Tell us about the beginning of iCivics and what the site offers.

After retiring from the Supreme Court, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor had become dismayed at the lack of knowledge that young people had about how our system of democracy works. She founded iCivics (www.icivics.org) in 2009 to challenge the status quo of diminishing and uninspiring civic education.

Today, iCivics offers a free, digital civic education platform with more than 150 lessons plans, 19 games, and digital tools for teachers and students. We create innovative educational video games and classroom resources that teach young people about our political systems.

Why did Justice O’Connor choose gamification, in specific, to address declining civic knowledge?

The Justice saw that middle school was a crucial time to engage young people. She started working with a small group of colleagues on a plan. Their first initiative was a civics website, which didn’t catch on.

Justice O’Connor then met education games expert Jim Gee, who had just written a book titled What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy. He explained that games were about problem solving, and that by putting students in the shoes of officials and letting them make the everyday decisions officials had to make, students would learn firsthand how these processes work. The Justice became fascinated with the possibilities that games offered to re-imagine civic education.

Our games allow students to step into any role they choose—judge, member of Congress, or community activist fighting for local change—and do the job they do. Educational video games allow for concepts to happen to us. They convey important information to students, give them agency to address real-world issues, and teach skills for good citizenship.

How has your site’s usage changed since the 2016 presidential election?

Students and teachers flocked to iCivics in record numbers during the last presidential election season (roughly 170,000 teachers in all) at rates triple that of previous years. In November alone, our games were played more than 3 million times. In a survey of 1,200 teachers who used iCivics last year, we learned that usage was basically split between red and blue states. Teachers told us that iCivics helped foster productive classroom discussions and lessons in this divisive political climate.

In a survey of 1,200 teachers who used iCivics last year, we learned that usage was basically split between red and blue states.”

What challenges has the current political climate brought to iCivics?

iCivics is nonpartisan, so that any classroom in any state can use our games without fear of bringing political agendas into the discussion. But, as the country has become more polarized, nonpartisanship is presenting new challenges. What started out as a nonpartisan stance in some of our games is now being challenged as potentially partisan, because the policy proposals in real life are more polarized.

We’ve become more careful, and we review our content for potential bias without watering it down so much that it becomes irrelevant. The content is reviewed internally by several education experts. We also get feedback from the field. When we get as many comments from the right as we do from the left, we feel like we’ve probably found the right neutral balance.

Editor’s note: This interview has been edited for space and clarity.
Teachers must dispel the notion that global citizenship and national citizenship are mutually exclusive.” —Ariel Tichnor-Wagner, p. 69

The book offers specific suggestions to add depth to the content and imbue lessons with personality. For example, a teacher covering imperialism could turn to pop culture’s Star Wars or The Hunger Games to illustrate how people in power can take advantage of the vulnerable. Milo also argues that instead of rushing to cover facts about long spans of time, social studies teachers should focus on a few key milestones, teaching their students how to analyze human behavior, develop problem solving skills, and practice critical thinking.

For the teacher concerned about such experimentation, Milo suggests that “trying—whether or not every detail is perfect—is key,” especially if the end goal is to teach students how to analyze and gain perspective. History is messy, complicated, and intriguing—and Milo argues that teaching social studies should be, too.