



KAREN SCHRIER



WE THE GAMERS



HOW GAMES TEACH
ETHICS AND CIVICS



We the Gamers

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Karen Schrier

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To my family

To our teachers

To us

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* * *

Right after I turned 18 years old, my parents took me to vote in a local village election. I wasn't too excited at first: it was not a presidential election, or even held in November, but my parents made this minor election a cause for major celebration. So we walked over to the polling place, I voted, and they cheered. I felt like what I was doing mattered, and I have celebrated voting ever since. My hope is that games can help us to feel like practicing civics and ethics is an everyday celebration.

PART I
TEACHING ETHICS AND CIVICS

1

We the People

In 2020, all of the world's citizens were embroiled in a global pandemic. The virus, SARS-CoV-2, quickly spread to all continents, countries, and corners of the Earth. As the numbers of sick people increased daily, the world also started to realize how much we, the people, rely on each other. We depend on each other to stay healthy, or to stay home when not healthy. We depend on each other to make ethical decisions about how to live and work. If we are in a country that allows representative elections, we depend on each other to vote for people who will govern ethically, responsibly, and scientifically. We depend on each other to serve as first responders, essential workers, and caregivers, and to make sure that we are all fed, sheltered, and healed. And we depend on each other to help find answers and repair us—to connect and contribute to solving the world's pressing problems. Whether it is a pandemic or an environmental crisis, we are all in this life together.¹

Yet we also realized that even though we are all human, we are not all participating in humanity equally and equitably. The pandemic further revealed a systemic “survival gap,” where people differentially have access to the means to survive—such as the healthcare, social, and financial opportunities to be protected and safe. Beyond a health crisis, we started to see what was already there—a public in crisis. We collectively saw how systemic economic, social, and cultural chasms, like racism and oppression, were cracking at the façade of a shared, just world. We realized that we are in a values crisis, too.²

Ethics and civics have always mattered. But now, perhaps more than ever before in our lifetime, it is becoming evident how *much* they matter. We realize firsthand how much our decisions and actions affect and are affected by others in the world. Civic participation and ethical decision making have public consequences. What someone does in a mall in Idaho affects someone in a school in Bangalore, India, which affects someone in a church in Lagos, Nigeria, and so on. Who we elect, and how we govern, matters. Not only do we need to learn ethics and civics, but we need to teach each generation, model it for every peer, and share it with our neighbors, families, and faraway friends. Personal responsibility for ethical and civic education is a collective necessity.

Games in the Time of a Coronavirus

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended how we do almost everything—teach, work, play, socialize, connect, give care, and even civically engage. It also upended how the

public thinks about games. In 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) added “gaming disorder” to their list of recognized psychological disorders.³ For years, pundits, parents, and public officials denounced games for a litany of civic problems—such as addiction, gun violence, and more.⁴

It’s surprising what a difference a pandemic can make.

Only one year later, in 2020, media outlets, companies, and social organizations were telling people to stay home and play games, touting playing as if it were an act of good citizenship.⁵ The #PlayApartTogether movement encouraged players to avoid transmitting the virus (and social isolation) by being together virtually through games. And in March 2020, the WHO reversed their previous anti-games stance and backed the #PlayApartTogether movement. While people have always played games, and many teachers have been innovatively using games for teaching, the collective stigma around them started to dissipate.⁶

Moreover, during the pandemic, games were used as virtual civic and social spaces. When people could not be physically together in classrooms, corporate offices, and community centers, teachers and professors held classes through games, colleagues held conferences and meetings through games, friends chatted and interacted through games, and grandparents and grandkids shared time and nonphysical space together through games. People celebrated birthdays and graduations through *Minecraft*, baby showers in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, and weddings in *World of Warcraft*. Games have always been places where people have connected, engaged, expressed themselves, or healed, but they became *the* place.⁷

Games also were communities where civic deliberation, public demonstration, and values sharing took place. People did not only go to the streets—they also went to the games. In 2020, members of the US House of Representatives livestreamed their play of the online imposter game *Among Us* on Twitch, with over 400,000 viewers watching. The US President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris created their own islands in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* to support their election campaign. Gamers mounted demonstrations, rallies, protests, and debates through *The Sims*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Fortnite*, and many other games.

Games have always been places where norms and values are negotiated, and they often have their own unique cultures that players need to learn to be able to fully participate.⁸ But the pandemic helped to ratify this. In the absence of physical civic spaces where ethics and values could be shared, games served as communal spaces where players could navigate the rapidly changing norms of our everyday, public lives. Through games, players were able to think and talk about how we should collectively behave beyond the game, such as whether to wear masks in public. Through games, players could practice these choices before enacting them in the real world. Or, they could enact risky behaviors in the game (like holding social events), which they could not do as safely in the physical world.

There are other ways that people were engaged in gaming during the pandemic. In-person classes were rapidly transformed to hybrid and virtual configurations. Students participated in more distance learning, online courses, and at-home

activities. Simultaneously, educators of all types more frequently assigned and used games to teach. What was once perhaps an in-class bonus or side jaunt became much more central to the curriculum. Games have been used to teach everything from math facts to art history to civic institutions.⁹ But they have now become more frequently adapted and modified to be used at home, virtually, and from a distance to learn, connect, and share. For instance, iCivics, an organization that creates games to teach about civics and the US government, created a remote learning toolkit to support at-home learning.¹⁰

Games themselves also continued to help people to understand and learn about pandemics as well as viruses and their spread.¹¹ *Pandemic* is a board game where players work together playing different roles related to containing a pandemic (e.g., medic, field operative, researcher). The players all play against “the board” to “save humanity” and conquer a viral illness, which rapidly and exponentially jumps from city to city. Leacock, creator of *Pandemic*, wrote that his board game teaches us that the solution to a pandemic is that we all work together “to play to our strengths, balance short-term threats against long-term goals and make sacrifices for the common good. If we can communicate, coordinate and cooperate effectively we might better overcome this uncaring, relentless and frightening opponent.”¹² Likewise, the games *Plague Inc.* and *Plague Inc.: Evolved* are pathogen simulators, where players intentionally spread a virus or other pathogens such as fungi and bacteria. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the *Plague Inc.* developers created a new version of the game that flips this around. In *Plague Inc.: The Cure*, players instead “try to save the world by controlling the global pandemic response,” through mitigating the outbreak, creating a vaccine, and making economic and social policies (see more in chapter 11). Moreover, Lofgren and Fefferman looked at a virtual viral outbreak in the game *World of Warcraft*, which helped them to model epidemiological responses to real-world pandemics. Researchers then used these results to better understand the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³

Games also served as a form of communication, helping to spread information on the coronavirus, and helping us to understand what we should do as a society to collectively solve the problem of its proliferation. The *Washington Post* posted simulations of the spread of the virus to help its audience visualize what would happen if we quarantine people or enforce social distancing: Would it flatten the curve?¹⁴ Likewise, Ahuja, Huang, Kovach, and Woods created simulations of viral spread, and applied it to college classrooms.¹⁵ Salathé and Case created “What Happens Next?,” a series of playable simulations about COVID-19 and its possible epidemiological spread.¹⁶ Kirby took a narrative approach, and used a Twine game to expose what it would feel like as a college student attending class in person in fall 2020.¹⁷ Game players also took collective real-world action, and worked together to try to solve the problem of COVID-19 through games like *Foldit* and *EteRNA*.¹⁸

Games have always mattered and do not need to be legitimized, but the pandemic further showed us that games can serve as publics: as places and communities for learning, for connecting, for problem-solving, and for ethical and civic engagement.

This book acknowledges and observes all the ways that people are *already* engaging in and learning about civics and ethics through games. It explores *how* educators can make the best use of games for teaching ethics and civics, given their limitations and strengths. It shares strategies and examples of using games in educational settings. It also imagines possibilities for how we might use games to reshape, repair, and remake our world, together.¹⁹

Defining Ethics and Civics

The world—and humanity—is messy, and that may be why we need to learn ethics and civics. When we talk about ethics and civics, what do we mean? Ethics are typically associated with the reflective, affective, and cognitive processes related to applying moral principles to choices, decisions, and scenarios. Ethics involves thinking through possibilities and deciding how to act when it comes to questions of “what our guiding ideals should be . . . what sort of life is worth living, [and] how should we treat one another.”²⁰ This is distinct from morals or values, as morals often refer to “universal truths, or public rules or principles,”²¹ while values typically refer to the guidelines on what matters to someone, their family, an organization, or a society.²² This is also different from virtues and character. Character relates to the landscape of who we are, our traits and temperaments, and the attitudes that shape how we act, behave, and make ethical decisions. Virtues are personal traits or qualities that are intrinsically good, like generosity, courage, humility, gratitude, or respect.²³ In this book I focus less on the distinctions among these terms, and more in how we, as educators, can shape and inspire all facets of moral behavior, ethical decision-making, and the development of character. How do we help our students to grow?

Civics relates to governance and how the public participates in governance; it involves understanding how people work together to decide how a society should function. Civic participation includes all different types of necessary—though often unpaid—activities, including volunteer work, community planning, attending town halls, voting, protesting, writing letters to officials, and solving local problems.²⁴ It also relates to day-to-day respect and humility; the care of others; and how we treat our colleagues, neighbors, and community members. It includes all the big and little individual and collective decisions as to how we should live together.

Why put ethics and civics together in the same book? I argue that it is because they are so intertwined. To fully participate in civics, we need to be ethical thinkers and moral arbiters. We need to cultivate moral wisdom, navigate moral complexity, and excavate ethical nuances.²⁵ Likewise, to be living as ethical citizens in a community, we also need to be civically engaged and civically active.

Being a good citizen is not just about having necessary knowledge, “but being able to participate in affecting the policies, societal behaviors, and practices around that knowledge.”²⁶ “Citizen,” however, is a problematic word, and by citizen, I do not mean someone’s legal status or role in a nation. Rather, Muñoz and El-Hani describe

a citizen as someone who thinks “critically about their actions and society’s actions.” To them, “citizenship demands political participation, activism, cultural engagement, that is, the capacity of being a global citizen . . . entails being able to engage in critical dialogue with the past, question authority . . . struggle with power relationships, be active and critical in the interrelated local, national, and global public sphere, be able to recognize antidemocratic forces denying social, economic, and political justice, and to struggle for a better world.”²⁷ Being a citizen requires engagement in our communities and a commitment to making ethical change.²⁸ “Just because we have knowledge and apply it to make real-world changes does not mean we know how to use it wisely, ethically, or appropriately.” We need both knowledge and wisdom, civics and ethics, together, to traverse the messiness of humanity.²⁹

That said, perhaps what we really need to describe this is not a noun, but a verb.³⁰ Is someone a “good citizen,” or do they practice it? Davisson and Gehm explain that to act as a citizen is not just to embody the identity of a citizen, but to be part of a body politic acting as a citizen. “To citizen” is an act of bravery, an ongoing struggle, and a critical dialogue with the complexity of humanity. To citizen is a process we do together to repair our world.³¹

Moreover, to citizen is to live our fullest life, individually and collectively. The Jubilee Centre explains that our ultimate goal as educators is “human flourishing, [which] requires the acquisition and development of intellectual, moral, and civic virtues . . . to achieve the highest potential in life.” We want our students to live their best life—to contribute to the good of their own lives, while also contributing to the good of society. In East Africa they use the word *Utu*, which means “humanity and moral goodness” in Swahili. As educators, how do we encourage our children to embody the concept of *Utu*?³² How do we inspire our students to flourish?³³

Yet in the past few decades, the skills and topic areas related to civics and ethics have not been prioritized in US schools, and are often squeezed out. Only 39 US states require students to take a class in government or civics to graduate from high school. Globally, while ethics education programs exist in over 43 countries, most do not have any national, institutional, or systemic support.³⁴

In the United States, compared to what is necessary for an engaged citizenry,

1. civic knowledge and skills are low;
2. access to civic knowledge and skills is inequitable;
3. people are not civically engaged enough;
4. access to civic engagement is inequitable;
5. political divides and distrust have grown;
6. disinformation has increased; and
7. harassment and hate have been rising.³⁵

So what can we do? How do we help people become ethical thinkers and learn the “knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experience to . . . be an active, informed participant in democratic life?”³⁶ How do games support or hinder this?

This book is for those who want to teach people to flourish, to grow, to connect, and “to citizen”—with games.

What Are Games?

The world—and humanity—is messy, and that may be why we need games.

First, what is a game? Typically, games are described as having a number of characteristics: goals, and actions that players can take to reach goals, and players, as well as a tacit agreement from players that they are playing a game, where the differential outcomes of that game matter. The definitions and uses of games vary tremendously, however. Games have been labeled as tools, media, experiences, art, and systems. They come in all different genres and styles, shapes, sizes, communities, and platforms. In this book I discuss augmented reality (AR) games, which are games that integrate virtual gameplay such as virtual objects, clues, or characters, with real-world locations, interactions, and people. I also look at analog (nondigital) games such as card games, board games, and larps (live action role-playing games). I talk about virtual reality (VR) games, in which the whole experience is virtual, the players’ entire visual field is virtually generated, and the players are interacting with virtual objects, people, and locations (though some VR games may incorporate players who are not virtually participating). I also investigate digital and online games, which are games that are played using personal computers, mobile devices, game consoles, internet browsers, livestreaming platforms, or other connected devices or platforms.³⁷

These games can come in all different genres, such as adventure, puzzle, first-person shooter, battle royale, or walking simulator. They can involve one person playing by themselves in their home or multiple people playing across many different locations around the world. They may be played only in a specific location, such as Lexington, Massachusetts in the United States or Karachi in Pakistan. Or they might be played anywhere, with any type of object that is available to the players.

Moreover, all different types of games are being played by all different people.³⁸ The latest Entertainment Software Association (ESA) statistics on game-playing explains that 75% of Americans have at least one gamer in their home, and that 57% of parents say they play video games with their kids at least once per week.³⁹ Since the COVID-19 pandemic, game-playing has increased even further. A report from Unity explains that there was a 46% increase in daily active users of PC and consoles and a 17% increase in mobile device use. Mobile game installations increased 84%. Video game spending overall rose 22% from 2019 to 2020.⁴⁰

Games and Learning

Games are also being used for teaching and learning. Games are being used in remote and physical classrooms, museums, libraries, after-school programs, and other

learning environments, including the home.⁴¹ Educators are using games to teach, with 74% of K-8 educators using games at some point in their teaching and 55% of teachers using games at least once per week.⁴² Games are also being designed with the intention of supporting learning in some way—whether to teach addition and subtraction, like *DragonBox Numbers*, or to teach Arabic letters, such as *Antura and the Letters*. While the mainstream games industry was at about \$43.4 billion in 2018,⁴³ the educational games, game-based learning, or “serious games” industry is predicted to reach \$24 billion by 2024 globally, and is growing in the double digits in many regions around the world, including Africa.⁴⁴

Just as games come in many different forms and formats, there are many terms that have been used to describe their different pedagogic functions. Games that aim to teach have been called “educational games,” “games for change,” “games for social impact,” and “serious games.”⁴⁵ The intersection of games and learning typically describes teaching, instruction, and learning environments that incorporate games or playful experiences into the classroom, school, library, home, or other location. A game could even become a classroom itself, where students can meet virtually to create and experiment, or discuss and deliberate (such as when teachers hold a class in *Minecraft*). However, I am less interested in choosing the right term to describe these games and more in their possibilities. What are the circumstances where games are more or less effective? How can we reconceive what games can do (or already do)?⁴⁶ For the purposes of brevity, I will call all of these types of tools, media, art, or experiences “games,” whether they are digital or nondigital, VR or AR, or fully realized or not-quite games.

Just because games are frequently used does not mean they are effective in doing what we want them to do, such as teaching skills, attitudes, behaviors, or content. So are games even beneficial for learning? Thus far, the research on whether games are suitable for education and actually enhance learning is often contradictory or inconsistent, though the potential of games has been cited frequently.⁴⁷ Frustratingly, large-scale empirical studies cannot definitively prove that games support learning. Civics games are also uneven in their effectiveness.⁴⁸ This is not surprising, however, because the success of any learning experience is highly complex and relies on its design, its audience and context, and how it is implemented or its ecology of use.⁴⁹ The same worksheet might work well with one class section in the morning, but not with the one in the late afternoon. A film may connect with one set of fifth graders in a district but not in a neighboring one, and a book reading could fall flat with a kindergarten cohort and then, reshared the following year, elicit laughs and excitement. Empirical studies on games, as well as anecdotal evidence, suggest that under certain circumstances, with particular audiences, and by meeting specific learning goals and needs, games can be quite effective and meaningful. A study by Clark et al. that was a large-scale meta-analysis of research on game-based learning, suggested that digital games can enhance cognitive learning outcomes as compared to a nongame condition, and that the “design of the game, rather than the medium of ‘games’ itself, was more important to whether the environment supported learning.”⁵⁰ Depending on

how they are designed or used, games can be beneficial and empowering at best, or they can be a waste of time and may even backfire, at worst. Games are a bit messy when it comes to learning.⁵¹

What Are Games for Civics and Ethics?

So what do I mean by games for ethics and civics?

Raphael et al. explain that games for learning civics “help players to develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions that players then apply to public matters in the world outside the game.”⁵² We could add ethics to this definition and say that these games help to support the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for ethical, public, and societal matters.⁵³

Games that teach ethics and civics can vary tremendously, from acting like the “President of the United States in iCivics’ *Executive Command* to understanding what it’s like to be the parent of a terminally ill young son in *That Dragon, Cancer*.”⁵⁴ Sometimes a game is the primary part of a classroom lesson, such as deliberating and voting on historic proposals in *VoxPop*, or collaboratively crafting a historical building like the Taj Mahal in *Minecraft*.⁵⁵ Other times games may be played to support further deliberation, such as using the game *Immigration Nation* to kick off a discussion on immigration, or the digital game *Acceptance* to reflect on gender expression, identity, and belongingness.⁵⁶ Civics and ethics games could involve playing a simple rhyming game in a preschool or be “as complex as transforming an entire class module into an alternate reality game (ARG), such as Darvasi did to teach *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* for his English literature students.”⁵⁷ These games may aim to make real-world change in one’s community, such as *Macon Money* or *Participatory Chinatown*.⁵⁸ They can also take place in real-world locations, such as *Pokémon Go*, *Time Trek*, or *Jewish Time Jump*.⁵⁹ They could be raw, unpolished games made in one night by one person (such as Kirby’s *September 7, 2020 Twine* game), or multimillion dollar games made and updated over the course of many years (such as *Fortnite*, *Overwatch*, or *World of Warcraft*).

There are a number of ways that games can share and express civics and ethics topics and enable the practice of relevant skills:

1. **Real-world knowledge and action.** Games can enhance knowledge of real-world issues and topics; encourage the understanding of real-world concepts, institutions, processes, and policies; and enable real-world action and change. For instance, in Abbott’s high school civics course at a public school in North Carolina, she teaches concepts such as the US government’s three branches and the Bill of Rights. To provide foundational knowledge she may use the iCivics game *Do I Have a Right*, in which players run their own law firm and decide whether to take on a client who may have had a constitutional right violated. Or she may have students learn about real-world concepts like the US Electoral



Figure 1.1 An image from the game *Win the White House*. Source: iCivics.

College through games such as *Win the White House*, where players campaign to win a fictional US presidential election (see Figure 1.1).⁶⁰

2. **Community and connection.** Games are civic communities. They can help to strengthen social interactions, communication, and a sense of belongingness in a community of learners. They can help people to better understand themselves, their identities, and their roles as members of a society as well as to respect, empathize with, and have compassion for others.⁶¹ (Just like all communities, however, they can also do the opposite and foster hate, harassment, bullying, exclusion, and toxicity.) Games like *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* can encourage community among people who are physically distanced from each other. Games may also support an in-class community more deliberately, like in *VoxPop*, where players work together to discuss and negotiate different proposals, views, and values. Moreover, games themselves are forms of human expression and as such can communicate a perspective on humanity, such as *SweetXheart*, which tells of a Black woman's experiences (see Figure 1.2), or *A Woman Goes to a Private Games Industry Party*, which expresses perspectives on harassment in the game development community.⁶²
3. **Critical thinking and critical inquiry.** Games are ethical systems, and players are moral actors who engage in them. Games can help people practice

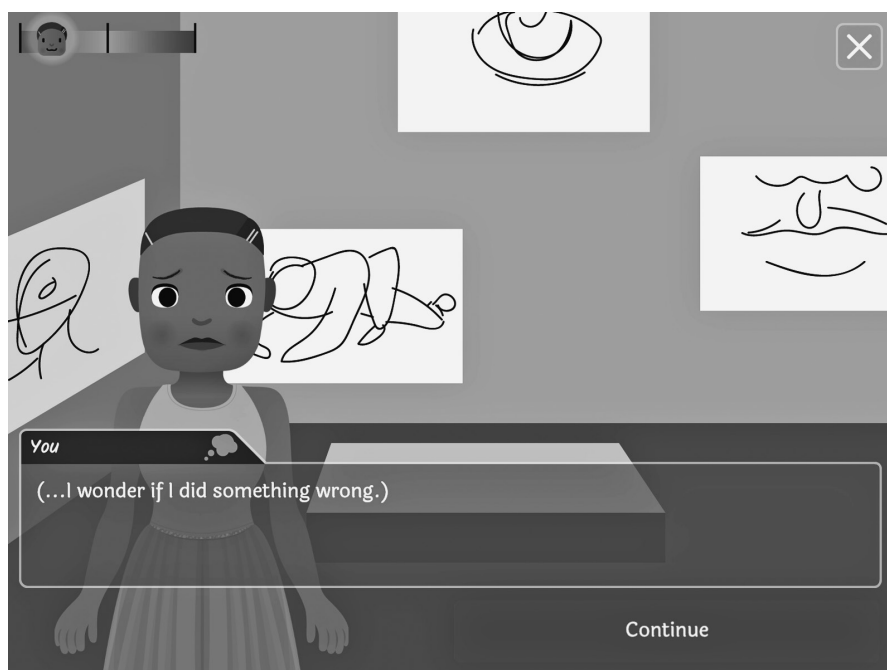


Figure 1.2 An image from the game *SweetXHeart*. Image courtesy of Catt Small.

relevant critical thinking and inquiry skills such as reasoning, decision-making, problem-solving, systems thinking and analysis, interpretation, evaluation, information gathering, and design and creation. They can pose problems and quests or act like morality tales and ethical case studies, where the player can enact part of the story to help them practice making decisions or analyzing outcomes.⁶³ For instance, in *Planet Planners*, a mobile ecology simulation game,⁶⁴ players practice resource management skills; in *Max*, a board game about helping creatures avoid a hungry kitty, kids learn how to collaboratively make decisions. The online digital games *Bad News* and *Harmony Square* seek to teach players how to identify disinformation and political manipulation techniques. Games can also serve as arguments about the world by enabling players to interact with systems, such as how we might learn about the oppressiveness of bureaucracy through *Papers, Please* or of systemic bias in *Parable of the Polygons*.⁶⁵

Games have been and can continue to be used for all different parts of ethics and civics education.⁶⁶ To further give you a sense of the breadth and variety of the types of games that could be used, here are some brief examples of how games can be included in the classroom, after-school program, home, remote learning environment, or other educational context.

- In *Factitious*, a mobile and browser-based game, players decide if an article is “authentic” and based on vetted facts and interviews, or “fake” and based on made-up quotations, misinformation, or satire. Teachers can use the game to foster information literacy skills, such as reading articles, checking sources, and vetting facts.
- The VR game *Along the River of Spacetime* helps to express and communicate Anishinaabeg teachings and cultural practices related to ecology, space, and the environment (see Figure 1.3). Teachers can use the game to share Indigenous perspectives on land and place.⁶⁷
- In *Buffalo*, a card game, players need to name characters or people who match combinations of characteristics. There is an orange deck (made up of adjectives) and a blue deck (with nouns). Players flip over one of each and have to come up with any type of figure who matches the two words. The game was designed to help players become more aware of their biases and prejudices.⁶⁸
- *Quandary*, an online and mobile digital game, invites players to decide the best solutions to problems faced by a new society, Braxos. Players need to solicit input from Braxos citizens, mount arguments, weigh pros and cons,



Figure 1.3 An image from the game *Along the River of Spacetime*. Image courtesy of Elizabeth (Beth) LaPensée.

and iterate through choices and consequences to make the best decisions. Teachers can use this to support ethical decision-making, such as holding an in-class deliberation around the strategies and tactics used in the game. “They can also extend the lessons of *Quandary* to real-life dilemmas suggested by students.”

- In *The Migrant Trail*, a browser-based game, players take on the roles of two different sides of an immigration issue. They play as a migrant who is trying to cross the border and escape the border patrol officers. Or they play as a border control agent, who is trying to find the illegal immigrants. Teachers can use this game to show multiple perspectives on an issue, and to help students explore the complexities of representing an issue like immigration through games.⁶⁹
- Using a series of plastic (about 8 feet by 8 feet) floor games in Indian community workshops, researcher Khanna teaches issues such as electoral literacy or child rights to different audiences.⁷⁰
- In the VR game *Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes*, players must defuse a virtual bomb. One player has the virtual headset and can see the virtual bomb, along with some tools. The other set of players has a manual but no access to the bomb, and needs to communicate with the VR headset-wearing player to figure out how to defuse the bomb before time runs out. Teachers can use this to support collaboration and dialogue, as well as cooperative problem-solving under pressure.⁷¹
- In the short indie digital game *Loneliness*, players move a white square piece toward other squares, and the other squares move away. Though the game is brief, players can discuss how emotion can be evoked by a game, even a game that is abstract and simple.
- In *Mission US*, players take on the role of a fictional adolescent and explore a historic moment, while making decisions for them, going on missions, and completing goals. In the *Mission US: City of Immigrants* module they play as Lena Brodsky, a Jewish immigrant who just arrived in New York City at the turn of the twentieth century.⁷²
- In the online multiplayer game *Among Us*, a group of players needs to figure out who the imposter(s) are and collectively vote to remove them from the game before the imposter(s) eliminate them instead. Students could use this game to practice communication and deliberation, and to reflect on the ethics of deciding which fellow players to eject from the game.
- *Time Trek* is a series of augmented reality (AR) games played at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, a US Civil War site (see Figure 1.4). In these games players explore the physical site while interacting with virtual historic and fictional characters. They learn about personal struggles and stories related to enslavement and emancipation, and meet characters such as Joseph, a free Black person who is helping runaway slaves escape on a ferry he operates.⁷³



Figure 1.4 An image of people playing *Time Trek*, a mobile game that takes place at the Harper’s Ferry landmark in West Virginia in the United States. Image courtesy of Avery Chenoweth and Laura Gillespie.

What to Expect

This is a book about games, and it is a book about learning. Yet I am not trying to argue that games *should* be used for educational purposes. Games are not universally bad, nor always good, at teaching ethics and civics. This book is not going to laud games as the panacea, nor is it going to only point out their problems. And just because something is a game does not necessarily make them fun nor functional.

The reality is much more nuanced. Rather, I will question games and consider the circumstances under which they may help us to better engage with, support, and inspire each other. I will cheerlead for games, but I will also problematize them by pointing out their limitations, weaknesses, ethical challenges, and idiosyncrasies.⁷⁴ I will assert that they are often awkward worlds that embed in them their designers’ and players’ own biases, prejudices, heuristics, and assumptions. I will help to reveal how games matter.

First, games should not be used just because they are trendy or popular, or because they worked for one kid, one class, or one educational context. A game is complex and needs to be adapted, played, and evaluated with consideration to the complexity of

the ecosystem of its use. Games need to be played with the care of the community in mind. Games are not standalone, one-stop-shopping solutions. Games, like people, are messy.

Second, games should not be used just to show kids how to do civics or how to be civically engaged. Rather, they should also be used to show *us* what civics *is*.

When discussing the use of hip hop in education, Bettina Love aptly argues that teachers do not need to bring hip hop into the classroom so that students can be creative—instead, we should include hip hop to “show [us] how creative kids already are.” Love explains that “hip hop is civics, hip hop is social justice, hip hop is creativity.”⁷⁵ This argument inspires my understanding of games. Games are civics, and civics is playful. Games are how students are already engaging with the world and with the public. Through games, students are designing, discovering, and deliberating. Through games, students are grappling with what it means to be human and with what it means to govern as a society. Through games, students are already “citizenizing.”

Mirra and Garcia argue that when we are defining civic participation, we cannot just use adult perspectives on what youth *should* be doing as “civic agents,” but also “asking young people what actually engages them or what kinds of civic learning opportunities they may already be experiencing.”⁷⁶ As Coleman-Mortley notes, “we need to reach kids where they are.”⁷⁷ Games have always been civic spaces for youth.⁷⁸ We need, as Mirra and Garcia contend, to further enable the “kinds of civic learning that youth are already doing in online games like *Minecraft* . . . leading to new disruptions of old civics.”⁷⁹

Third, games should not be used just because they may be effective or productive at making “good citizens.” Rather, we need to reconsider what it means to learn civics and ethics. Is it just about being proficient on tests and doing good deeds? Is it just about maintaining civility and upholding our institutions? Or, is it also about redesigning and reenvisioning our world and its systems? Is it about questioning what it means to citizen?⁸⁰

What, then, is the value in games? In my previous book, I wrote about what I call “knowledge games,” or games that aim to collectively solve real problems and build new knowledge about humanity through the play of the game.⁸¹ I explain that knowledge games can help us struggle with the world’s problems—to make a better world not necessarily by *solving* these real-world problems, but by revealing them and helping us to see their flaws, foibles, and messiness. Or, as Bogost explains, playing games is the work, the hard stuff, of maybe not coming up with solutions but perhaps instead “troubling the idea of solutions rather than leading us toward them.”⁸² I explained that these knowledge games bring up age-old questions about what it means to be a good citizen, to participate in society, and to create new knowledge—questions that we may never entirely answer, but perhaps we can more fully address through games.

Bernard Suits describes play as the ultimate human act, or as a “voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.”⁸³ Perhaps this is one of the greatest possibilities for games. Games may help us to collectively overcome the unnecessary obstacles of life, and the unnecessary problems in our publics, by helping us to better see all of our

messiness. Who is allowed to be in the game's civic spaces, and how can they engage? Who is included and who is empowered? Who is allowed or invited "to citizen?"⁸⁴ Games may help to reveal obstacles to ethics and civics—and may show us how to overcome them. Games may help to reveal who we are, and maybe how to reimagine who we can become. This is where I situate this book: as a call to use games not necessarily to "make citizens," but to reveal citizens.

What if games don't just allow us to participate in civics and ethics? What if we *need* games to citizen, or to "overcome the unnecessary obstacles" that exist in our world?⁸⁵

We should readjust what we expect of games and what we ask of teaching and learning. Teaching becomes not just about imparting facts and figures, but about helping students to connect with themselves and each other to overcome the obstacles that society has placed on us, so that we can live together more equitably.⁸⁶ Education becomes not about reinforcing social hierarchies about who should contribute and participate in the public, but about liberating them, and empowering the contributions of all. Playing becomes not about exclusion, but about ensuring we all belong so that we can rebuild our world together. And games, then, become about engaging our follies so we shall overcome.⁸⁷

As I mentioned earlier, Raphael et al. argue that civic learning happens in games "when they help players to . . . apply [it] to public matters in the world outside the game."⁸⁸ Dishon and Kafai take this definition further, arguing that games should be seen as part of a learning ecosystem, with players viewed as active and cocreative participants rather than passive consumers of a predesigned, single-purpose product. They explain that we need "connected civic games," which include youth as active makers and remixers of civics, through games and play. As Dishon and Kafai argue, we need to reframe our expectations of learning in games and think about how to "enrich the spectrum of experiences players have in-and-out of games."⁸⁹

I would adjust the definition even more. As I have started to explore, playing helps us to struggle, to wonder, to grapple, to dance, and to act. Playing helps us to overcome. Gamers engage in civics and ethics outside and beyond the game—but also inside, through, around, and between. Games, and our play of them, are part of an active conversation with the world. Games are public spheres and public matters. Games are publics. They are communities where deliberation, civic engagement, ethical decision-making, socialization and norm-sharing, and civic problem-solving take place.⁹⁰ Games are part of who we are and how we learn about the world—and how we decide the type of world in which to live. To play games *is* to citizen.

How can we, as teachers, help to empower our students to citizen in, around, and with games—equitably, and with justice for all?

Mapping the Book

With all this in mind, as teachers, we want to help our students make the most of their play. We need to meet specific educational objectives. In this book, I show teachers

how to meet standards and curricular needs, and I provide practical advice, strategies, and examples for how to use games to explore the nuances and complexities of life. I delve into the research-based possibilities for empowerment and inspiration, as well as the limitations, complexities, and complications of games (which also serve as learning opportunities). This book will answer questions such as: How do games support the learning of ethical and civic skills—which games may be notable and under what conditions?⁹¹ What types of classroom configurations and activities best support play and engagement with civics and ethics? What are the current limitations and gaps of games, and how do we wrestle with these limitations?⁹² This book aims to point out the messiness of games so teachers can help students better navigate it.

To do this, in part 1, I first investigate why we need to learn ethics and civics. I then describe the types of skills, concepts, and knowledge needed for civic, public, and ethical engagement. I create a three-part set of nine driving questions for teaching ethics and civics, derived from an analysis of current standards.

In part 2, I dive into the first set of questions, which relates to using games to build real-world knowledge and to take real-world action.

In part 3, I look into the second set of questions, and consider how games may or may not support community and connection, as well as how they may encourage the practice of skills related to identity, emotion, respect, cultural humility, perspective-taking, compassion, and empathy.

In part 4, I look at questions related to critical thinking and critical inquiry. For instance, how may games help us to practice skills such as making decisions, solving problems, analyzing information, engaging in design, and thinking systemically?

In part 5, I consider logistical and practical considerations for bringing games into the classroom and other learning environments, such as online and remote ones. I delve into curricular considerations, such as how to choose the right game, how to develop activities around games, and how to handle the logistical and practical aspects of using games in a classroom or educational context. An appendix also shares information on designing games, as well as design principles and best practices for making and using games for civics and ethics.

Finally, in the concluding chapter of this book, I imagine the future of learning ethics and civics through games—and also the future of humanity, more broadly. How might we shape our future through games?

Why Should We Teach Ethics and Civics?

Global catastrophe. Systemic oppression. Crisis. Destruction. Turmoil. We can imagine a world where ethics and civics are not taught nor valued. In fact, many of us have lived in and experienced the consequences of such a world, first-hand. Yet, ethics and civics education is lacking.¹

The United States went from having three civics-centered courses in the mid-twentieth century to just one for most students today—if that. And many US high schools will teach that one course in 12th grade (the final year), which means that many students may never stay in school long enough to reach the class.² Moreover, only three states in the United States require middle schools to include a separate civics class in their state standards,³ and only nine states require that a student pass a social studies-related test to be able to graduate from high school.⁴

What about younger US students? Due in part to an increasing focus on reading and math, as well as other STEM fields, 80% of elementary school teachers have acknowledged making less room for social studies. As a result, only around 7% of total instruction in elementary schools is spent on social studies as a whole, which includes history, geography, cultural studies, sociology, psychology, civics, and ethics. Weekly time spent on social studies for US students in grades one to six went from three hours in 1999–2000 to 2.6 hours in 2003–04.⁵

Across the world, interest in and implementation of civics education has varied widely, country by country. In Romania, for instance, few civics education initiatives were implemented, but there were also barriers to cultural and political acceptance of these initiatives. In Poland, civics education was made a prime initiative, and the country took steps such as including a course in civics, teacher training, and teacher materials, as well as government programs for adults.⁶ In a study of 21 countries (including Afghanistan, India, Ireland, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Guatemala, and Ecuador), the results suggested that around half of the country's governments were receptive to building civic education programs. Nigeria's and Burkina Faso's governments were particularly open to civics education.⁷

What about ethics education? It fares even worse. Ethics teaching may exist in a number of countries, but it's typically not formalized, and quite precarious—and it varies widely school to school or setting to setting.⁸ In the United States, there are no state or national standards for ethics.⁹ Ethics and character education often get shoehorned into social studies, history, or even home economics courses, without fully being seen as a discipline in its own right. Some students may not get any ethics content until they reach college—or they may never get it.

Only around seven US states actually assess civics as part of the state accountability measures, which means it may never ever get taught as it is not tied to quantifiable results or funding. No US state tests ethics, character, or ethical thinking.¹⁰ If you don't test something, it doesn't matter, and if it isn't valued, it's not learned, developed, or practiced.

And look at the results.

Former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor explains, "Only one-third of Americans can name the three branches of government, but two-thirds can name a judge on American Idol."¹¹

People have lost trust in government, and in each other.¹² Civic participation is low, with low volunteerism, especially among youth.¹³

Access to civic participation is also inequitable, particularly for communities of color, working class adults, and low-income students.¹⁴

An international study of civics knowledge found that no country's 14-year-olds scored high on all factors, and that in some countries young people seemed disinterested in and even systemically unable to participate in civic engagement.¹⁵

Yet historically, civics is part of why we started public schools in the first place.¹⁶ We are all part of the public—so we need to practice being public participants. As O'Connor explains, "We started public schools in [the United States] with the thought that we had to teach ... people about our system of government ... it's complicated and it requires citizen participation."¹⁷

Flash forward to today. We need to prepare people for civic life by directly engaging people in it. Schools do not just serve the public, they create a public who can participate meaningfully with "civic competence," or "the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for active and engaged civic life."¹⁸ Moreover, civics education *can* make a difference in building civic competence, and can raise civics learning test scores and enhance civic participation.¹⁹ But beyond lifting scores, education can lift people so that they can *citizen*. Learning can help to lift the fears and obstacles that contribute to the inequities in civic participation and in public life.

On paper, civics and ethics education should be seen as important—even essential—but we seem to overlook it as a priority. It becomes an afterthought rather than the central mission of schools. This goes beyond the United States or any one country. We, the people of the world, all need civics and ethics to fully participate in the public life of the world.

In this chapter I delve further into why empowering people with ethics and civics is so important. Why is developing civic and ethics skills and knowledge so necessary—and why are they particularly beneficial to teach *now*?

We Are a "We"

It's not enough for us to individually practice ethics and be civically engaged—we also need everyone else to be engaged. We are all part of the public.

Our votes, values, and voices have *always* mattered, but perhaps now more than ever, it is becoming evident how *much* they matter. The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare our collective humanity and our shared systemic inhumanities. It helped us to realize that our actions and decisions affect others and have civic and ethical consequences not only for our neighbors and local communities, but even for people across the whole world. We saw first-hand, on a large scale, how much our individual and collective decisions count.²⁰ Yes, we are all in this world together—not equitably—but interdependently, in that we all need to speak up together, engage in dialogue, listen, learn, and teach to make the world better for humanity.

In the United States, for instance, people rely on each other to participate, be informed, and make well-reasoned decisions.²¹ O'Connor explains that “our citizens need to be educated to analyze things, to make reasoned opinions, to express themselves, how to get through the political process. . . . How do you choose responsible leaders, how do you participate if citizens don’t understand the system at all?”²² However, we cannot just be engaged as citizens of a nation—we also need to be together as citizens of a world. We need to feel connected amid rising loneliness and isolation.²³ We need to think, care, teach, learn, and civically engage across borders. Students are “living in an increasingly interconnected world” and need global perspectives.²⁴ We need to figure out with each other how to behave, collectively, as a human society.²⁵

Moreover, engagement in civics and ethics may also help us to feel more like we are a “we,” which contributes to our well-being and feeling of belongingness. The more a person participates in their community the more connected they may feel, the more actively involved they may become, and so forth. Well-being has even been found to be enhanced in places where people are more able to be engaged in the community and the democratic process, and as a result, are more actively involved.²⁶

We Live in a Diverse World

While we are one global community, we are also participants in many different types of communities, each with their own rules, norms, and challenges. A virtual classroom community may be different from a physical one. How a local group meets on Facebook may be different from how it meets in person or through Zoom. Moreover, with connective platforms such as games or social media, we may be constantly interacting with people across the globe and jumping from one micro-community to another.²⁷

Thus, we need to be able to fluidly navigate different types of communities—whether offline or online, in school, at work, in our neighborhoods, or in our peer groups. We need to be globally savvy and aware of the changing norms, values, and participatory modes of the different communities we may weave in and out of.²⁸ We

need to be able to understand how to take civic action in our local communities and our countries, our online realms and our virtual publics, as well as how to connect with others across the world to make global change.²⁹

We Need to Prepare for the Future

The skills necessary for civic engagement and ethical thinking are important for responsible participation in civic life, but also for success in other domains, online, offline, in school, and in the workplace more generally. The National Council for the Social Studies's C3 framework explains that "many of the same skills that are needed for active and responsible citizenship—working effectively with other people, deliberating and reasoning quantitatively about issues, following the news, and forming and sustaining groups—are also crucial to success in the 21st century workplace and in college."³⁰ The Education Commission of the States talks about the 4 Cs—critical thinking, communication, creativity, and collaboration—which are taught through civics and ethics education, and also prepare students for career and life success.³¹ Moreover, the skills that companies are looking for are ones that are developed, in part, by ethics and civics education. For instance, at a meeting at my kids' school district, the principal projected a list of the top skills desired by companies based on the World Economic Forum's list, and they included things like problem-solving, critical thinking, systems thinking, and judgment and decision-making.³² Learning ethics and civics is essential for the future.

We Can Enhance Humanity

We need ethical thinkers and deliberators, action-takers, and decision-makers. We need people who can engage in informed, reasoned discourse, who seek out others' views and opinions, and who know how to navigate different types of communities, values, and norms. We need people who can help to solve the everyday problems of civic life, as well as the larger problems of global concern. Learning civics and ethics is its own reward.

But we also need to teach ethics and civics in tandem with other fields, and to show how they are foundational to all pursuits and questions. We cannot teach computer science, business, chemistry, or art without also thinking about their ethical implications, such as how data is collected or interpreted, how algorithms are programmed, how ideas are represented, or how knowledge is inequitably accessed.³³ The pendulum is starting to swing back another way, in that social studies is beginning to be reprioritized as a discipline, but civics and ethics should not be taught in isolation from other fields.³⁴

We Can Raise Proficiency in Knowledge and Skills

Historically, one of the main purposes of school, at least in the United States, has been to teach civic engagement and prepare future citizens.³⁵ Yet proficiency in civics and ethics is lacking among youth. Only 23% of eighth graders in the United States are at the proficient level on a test of civic skills and knowledge (the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) civic assessment).³⁶ Students from top colleges also do poorly. Eighty percent of college senior students from the top 55 American colleges and universities scored a D or F on a test of civic and history-related knowledge. And this was only 13% higher than those students who had a high school diploma as their highest earned degree.³⁷ O'Connor explains that "Less than 1/5 of high school seniors can explain how civic participation benefits our system of government. Less than that can say what the purpose of the Declaration of Independence is (and it's right there in the title)."³⁸

Likewise, in an ongoing, cyclical study of civics (the IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) Civic Education Study), students are tested on their civic knowledge, support for democratic values, support for government, and participation in civics-related activities. Researchers found that none of the 14-year-olds in any of the countries that give this test scored high on all of these factors.³⁹ Moreover, in some countries, students reported that they were not likely to vote, nor engage in civics more generally. They also had major gaps in knowledge, and did not have the social, educational, and institutional support necessary to civically engage.⁴⁰ Researchers reviewed the curricula across these countries and found that while they typically included the country's history, human rights, and discussion of issues and concerns, "civics education generally had a low, sometimes precarious, status in schools, with many teachers reporting a lack of materials and limited training."⁴¹

What about ethics knowledge and skills? While it is difficult to create a standardized test of ethics behavior, and specific tests of ethical thinking and decision-making are rare in K-12 in the United States, studies have suggested that students are increasing in unethical behavior, such as cheating on schoolwork, paper-writing, and tests, as well as in incivility online.⁴² However, we should not conflate the practice of ethical thinking skills with what may be the changing norms and values of a society—and a possible moral panic about what is happening with kids and media. We should also not only look at test scores to understand proficiency in civics and ethics.⁴³

We Can Enhance Civic Engagement

Civic engagement and participation vary greatly in different countries, depending on their rules and regulations, government systems, and culture. In the United States,

citizens who are 18 or over are allowed to vote, yet youth aged 18–24 are typically less likely to vote than any other age demographic. Only around 46% of youth 18–29 voted in the 2016 US presidential election, and only 21% and 31% participated in the 2014 and 2018 midterm elections, respectively,⁴⁴ with even lower participation rates in other types of civic activities, such as town hall events or meetings.⁴⁵ (However, youth voting rates increased from 2016, with an estimated 52–55% of eligible voters 18–29 voting in the 2020 US election). Moreover, civic engagement is generally low across the world. Youth are not as involved in community service and volunteering.⁴⁶ Overall voter turnout in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries has dropped by about 8 percentage points since 1970, and turnout has decreased by 20 points in the United Kingdom and 30 points in Japan.⁴⁷

Lerner argues that *meaningful* civic engagement is decreasing overall, with people perhaps signing more online petitions or marching in virtual marches, but not necessarily engaging in the day-to-day tedious but necessary tasks and deliberations with each other.⁴⁸ Around 58% of 15- to 25-year-olds in the United States were deemed civically “disengaged,” and not participating in activities like charity-giving, volunteering, and voting.⁴⁹ Steven Schrier, a professor at a US community college, estimates that only about 10% of the students who take his local and state government course have ever participated in any type of civic activity, such as working on a campaign.⁵⁰

One reason why college students and other youth may be disengaged from civics is because they have trouble seeing how it may personally affect them. They feel they won’t be able to meaningfully impact civic processes. Many people aged 18 to 24 years old are also just starting out with families or beginning to work at jobs, and only beginning to learn about how they could participate in civic life.⁵¹ Moreover, Lerner explains that people may be feeling distrustful and disempowered when it comes to civics and politics.⁵²

In fact, civic engagement is lower than it could be across all demographic groups, as people often do not engage with civics unless it personally affects them. For instance, I did not start attending my own town’s public board meetings until there were three things in place: the meetings were more *accessible* to me because they were livestreamed online, my *neighbors* encouraged me to attend, and the *issues that I care about* and that personally affect me and my family were being discussed at the meetings. I have continued to attend the meetings because I now feel I have a personal stake in our town and a sense of responsibility to engage, though I would not have attended these meetings otherwise.⁵³

We Must Reduce Hate and Harassment

Has there been an increase in incivility, toxicity, and disrespect in public? Certainly, Americans think so. According to a Weber Shandwick and Powell Tate survey in 2018, 93% of those surveyed stated that they believe that “civility is a problem in society,” with 69% saying that it is a major problem.⁵⁴ This is up from a decade prior.⁵⁵

The survey also found that only half of Americans thought that the general tone of Facebook was civil. “Civility,” however, is itself a problematic term and concept. It can be used and applied harmfully, such as being a way to oppress and marginalize, or socially control Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other people of color in public.⁵⁶

We can also look at reports of harassment and hate in public spheres, including games. In an ADL study of American people on social media platforms, they found that 37% of respondents experienced severe online and digital harassment.⁵⁷ A third of the respondents also reported that they experienced harassment specifically targeting an aspect of their identity (such as race or religion). Of the participants who identified as LGBTQQA+, 63% reported being harassed due to their identity, with Muslims (35%), Hispanics (30%), African Americans (27%), women (24%), Asian Americans (20%), and Jews (16%) also reporting identity-based harassment.⁵⁸ In games, players have also experienced harassment. In another ADL survey of Americans, 81% of the people who play online multiplayer games reported that they experienced some type of harassment during their game play. In that study, they found that of the participants who identified as LGBTQQA+, 37% reported being harassed in online games due to their identity, with Muslims (25%), Hispanics (30%), African Americans (31%), women (41%), Asian Americans (26%), and Jews (18%) also reporting identity-based harassment. They also found that 25% of those who are disabled were harassed due to their ability status.⁵⁹

Likewise, reported hate crimes overall are also on the rise for different groups in the United States, including Latinos, Blacks, Muslims, Asians, and Jewish people, with a significant increase in violence against Latinos.⁶⁰ Reports of hate crimes and violence against Asian Americans also increased in 2020, particularly following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hate crimes overall have been found to disproportionately affect Blacks, Muslims, LGBTQQA+, and Jewish people.⁶¹ Yet, we can change this. Ethics and civics education, civic engagement, and ethics practice can enhance our respect, care, and understanding of others, and can strengthen belongingness and compassion.

We Can Bridge Divides

Political divisiveness has been rising. People are often in “partisan bubbles,” where they only hear (or believe) the beliefs, views, and news from those that already agree with their ideas. People are self-segregating into political clusters, where they may be less likely to interact with (or listen to) those who have different backgrounds or views than themselves. Social media may even be crystallizing this further, with algorithms that serve up, replicate, and propagate partisan takes on content and news, or even egg on conflict and discord between people who do not agree.⁶²

People may even be harassed specifically because of who they are and what they believe in, including political differences. The 2017 Pew Internet Study found that for 14% of the people who were harassed online, it was due to their politics (equally

Republican and Democrat in the United States). Anonymity is often cited as a reason why people are more able to harass each other, with more than half of those who were harassed saying that they were harassed by anonymous strangers. Yet harassment is reported as not just coming from strangers, but from friends and family, too.⁶³

We need to have experiences interacting with and engaging with other viewpoints so that we can better deliberate decisions collectively. Civics and ethics practice can help us to connect with others and listen to their views, and collaboratively construct well-rounded arguments.⁶⁴

We Can Disrupt Disinformation

Along with an increase in the amount of information and news being shared offline and online, there has also been an increase in the amount of disinformation that has been created and spread.⁶⁵ False or disinformation has been called “fake news” or “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent.”⁶⁶ A study found that Americans encountered an average of one to three stories from common publishers of fake news in the month leading up to the 2016 US presidential election. Another study found that people are more likely to retweet fake news stories than articles based on factual information. The people tweeting may not even be people, and around 9–15% of Twitter accounts are estimated to be bots or autonomous programs designed to act like a social media participant. About 60 million bots may be on Facebook.⁶⁷ A growing number of videos are deepfakes, or artificially programmed video content that is not authentic nor based on reality.⁶⁸

Yet we need to be able to identify and counter fake news and other forms of disinformation, and these skills can be taught.⁶⁹ Just as we need to enhance how we listen and communicate with each other around our differing views, we also need to read, interpret, and vet views, news, and information. We need to learn how to assess valid and reliable information to make the best decisions on how to act as individuals and as a society. We need to learn how to be responsible for what we share and how we spread it.⁷⁰

We Can Enhance Access to Civics

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, “we are a we.” Communities are able to solve problems more effectively when more voices and perspectives are included. Yet civic participation is not equally accessible to all people—whether it is being able to be an active volunteer, an elected official, or a student in a civics class. The ability to fully participate in public life is affected by systemic factors, such as racism and racist policies, as well as one’s location, nationality, and geography, and other socioeconomic factors.⁷¹

For one, access to educational opportunities is inequitable. In the United States, researchers note that students who are from lower-income households, have parents without college degrees, or are English-language learners perform lower than other students on the NAEP civic assessment, which is a test of the skills and knowledge related to civic engagement.⁷² They also cite a large gap in test scores on the civics assessment between white and Black students and white students and Hispanic students.⁷³ However, we should question whether to call this “a gap” or a more intentionally designed result of systemic inequities in civic education for low-income students and students of color. For instance, take a public school district in the United States. If there is a lack of resources overall for that district, coupled with a lack of requirements to meet civics test scores, and greater incentives for raising math and reading scores, this may mean that disproportionately more time, energy, and materials will go into teaching math and reading at the detriment of subjects like social studies.⁷⁴ We might mistakenly blame the district—or its students—for low test scores. But, the underlying issue is that there is a systemic lack of resources for certain districts, due to long-standing racist policies and systems, which will continue to be propagated as those districts and students will not have the access, knowledge, or skills to reform the policies and systems. Kahne and Middaugh note that the students in higher-income families or wealthier districts have more opportunities to engage in civics than those in less wealthy schools. This “civic empowerment gap” means that poorer students and students of color will have fewer and fewer opportunities to participate in civics and get the practice needed for this participation. Levinson explains that inequitable access to civics education, knowledge, and skills, combined with systemically less power, influence, and the ability to participate, continues to further this gap.⁷⁵

Korbey also notes other types of inequities in civics participation in the United States, such as the so-called civic deserts. These are areas with limited opportunities for community engagement, and they lack places like cultural organizations and youth centers.⁷⁶ A study from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) noted that 60% of young people in rural areas and 30% of young people in urban and suburban areas are in a civic desert of some kind.⁷⁷ Living in areas with limited opportunities for civic engagement, and lower “civic health,” may contribute to feelings of alienation and disempowerment for the people living there, which only furthers a lack of access to civic participation.

Moreover, Mirra and Garcia point out that much of civic education in the United States relates to “patriotic observances” and the “virtues of the American form of government,” rather than a focus on real-world problem-solving or community-building. It relies on narrow, exclusionary definitions of what a “good citizen” is. Learning civics, then, becomes not about meeting people where they are, but about promoting jingoistic tropes like “the American Dream” or about upholding white, middle-class forms of citizenship. It becomes about reinforcing social hierarchies and inequities rather than dissolving them. This furthers the chasm even more, because why should we engage with a broken system that excludes so many of us?⁷⁸

We need to reconceive the concept of participation gaps. While we definitely need to enhance access and participation, we also need to rethink how people are already participating, including youth and people of color. Love explains that Black people are showing up and civically engaging, such as through creative works like hip hop, and through creative movements, digital formats, and grassroots communities. Likewise, youth are engaging in dialogues and creative expression, governance, and political protests such as through games and social media. Take, for instance, the teenagers who met on Twitter and organized a Black Lives Matter protest of over 10,000 people in Tennessee.⁷⁹ Or the group of K-Pop stans who collectively worked together to protect Black Lives Matter protestors in Dallas by interrupting the policing app with K-Pop Fancams (short clips of live performances by South Korean pop stars).⁸⁰ And then there are the TikTok teens and K-Pop stans who used social media to disrupt a political rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma by filling the ticket requests with false registrations.⁸¹

Mirra and Garcia ask us to look at how students of color are participating in ways that the traditional methodologies to measure civic engagement may not capture. They call for “a critical vision of citizenship that can counter the dominant perspective that young Americans of color are civically disengaged and instead acknowledge the innovative ways in which they are participating in civic life.”⁸² It is important not only to teach civics and ethics, but to find ways to equitably teach it, equitably enable access and belongingness to it, and equitably acknowledge participation in it. To do this, we need to reveal the complexity of and problematize ethics and civics systems themselves.

We need ethics and civics—even if it is messy and complex, *especially* if it is messy and complex. In the next chapter I will describe the types of specific skills, knowledge, concepts, and practices we need to learn *to citizen*, with an understanding that we should be continually reflecting on and revising what “to citizen” means.

3

What Should We Teach?

What Is Currently Being Taught?

But certainly, teachers *are* teaching ethics and civics. Educators around the world are teaching students how to think critically, solve problems, make ethical decisions, and take action in their communities. So what are teachers doing now? What should teachers teach?

In the United States, the teachers that typically teach civics and ethics are social studies teachers, history teachers, government and political science teachers, and philosophy teachers. They teach to all different types of students—including honors and AP students, as well as students in private, charter, public, and alternative middle and high schools, community colleges, universities, and four-year colleges. Beyond formal education, civics is taught in the home, after-school programs, libraries, community centers, museums, and historic sites, as well as online.¹

US educators teach topics and themes such as states rights versus federalism, the separation of powers and branches of government, the election process, the party system, and news literacy. They teach skills such as reading comprehension, writing, critical thinking, making inferences, and argumentation, and how to read, compare, evaluate, and use documents and evidence. Teachers also have their students read and learn about current events and investigate their local communities and governments.²

Teachers use workbooks, picture books, worksheets, and textbooks. They use videos, films, and visual material. Many also use websites, games, and other interactive experiences.³ They use a mix of lecture-focused classes and project-based learning. Their assignments range from multiple-choice tests, essays, and research papers to document-based questions and Socratic-style seminars. Their students are also doing real-world activities, like writing to their congressperson or taking field trips to civic spaces in their community.⁴ But as Coleman-Mortley explains, time is limited to even take kids to local spaces such as city hall or the post office.⁵ As a result, teachers may be “focusing more on facts and history narratives and less on activities like debate or simulation exercises” that have been shown to be effective.⁶

Despite these challenges, teachers are encouraging hands-on projects. Daniels, a teacher at a public International Baccalaureate school in the District of Columbia, has capstone community projects where students have gone “to one of the local food banks, donated time to campaigns, or worked for animal shelters. One group that was really influential created a social media campaign around raising awareness of teen anxiety and depression and what you can do about it. One girl wanted to raise

awareness to teachers on better supporting students with autism. She has an autistic brother, so she ran a professional development for teachers one afternoon for an hour.”⁷

Teacher Everett, a Florida private school teacher, has students do community-focused civic engagement projects where they identify a problem and then find a way to help solve the problem, such as through a policy solution, community partnership, or creative project. For instance, one student created a series of videos for different civics-related topics, while others created adult education civics classes with a local library.⁸

Abbott, who teaches at a rural North Carolina school, has her students work on a group project where they need to call county officials and investigate the local, state, and national level branches. They sift through voting records of elected officials. Abbott also has a “current event of the day” where the students need to “break down the current event, look at how the U.S. Constitution applies to that current event, and then do an activity around the topic.”⁹ For example, the week I interviewed Abbott, her students looked at traffic cameras and whether they violate due process. The following week they were planning to look at affirmative action and the 2019 college admissions scandal, where celebrities and others were paying to have their children receive special privileges to help them get admitted into colleges.

And some teachers are implementing the Generation Citizen curriculum, an action civics-based curriculum that aims to take students step-by-step through how to identify problems and take action in their communities. During the 10-week unit, students practice skills related to civic engagement “through attending community meetings, through keeping abreast of current events in [their] locality, through collaborating with others to collectively solve a problem.... It gives students the opportunity to experience and practice engaging in a democratic culture within the confines of the community.”¹⁰

While this is what may be happening in the classroom, it’s not necessarily consistent across classrooms and schools, from state to state, or country to country. What is mandated by state and government standards varies. In the next section I will dive into different frameworks, standards, and curricula that explore what we should teach, such as through and with games.

Standards, Frameworks, and Tools

Why do standards matter?¹¹ When you are using any educational activity or experience—such as a game—you need to make sure that it fits the requirements of what should be taught in that country, state, region, or place. Coleman-Mortley explains that “you can create the best K-12 learning tools in the entire world. But if it’s not aligned with the standards, teachers will say ‘goodbye.’ There’s no value in it because they are required to adhere to their state standards.”¹² In the United States,