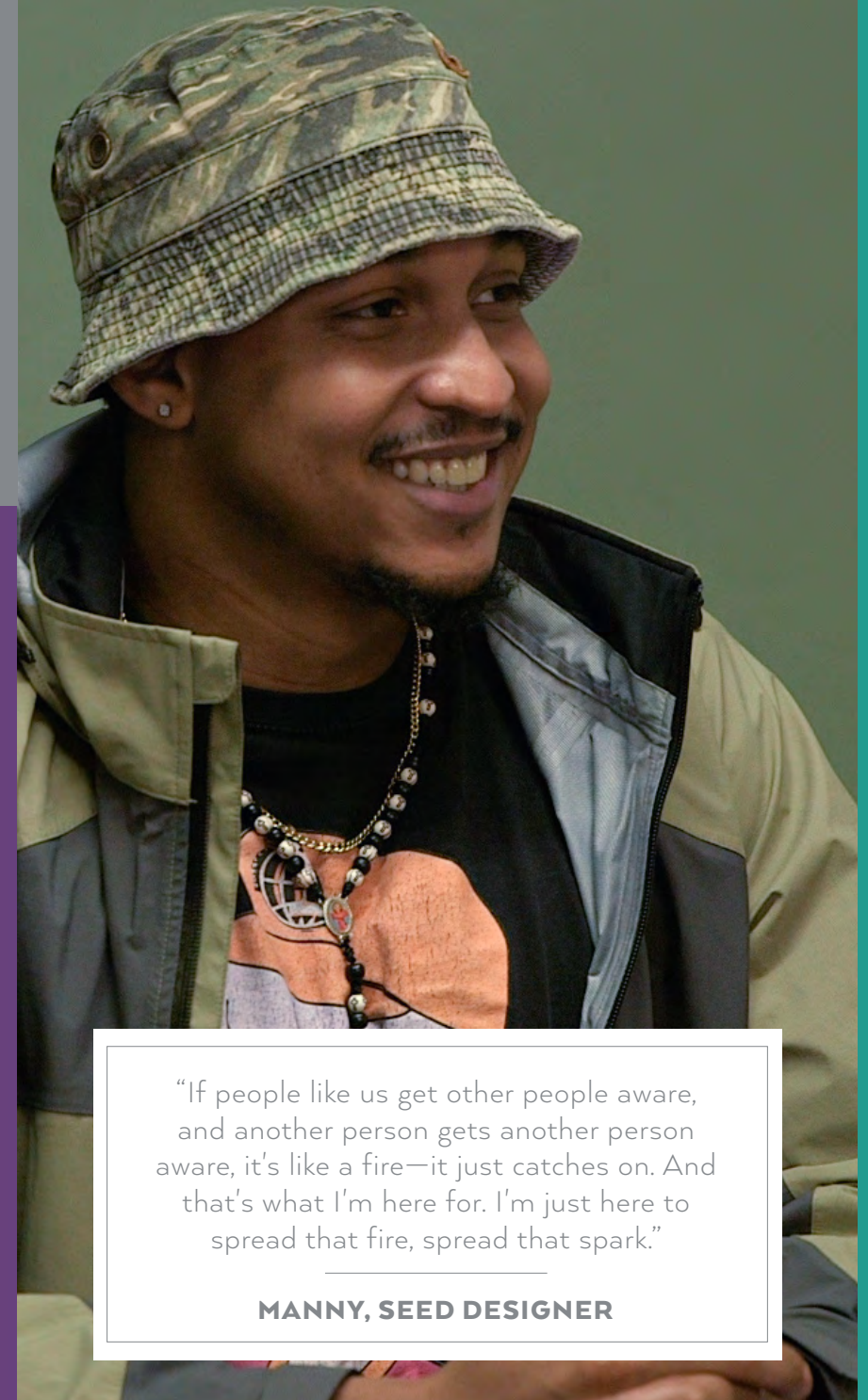
FOUNDER OF TRANSITION HOPE &
DIRECTOR, SEED INSTITUTE

ACTIVATING SYSTEMS CHANGE

SEED Institute

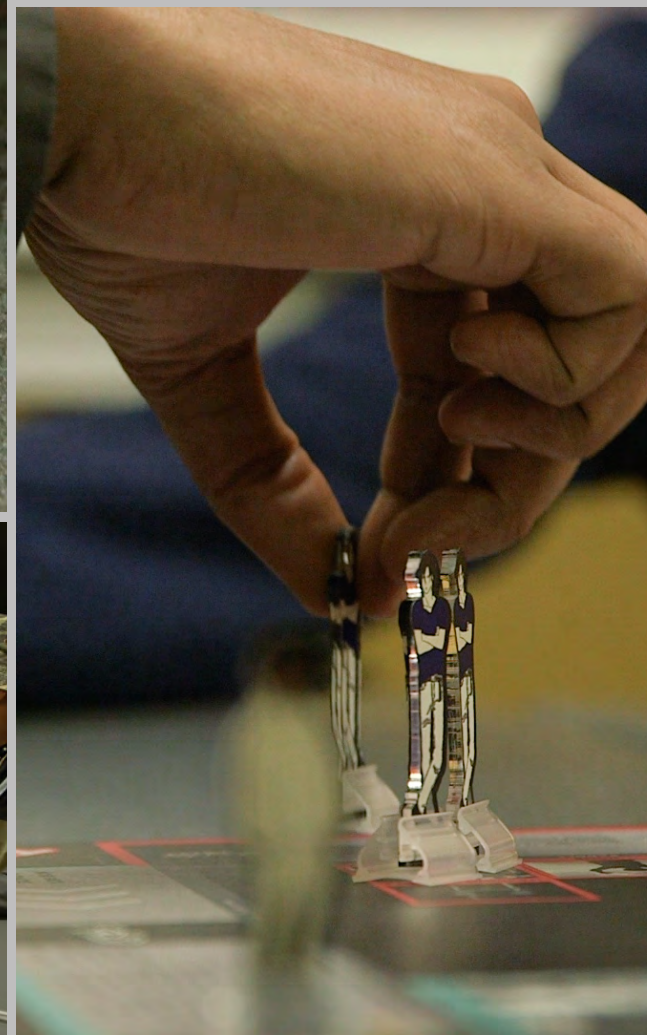
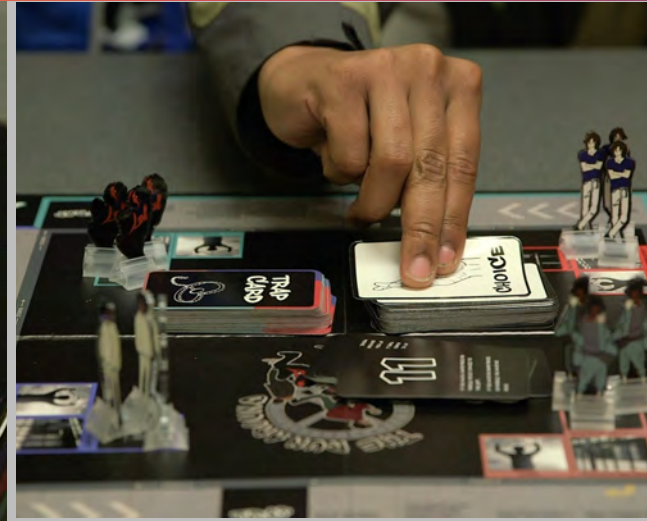
Funded by the DN Batten Foundation, William T. Grant Foundation, Gardiner Howland Shaw Foundation, and the Players Coalition, the SEED Institute amplifies the ‘spark’ inherent in each of the young System Educated Expert Disrupters, or SEEDs, whose lived experiences, perspectives, and creativity are activating systems change in their communities.

A collaborative effort of Transition HOPE, iThrive Games, the Black Ministerial Alliance of Greater Boston (BMA), and the Boston TenPoint Coalition, the SEED Institute works with youth experts through training, courses, and game design workshops developed to mentor them as they work to dismantle systems of oppression. SEED Designers develop games that depict—and engage stakeholders in recognizing and experiencing—the inequities and injustices they have experienced. Countering traditional top-down approaches, the SEED Institute centers youth and invites them to synthesize their experiences into structured games that create safer space for conversations about systems change.



“If people like us get other people aware, and another person gets another person aware, it’s like a fire—it just catches on. And that’s what I’m here for. I’m just here to spread that fire, spread that spark.”

MANNY, SEED DESIGNER



GAME DESIGN AND JUVENILE JUSTICE REFORM

The Run Around

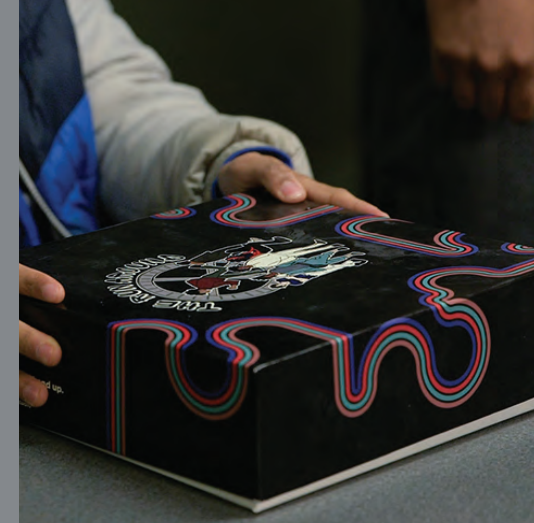
In 2021, youth designers at the SEED Institute released *The Run Around*, a tabletop board game that highlights young people’s lived experiences navigating incarceration and parole. SEED Designers use the game to advocate for interventions that interrupt the harm created by the cradle-to-prison pipeline and support their education, employment, and mental health and wellness needs. Designers facilitate gameplay sessions with educators, social workers, police officers, and other stakeholders in an effort to influence decision-making and dismantle the injustices in the system.

The Run Around won a gold medal in the category of Educational Tabletop Games in the 2021 International Serious Play Awards Program. SEED Designers were invited to present the game at the University of New Hampshire, and were featured in articles published by Lesley University and *The Boston Globe*. In 2022, SEED Designers plan on publishing four new games and continuing to facilitate workshops with stakeholders focused on dismantling systems of inequity and creating new pathways for thriving.

“These aren’t external interventions that people helicopter in and then sort of dump on the community. These are homegrown. These are organic. These are interventions that help people build the resiliency within themselves to be able to make the change that they want to make.”

REV. DAVID WRIGHT, ESQ.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, BLACK MINISTERIAL ALLIANCE OF GREATER BOSTON





GAMES RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Journal of Games, Self, & Society

The Journal of Games, Self, & Society publishes peer-reviewed scholarship on how games, game design, and gameplay contribute to a deeper understanding of learning, health, well-being, and human connection. Scholars and designers across disciplines submit articles, helping the entire field stay up-to-date on the latest research and thinking in this space.

The Journal's third volume, released in 2021, further elevated the research on games and play. The newest volume examines the ways play supports connection in young people at crucial times, highlighting the ways games accompany and ignite transformation in how we understand ourselves, others, and society.

"Volume 3 is published during a critical time where games played an enormous role in society to meet the need of building connection. My hope from insights in this volume is that it inspires readers to reimagine how we integrate games into educational and youth-centered spaces for the purpose of connecting, learning, and collaborating while demonstrating compassion with one another."

CLAUDIA-SANTI F. FERNANDES, EDD, LPC, MCHES, NCC

DEP. DIRECTOR, PLAY2PREVENT LAB AT THE YALE CENTER FOR HEALTH & LEARNING GAMES

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A HEARTFELT THANK YOU

Appreciations and Acknowledgments

With every playtest, with every smile we see on a teen's face when they engage with one of our units or games, with every teacher who says they've never seen a classroom so engaged, we feel a huge wave of appreciation for the funders who make that impact possible.



It takes a community to create lasting change. We are deeply appreciative of our collaborators for co-creating with us.

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