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Work hard! Play hard?

The realities of balancing school life and being a teen

Joeliz Correa

Realistically, when was the last time you did something for yourself? Went to a movie, hung out with friends, or simply enjoyed a moment of peace? As a fellow JMSA “Grinder,” I know the answer to that question is “far too long ago.” Truthfully, life moves quickly, often making it hard to find time to breathe, especially when you’re a committed and high-achieving student, like I know every JMSA student is. Even for teachers, work-life balance does not come easily. Now, by no means whatsoever have I mastered this aspect of life; in fact, the complete opposite would be more accurate, but one thing is for sure: after four years at JMSA, I’ve gained some perspective, so if you’re open to some advice, this is for you.

First, know that you are not alone; in fact, you’re part of the 77% of Americans who report feelings of burnout and an unbalanced work-life ratio. The truth is that JMSA is an amazing community; I would even go as far as to say that it is the birthplace of innovation, the breeding ground for genius and leadership. But, while it is a very bright environment, it can still feel overwhelming sometimes. At JMSA, the major pressures are those that come from within; the perfectionism and ambitious goals that we as students set for ourselves lead to an intense hustle culture, high academic expectations, and a highly competitive spirit. So, yes, Fellow JMSA Grinders, the fact is that we are a hard-working, highly committed, and enthusiastic community, a school full of overachievers and go-getters, but we do not have to give up rest and relaxation for the sake of success and achievement.

Benefits of Downtime

Unfortunately, downtime gets a bad rep, but the reality is that spending quality time with family and friends actually helps teens manage stress, strengthen relationships, and restore mental health.



At JMSA, taking time for yourself, hanging out, pursuing hobbies, or simply relaxing, shouldn't be considered laziness, but instead a way to recharge.

Make It Happen

So, what can you do, and what can JMSA do to foster this sense of balance? Start small. Take a moment of your day to call your friends, watch a show together, or plan a weekend hangout. What really matters is that you find the time, you make a simple plan, and you follow through.

As for JMSA, the Student Council, and the school administration, they can collaborate to work on social events and get-togethers aimed at creating fun and encouraging a sense of community. Use the link below to suggest activities and community events you would like to see at JMSA, and feel free to fill it out as many times as you would like all throughout the school year!

<https://forms.gle/CRHRUXvtBgPYoYNt7>

Relax and Recharge

As for what you can do on your own, I suggest you try these simple and effective ways to get back some of your personal time:

The Main Step: Make a plan for your day and organize your time appropriately. Doing work is something you should schedule time for, but so is resting or spending time with friends and family.

- Free time doesn't always have to be fun or different; it can be as simple as 30 minutes after school at a coffee shop with friends.
- It can be watching your favorite movie or show once a week
- It can be 45 minutes of video games, reading, art, or meditation
- It can be curating a playlist, learn new fascinating topics on YouTube, starting a diary, etc It can be 15 minutes of whatever you want



The most important thing is that you control your time, you lay out a plan to finish your work first, and then allocate time to have fun. Above all, don't forget that giving yourself a break is a way of self-care, and it doesn't lessen your status as a Grinder. Success and relaxation aren't opposites; in fact, they complement each other quite nicely.



- The Chinese New Year is a celebration that happens in many parts of the world, more commonly known as The Spring Festival.
- The Chinese New Year, also known as the Lunar New Year, follows the Lunar Calendar which uses the monthly cycle of the moon. The celebration does not follow the traditional calendar most of the world follows, the Solar Calendar. It follows a 12 month time period to make up each year.
- In the year 2026, it began on February 17th.
- Chinese years have their own zodiac signs, which are different from the zodiac signs we know of. It follows a 12 zodiac cycle, changing each year.
- In the year 2026, it began on February 17th.
- Every year, a different animal is associated with the new year.
- For example, 2026 is the year of the “fire” horse or “mǎ nián,” which translates to the year of the horse in Mandarin.
- The animals for each year are based on a Chinese myth, in which the Jade Emperor organizes a race between animals to have a year named after them, and the 12 that win have their own year in the order they arrive at the finish line. These 12 animals won in order: Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat, Monkey, Rooster,



Dog, Pig. Each animal represents a different personality trait.

The Event*

On February 4th, JMSA held its annual Chinese New Year Celebration hosted by the Asian American Pacific Islander Club (AAPIC Club). Decorations were placed around the cafeteria to match the Chinese New Year. There were projects from the Mandarin students on the walls and lanterns as well. On the day of the performance, many students, along with their families came. Once people began to enter, they were given HongBao or Red Envelopes with coins and two tickets inside. The tickets were for a raffle; if they called out your number, you would win one of the many prizes the AAPIC club had provided. Some club members had agreed to overview certain activities and allow people to play before the performance started.

There were many performances of classes and clubs, such as Band, Dance, Choir, and Acting. Students who were also a part of Mrs. Esgrow's Mandarin 1, 2, and 3 classes joined in performances for the Chinese event. These Chinese performances included: Tai Chi fan dances, lines of silk ribbons, short dragons, and handkerchief tossing. Mandarin 1 students learned the Tai-Chi fan and performed along with some Mandarin 3 handkerchief tossing. Mandarin 1 students learned the Tai-Chi fan, and performed along with some Mandarin 3 students. Mandarin 2 students learned Tai-Chi. We were given around one and a half months to practice and learn the moves.. All of these performances were related to the Chinese New Year and were performed elegantly. The performances overall went near perfect and nearly everyone wore red.

Along with these performances came speeches from many participants and honored guests: the president and advisors of the AAPIC Club, Mrs. Esgrow, and Mr. Baez. The MC of the event was Jhoamy Velasquez who kept the audience interested with her articulate and enthusiastic introductions of the entertainment.

After the performances and speeches, dinner was served. There were foods such as dumplings, rice, noodles, chicken skewers, and even Chinese drinks. These foods hold significance for the New Year as they symbolize a long and healthy life.



Also after the performances and during dinner, club members went to a station to explain the rules of the game, allow people to play, and give out the prizes. Games such as Pin the Panda, Ring Toss, HongBao- making, sugar candy-making, and calligraphy were available as part of the entertainment. These stations were extremely fun to do with friends and a great chance to win prizes.

*Ms. Escrow should be given a big round of applause for creating and running this event which JMSA has enjoyed for three years. It takes a tremendous amount of time and effort to accomplish such an amazing task of teaching her classes the material, coordinating the participants from the AAPI Club and other groups, doing publicity, arranging the purchase and distribution of the food, and cleaning up!

Xièxiè 谢谢

Take a look at the photos from the Chinese New Year event on the Captured Moments Page!



In an all-cream monochromatic outfit, fastened with love in his heart, on February 8th, Benito Antonio Ocasio Cortez took to the stage his love for Puerto Rico and Latin America at Super Bowl XL. According to Roc Nation, Ocasio Cortez, famously known as Bad Bunny, was responsible for the most viewed Super Bowl halftime show, amassing over billions of views across multiple platforms. Could it have been the color scheme he brought to the field? Or his love for music? In the end, we are all left wondering what truly made Super Bowl XL one of the most marked and special in history.

A Field of Canes built by Love & Language:

The estimated 13 minute performance, started off with references to Puerto Rican culture and its history, as ensemble laborers wore white colored clothes and straw hats while cutting cane with machetes, symbolizing Puerto Rican countrymen, or jibaro, as one of them expresses “Que rico es ser Latino” [How rich is it to be Latin]. This was later followed by other cultural nods, such as a piragua stand [Puerto Rican shaved ice coconut stand], older men playing with dominoes, young ladies getting their nails done, and features from professional Mexican boxer, Emiliano Vargas and Puerto Rican boxer, Xander Zayas, nudging at the long-standing boxing rivalry between both countries. On the other hand, fellow New Yorkers were thrilled to be represented by a mogul from one of their boroughs. Maria Antonia Cay, widely known as Toñita, who is famously recognized for owning a prominent Puerto Rican-styled social club, often praised for constantly paying homage to the Caribbean island and refusing to sell her property as part of the city’s gentrification (a topic that is often referenced in Bad Bunny’s album *DeBI TiRAR MaS FOToS*).



Apart from bringing culture to the stage, his pink casita (his Puerto Rican styled house) also made its way from his tour to the field. Noted for housing prominent social figures, Bad Bunny mainly featured iconic Latin artists such as Colombian Grammy winner Karol G, Chilean SAG award actor Pedro Pascal, and Dominican descent Grammy-winning rapper Cardi B, among many more.

Despite the celebrity sightings and Latin American allusions, what left people most in shock was that a bride said “yes” at Superbowl XL. That’s right, not only did Bad Bunny pay tribute to his island and heritage, but he also allowed a fan to get married on top of his casita. Eleisa Aparicio and Thomas Wolter tied the knot, expressing their gratitude and love for the Puerto Rican rapper. The most relatable moment for the audience was when the camera panned to a young boy sleeping at the reception (knowing that we were once that young boy at the weddings we’ve attended as children).

Un Apagon? [A Blackout]:

Upon the Super Bowl performance, there was a political debate on whether or not Bad Bunny was considered “American” enough to perform at the “patriotic” event. As part of a retaliation, Turning Point USA hosted their “All American” Halftime Show Performance with a turnout of 6 million concurrent viewers. Unfortunately, the heated tension surrounding Bad Bunny continued even after earning his three Grammys, including Album of the Year, the most prestigious award in the music industry, due to his acceptance speech consisting of the phrase “Ice Out,” an advocacy against the current administration. This fueled the hate train towards Bad Bunny, with some refusing to watch this year’s Superbowl as their own “protest.”

The Only Thing More Powerful Than Hate Is Love

Lastly, Bad Bunny wrapped up his show with a heartfelt message. Amidst the chaotic times we are living in, he reminded the audience to carry themselves with love as love is “the only thing more powerful than hate.” But what centralized the show was the patriotic message of God Bless America, following up with his mention of all North, South, and Caribbean American nations, implying that the term “America” is not reserved for one sole territory. In the end, maybe Bad Bunny was not talking about blue or red, right or wrong, maybe all that he was trying to convey was enjoyment in unity, the richness of our culture, the beauty in our heritage, and to



love one another each day. With that being said, the boy who once wore a green striped shirt and khaki shorts just made history at football's biggest night, and it for sure was un baile inolvidable [unforgettable dance].

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Rolling Stone, 2 February 2026, <https://ca.rollingstone.com/all-of-the-hidden-symbols-and-meanings-you-may-have-missed-in-bad-bunnys-super-bowl-set/>

AP for all?

Should Advanced Placement courses prioritize student performance or potential for growth?

Andrew Vaca

The Growing Push for Inclusion

In recent years, schools across the country have begun rethinking who gets access to Advanced Placement courses. The College Board has encouraged schools to “broaden access,” especially for students who have historically been underrepresented in AP classrooms, arguing that more students should have the opportunity to challenge themselves with advanced coursework.

Schools are encouraged to recruit more students, inform families about AP opportunities, and provide extra preparation so students can build the skills needed to succeed. Essentially, students are encouraged to try out AP with the understanding that they can develop the potential they initially had as they progress through the class, very much chill and not on that Blue Ribbon level, unlike a certain school, or should I say academy that I know of...

AP selection at JMSA

Here’s how students at JMSA go through the AP selection process

- Students first choose which AP courses they want to take
- Confirm they have taken the prerequisites
- Obtain a parent's signature
- Take entrance exams
- May get further evaluated based on teacher recommendations or PSAT scores (Shoutout, my bad test- takers!)



After outlining the current process, it's important to think about how students themselves feel about these regulations.

What students think about the current AP system

Raymiluz, a junior, strongly supports keeping entrance exams, arguing that they maintain the rigor of AP courses. She believes the exams help identify students ready for the fast pace of AP courses and those who may need additional support. However, she suggested that exams could better measure a student's potential to grow in the class, rather than what they already know.

One junior, who preferred not to be named, expressed firm support for keeping the current system. She argued that entrance exams help AP classes keep their unique challenge and stop them from feeling like regular honors courses. In her view, the current system ensures that enrolled students are motivated and have demonstrated the necessary skills for AP coursework. #God forbid a girl wants a challenge

Emanuella, a junior, acknowledges that entrance exams help keep AP classes maintain rigor, but she isn't sure they should carry the most weight. She pointed out that being tested on material before learning it doesn't always seem fair and suggested the school look at more than just the exam, including grades and teacher recommendations. #We love a well-rounded queen

A lot of students are fine with the exams staying. They just don't think one test should decide everything.

Allison, who is a sophomore aiming to take APs for her junior year, was firm on how entrance exams can't truly measure a student's potential. Arguing that one exam doesn't capture how a student actually learns or processes information, she said, "You can't see a person's potential solely on a test."

Several students, aside from Allison, have argued that a single timed test isn't a good indicator of a person's ability. For instance, English classes often value analytical depth/ creativity and the ability to revise and strengthen ideas over time. When applying for AP's that are heavy in writing, some students may be stronger



analytical writers than creative ones, or may produce their best work when given more time to process and revise. A timed entrance exam may cover how a student performs in one moment, but it may not consider how that student could grow throughout the year and the strengths that they have to offer.

What does the future look like for AP at JSMA?

Amongst the AP discussion, who better to get insights on than JMSA's AP coordinator Mr Drozd! According to him, the goal of the selection process is to find a middle ground where inclusion and preparedness can be considered. We know that students must complete prerequisite courses and also show interest in the subject (I mean, why else would you take it? Unless you're tryna be the next Rory Gilmore...), but AP teachers are heavily encouraged to look at several factors before deciding to admit a student into an AP or not. These include prerequisite courses, grades, students' work ethic, strengths and weaknesses, and, oftentimes, a pretest that checks the core knowledge students should already have before entering the class.

Now you may be thinking, "That's all?" Trust me, that was me too until I heard Mr. Drozd's next point. The point in question is that teachers should also consider students who have just missed the initial cutoff. For example, if a teacher originally plans to admit around ten students into an AP class, they would be asked to review a few additional applications from students who were close to qualifying. If those students show potential, they could still be admitted in order to expand opportunities for students interested in trying an AP course.

A big, big, big, biggggg factor to consider is that JMSA covers the cost of AP exams for students, which makes preparing students for the tests an important priority. And with all the AP courses available, you can imagine how big that bill from the College Board is going to be (It was about 8k last year, btw) Not to mention that extra money goes to the teachers who spend extra time helping students work toward the final exam. During this stage it can be difficult for them to balance students who are aiming for tip scores with others who may still be developing the skills needed for the course Hence, another reason why the AP selection process is the way it is (# Stay locked in guys).



Anywho, that's enough of the AP selection process from Mr. Drozd. Instead, why don't we look at some new APs that might be coming soon to JMSA from the all-knowing AP coordinator himself? New APs being discussed include AP Economics (Macro and Micro), AP Psychology, AP Cyber Security, and an AP Business course with personal finance that can cover your finance credits (a two-in-one special you guys). Some possible returning APs include AP Computer Science A and AP Art. Expanding course offerings could allow more students to try at least one AP class while still maintaining the rigor expected from the program, which seems to be another goal JMSA values (in other words, don't be afraid to dip your toes in the water when it comes to academically challenging yourself)

Conclusion

AP courses were designed to challenge students while also giving them the chance to earn college credit in high school. But lately, the debate over entrance exams as a barrier has become one of the latest “chismes” in JMSA education news. AP classes were originally meant to give students the chance to try more advanced work, but needing to prove you’re ready before you can even take the class can make that harder. Despite this, let's not forget about our AP teachers who want to keep the rigor of the courses strong. These classes are supposed to match college-level expectations, so students need to be ready for the workload and difficulty that come with them. And to be honest, teachers don’t want to spend an entire year teaching a class just to see students barely scraping 3’s on the exam; they may as well quit at that point. Even though the selection process can feel just a tad bit daunting, it is also meant to make sure students who enter the class are prepared for the standards that come with it. How JMSA balances opportunity and rigor may shape the future of the AP selection process and make the courses feel more like meaningful classes taken out of academic interest rather than gold medals for students to collect.

Work Cited

<https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/broadening-access-to-ap.pdf>

What does it mean to be unique?

Behind the JMSA Theatre Production of *Side Show*!

Gianna Rodriguez

There's something alluring about things you don't see every day. For the same reasons we can't help but stare at a car crash, unable to look away, we stare at those different from us. I remember being in the grocery store with my mom as a child and walking by an amputee. They were missing half of their leg, and they must have felt my burning, never-fleeing stare. Conjoined twins Violet and Daisy Hilton were no strangers to these stares. The twins are the primary focus of the musical *Side Show*, based on the true story of their rise to stardom during the depression, taking the audience on a journey discovering love, loss, discrimination, and acceptance.

Before they were even toddlers, they were exploited, taken advantage of, and treated inhumanely, all because they were different. Their guardian sought to monetize their abnormality by putting them on display, leading them into a life of constant exposure and abuse. From the beginning, their whole lives have been a show. I am fortunate to have the opportunity to step into her shoes and play Daisy Hilton in our production of *Side Show*. In doing so, I have learned the gravity of trusting others, the cruelty and greed of man, and the importance of being true to yourself. In the show, and in their real lives, the twins receive praise and admiration for their uniqueness, yet it fills their lives with complication and uncertainty. They navigate love, fame, trust, and deceit, which all amplify their already powerful bond.

In an audition I had, I was asked "what is a piece of media you've encountered recently that you think everyone should know about?" and without hesitation I answered, *Side Show*. Their rise to stardom and their struggles they faced throughout their lives are something I truly believe everyone should know about. Learning about their lives opened my eyes to the extent of how cruel people can be to those who are different.



The twins, and every other side show exhibit, were taken advantage of by so many people who profited from the stares. Their life consisted of being constantly shown off, or more accurately, exposed. And unfortunately, they became known as a big attraction, and many competed to “own” them, and make money off of their abnormality, knowing their capability to lure in paying viewers.

Daisy and Violet Hilton had difficult lives, but inspiring ones. Their perseverance and determination to stay true to themselves is what I find most admirable. And being conjoined twins, their bond remains incredibly fascinating. Typically, two people could never have the same life. Each person has different experiences, different relationships, that establish who they are and how they present themselves. But the Hilton twins shared everything, and went through all of their obstacles together. Their story is an important one to be told, and I am honored to say we’re fulfilling the opportunity to share it. So take a chance, admire these aberrations and their malformations, and come look at the freaks!

Work Cited

[The Tragic Lives of Conjoined Twins Daisy and Violet Hilton](#)

From Grace to Glory

Figure Skating at the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics

Shelly Salto

Swiftly slicing through the ice, spinning into the cold air heavy with anticipation, the crowd erupts at a graceful landing. Control and precision dominate the rink through every turn, competitors gliding effortlessly across. This sport that leaves the audience enthralled...Figure Skating!

The 2026 Winter Olympics invited athletes around the world to come together and compete for a gold medal. Fans united in venues across Italy, eager to witness the impeccable talent of these hardworking individuals. From long-time favorites like ice hockey and snowboarding to unique sports like curling and bobsleighbing, the viewing of figure skating has surged in popularity through social media platforms.

Alysa Liu rose to the top as a gold medalist within Women's Single Skating, closely followed by Kaori Sakamoto and Ami Nakai with silver and bronze. Liu's bright smile and relaxed composure captivated the audience throughout her entire performance as she flowed across the ice with a radiant confidence. Ranking in second place, Sakamoto's breathtaking performance was executed skillfully. She brought fierce energy to the rink with each graceful movement. Following this season, Sakamoto retires from figure skating but seeks to continue her passions as a coach, shaping aspiring athletes into gold medalists. Possessing both elegance and innocence, Nakai captured the hearts of many with her agile moves, earning her a bronze medal. The audience was drawn to the sincere work in her artistry at only 17 years old.

With an exquisite rendition of Kazakh music, Mikhali Shaidorov secured a gold medal in the Men's Single Skating. From his jumps to the speed and technique, each element perfectly captured his artistic expression.

After a shortcoming in the Short Program, he made a resilient comeback with a well-deserved score. Yuma Kagiyama took home silver, emitting classical elegance from the choice of music to presentation. As such a brilliant skater, fans were heartbroken to witness the falls and mistakes in an otherwise perfect routine, with reports of melting ice as the cause. With a strong and relaxed composure, Shun Sato flowed across the ice, attaining bronze. His movements were excellently timed with the musical tones, making it a solid performance amongst others.

The Winter 2026 Olympics gave the world a chance to recognize and appreciate the immense effort and dedication these athletes had poured into showcasing their talents. It welcomed nations and competitors, bringing them together to support and encourage one another. With a sport as mentally and physically challenging as figure skating, these Olympic medalists inspire future generations of athletes to be themselves and discover the joy and passion of the sport.

Work Cited

[Shaidorov wins gold as 'Quad God' Malinin crumbles](#)
[Olympic Men's Figure Skating Results: Malinin Misses Podium, Shaidorov Stuns For Gold](#)
[Alysa Liu, bursting with joy, wins first U.S. Olympic women's figure skating gold in 24 years](#)
[With four Olympic medals, Kaori Sakamoto doesn't need gold to cement her legacy](#)
[USA superstar Liu wins women's skating Olympic gold](#)

One Body, Two Souls

Get a look into the real tales of Daisy and Violet Hilton and other characters!

Abigail Castillo

The lights dim, the snare drum rolls, and a booming voice invites the audience to “come look at the realities.” But in *Sideshow*, the real story isn’t just about the physical strangeness of the protagonists; it's the profound, melancholy story hidden behind the joyful side of the circus. Introducing the most famous performers in the 20th century, Daisy and Violet. Daisy is sociable, flirtatious, and ambitious; mainly focusing on having fame and fortune. On the other hand, Violet is quieter and more cautious of herself, seeking to be treated like a regular person and wanting to be like “everyone else.” Centering on the twins, they are born physically joined together at the hip and are a part of a traveling circus attraction along with others such as the Bearded Lady, Venus De Milo, a Fortune Teller, and other “freaks.”

However, did you know that *Sideshow* is actually based on true events from actual people with “odd” disabilities? In the 16th century, freak shows started, increasing in popularity in the 19th century, particularly during the Victorian era. P.T. Barnum's American Museum in New York in 1841 was an example of this.

These shows were exhibitions of physical deformities and extraordinary talents and were considered family entertainment. Circus owners would use the term “Human Freaks” for people with disabilities or traumatic injuries. Due to this, the treatment of human freaks in circus shows was often exploitative and demeaning. Performers with congenital disorders were often forced to participate in shows against their will, and some were mistreated by abusive staff members or the audience, who didn’t see them as real individuals.

According to Daisy and Violet’s history, they were born in Brighton, England, in 1908. The twins were conjoined



by the hip and buttocks, sharing blood circulation but not major organs. Mary Hilton, who referred to them as “Auntie,” was their caregiver who was physically and emotionally abusive and wanted to cut them apart, but unfortunately, due to the risk of death, she decided on not doing it anymore. However, she ended up exploiting their disability for profit. Circus shows, which were owned by Myer Myers, known as “Sir,” became the center of Daisy and Violet’s life.

Alongside the twins were other acts that audiences came to stare at: The Bearded Lady, celebrated for her striking facial hair; Dog Boy, whose body was covered in hair due to a rare condition; the Cossacks, known for their dramatic presence and exoticized identity; the Geek, often portrayed in disturbing, animalistic acts; and the so-called “Half Man, Half Woman,” presented as a living example of gender duality. There were also others such as the “Fortune Teller,” who added mystery to the spectacle, “Venus De Milo,” advertised without arms, and “Tattoo Girl,” her body filled with ink drawings, “The Three Legged” who was known for his unique appearance of a third leg, the “Human Pin Cushion” who was known for their shocking performance of inserting pins and needles into their body, and finally, “The Lizard Man” known for his body modifications. Under Sir’s influence, and later under Mary Hilton’s authority, the twins were treated less like daughters and more like property.

Daisy and Violet would soon realize that having the same routine became tiring everyday; they decided that they wanted a change in their life. They wanted to be like others and to marry someone who would accept them regardless of their condition and have a loving family as well.

“But why should we go watch *Sideshow*?” Well, not only does this play mainly focus on celebrating the unconventional and highlighting the resilience of those often marginalized, challenging societal norms and promoting acceptance, but also *Sideshow* digs deep into the twin’s complex bond, exploring the twin’s struggle for independence and the importance of acceptance, love, and embracing one’s uniqueness.

Tonight, the tent rises. And as tonight, the crowd gathers and the audience decides who is the perfect one in their eyes...and who’s not. But before you judge, before you turn away and leave, step into the spotlight with them. Witness the lies, witness the truth, and come look at the “freaks.”

A New Club in Town

The Civic & Governance Club! What do we do?

Sofia Molina

Are you interested in making an impact on society?

The mission behind Civic Tech and Governance is rooted in the systems that organize civic life — such as public institutions, private institutions, businesses, and individuals within them. These systems are often complex and difficult to navigate, and despite existing information, it is not always coordinated or accessible. When systems lack transparency and coordination, the trust of the people weakens. If the information is too difficult to interpret or access, participation becomes limited.

The Civic Tech and Governance club aims to explore how technology and governance can work together to design systems that are reliable and accessible. Civic Tech and Governance *is* the intersection of innovation and civic life. It requires technological tools, analytical thinking, and collaborative research to model frameworks that make information clearer. While many spaces focus on accelerating innovation, our focus is on strengthening guardrails and asking when ideas should slow down. For example, one case Mr. Sandeep and Dr. Michael studied examined the late-stage breast cancer detection rates in Hudson County. Even if cancer incidence is not unusually high, there was a disproportionate number of diagnoses occurring during late-stage cancer. In order to find an effective solution to resolve this tendency, he asked deeper questions that focused on screening access and institutional capacity. He also considered how a medical technology company and a public health school might interpret this differently. By mapping this first, he formed a “civic insight investigation,” concluding that individuals’ health should be checked before anything was built.

Right now, all of us members are focused on researching, examining models, and questioning feasibility *before*



systems are built. A system cannot be designed by a singular mind, which is why we need more than one perspective. Students interested in STEM are needed to *understand* and *evaluate* technical feasibility. Students drawn to government or civic education are needed to ground discussions to fit our society and do the research that can help make this effective. Originally, the plan was to immediately build the idea, but the approach has shifted into evaluating the assumptions behind large civic concepts that are technology-driven. This very important change was made in order to clarify and strengthen the project's foundation.

Humanities and STEM collaborate in this space, as the strength of this initiative depends on the diversity of thought. The more perspectives we share, the more refined and realistic the work becomes. Anyone with curiosity and a willingness to think critically can contribute.

Civic Tech and Governance is led by Mr. Sandeep, Dr. Michael, Dr. Coleman, and Mr. Clavijo — a team committed to ensuring that this work is realistic and grounded. Their leadership provides direction, and progress depends on student collaboration.

If you are interested in participating in research that connects technology, governance, and societal systems, Civic Tech and Governance offers that opportunity. By working together to examine how systems could be improved, we are making a change for the better step by step.

Beyond Reading: Experience

How video games turned storytelling into an experience

Alexander Soto

Video games are commonly associated with fun and the consumption of time. While books have long been considered the standard for storytelling, a tried and true method, video games have been cast aside due to the preconceived notion of them being childish. Most people would say there are more valuable ways of using your time. What those same people don't realize is that video games are arguably the best outlet to tell a story. Though in the past that may have been true for early titles like *Mario* and *Sonic*, this is no longer the case. Modern video games now tell stories that rival traditional literature, and in some ways go even further by allowing the audience to actively participate in the narrative rather than simply observe it.

An immediate case that comes to mind is *Red Dead Redemption 2*. At first glance, it seems to be a simple western type game, gunsling and what not. In reality, it is a tragedy centered on loyalty, identity, and moral decay. Arthur Morgan is not just a playable character, he is a man confronting the consequences of a life built on blind faith and violence. Like protagonists in classic literature, he struggles with a tragic flaw that ultimately leads him to his downfall. But unlike classic literature, Arthur Morgan is also the player. He allows the player to be him and be a part of all his endeavors. With *Red Dead*, the audience does not just mindlessly read the story, they experience it. Every choice, mission, and even every moment aren't just told. They aren't even just shown; they are enacted by the player themselves, they embrace it. Because the player is responsible for carrying out Arthur's journey, the narrative becomes far more personal than a traditional story being passively read. And all of Arthur's ups and downs are also the player's. The story becomes personal because the player is actively involved in it as opposed to having to imagine every section of the story by dissecting the setting from text. In this way, Arthur's journey mirrors the tragic heroes of classic literature, whose flaws ultimately lead to their downfall. The difference is that the player does not simply witness that tragedy unfold. They actively take part in it.



A similar depth can be seen in *God of War* (2018) and its sequel *God of War Ragnarök*. The earlier titles in the game series were centered around the hack-and-slash genre of games, mindless killing with little reason to do so. However, the newer titles take a different approach to the story. No longer is Kratos a vengeful god but a father trekking through grief to be better for his son. Attempting to break the generational curse that of the act of a son killing his father, he is a father attempting to break a cycle of violence that his father, Zeus, and his father's father, Kronos, bestowed upon him. His journey reflects the tragic flaws and generational consequences often seen in classical Greek tragedies. However, what separates this story from traditional literature is the player's participation. The emotional core of the narrative is in the evolving relationship between father and son. As with *Red Dead Redemption 2*, the player participates in Kratos's journey, experiencing his growth, not as a spectator, but as part of the performance. Rather than just reading about Kratos's struggles, the player experiences and fights them as Kratos. This allows the player to share in his challenges and in the development of his character. Due to this, the narrative becomes a story the player participates in, rather than one he simply watches unfold.

The stories of Arthur Morgan and Kratos demonstrate how modern video games transform storytelling by allowing players not only to witness a character's struggles, but to embrace and actively experience them. Books will always be a timeless and powerful method of storytelling, so "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." They rely on imagination, reflection, and the ability to think beyond what is said. Video games do not replace those strengths—they improve them. They take emotional depth, conflict, and growth to a level that even words cannot perfectly encapsulate. Storytelling is no longer limited to pages. Video games prove that powerful narratives can exist wherever strong stories are told.

Red Dead Redemption 2

[Plot Summary](#)

[Author Morgan Character](#)

[Complete Story](#)

God of War Ragnarök

[Story Part 1](#)

[Story Part 2](#)



The Past

For decades, malls were *the* social hub. Especially in highly populated states like New Jersey, places like Garden State Plaza or Jersey Gardens was where everyone went on the weekends. When we were kids, our parents would drag us there for hours to walk around, shop for clothes, and end at the food court. When we got older, it was the *it* spot. We begged our parents to drop us off for last minute plans made with friends. For many of us, it bridged the gap to being independent. It wasn't always about just shopping and trying on clothes. The mall represented a place for teenagers to hang out, get food, take photos, and play games.

Dead Malls Across America

Although New Jersey is a populated state that might have stronger mall culture compared to other states, decline in mall popularity is happening across the country. Some malls are completely shut down and abandoned, while others remained open and are referred to as ghost malls that often house one popular store like Macy's. Malls are also constantly getting torn down and completely gutted by the companies that once funded them. These dead malls of America stand as a persistent reminder of the effects of teen culture and the weight of social media. Even extremely popular malls like Mall of America and American Dream have added numerous attractions, such as roller coasters and water parks in order to stay relevant which proves that just housing popular storefronts may not be enough anymore when people can easily find them online.

Social Life Turns Digital

Today, that culture feels different. Instead of asking friends to go to the mall, we send links back and forth. Teenagers choose to scroll through apps like Tiktok and Amazon instead of wandering through stores for hours. Shopping is faster digitally: social interactions have not disappeared though— it is now done online. This fact, which at first sounds sad, begins to make sense when we evaluate our high school experiences. As we age, we become committed to other responsibilities that take precedence— like classes, studying, part-time jobs, and college applications and planning. Free time starts to feel limited, and it is easier to stay home and communicate with people online rather than plan and dedicate a whole afternoon to the mall.

Long Term Effects

The pandemic only worsened the popularity of the mall: stores closed down and people turned towards online shopping as their only option. The decline of mall culture also reflects something bigger than just what is trending online. It is more than going shopping to buy clothes. In the past it was about finding public spaces to hang out, be independent, meet new people, and spend time with friends. Unfortunately, for new generations, the mall becomes less of the long-term hangout spot it once was, and more of a relic.

Sources

[Dying Shopping Malls are the Roman Ruins of our Civilization](#)
[Is New Jersey's Mall Culture Dying? We Break Down the Latest Closure.](#)

"Here comes the Sun"

Why winter can feel hard

Maya Esawi

When everyone comes back from winter break, the same sentence is spoken 20 times a day: "I can't wait for summer." When the sun sets at 5:00 pm instead of 8:00 pm, making the world outside feel empty, everything seems heavier. Waking up for school is tiring (and dark); all the motivation disappears, and the only thing on anyone's mind is the beach. This is the reality for many high school students, and they all collectively have one name for it: 'Seasonal Depression.'

People joke about having seasonal depression, and while the real condition — Seasonal Affective Disorder (appropriately abbreviated as SAD) — does exist, most of us probably just feel the winter slump. Less sun and more schoolwork make everyone feel drowsy. Especially this year, constant snow and harsh winds made the slump feel even longer. While having three days off from school itself felt exciting, the weeks of icy mornings and gray skies made winter seem like it would never end.

It's not only the warmer weather that's the cure for 'seasonal depression,' but also the less amount of schoolwork. During the harsh months of winter and early spring, it's prime school season, when all the teachers assign projects and tests every week. By the time the weather hits 70 degrees and there is one month left of school, the majority of students feel relaxed -- not feeling the heavy mental weight they mysteriously experience in the winter.

When the weather hits 50 or higher, you hear it everywhere. In the halls, at lunch, from your friends, everyone's anticipating the feel of summer, even if it could just be for one day out of a chilly week.



That's why the first warm, sunny day of the year feels like a big deal. Suddenly, people are outside after school, walking around town, enjoying the fact that they don't have to wear three layers just to feel warm. The energy shifts almost instantly, like everyone around you has had a mood reset.

So until summer finally arrives, most of us students are just counting down the days until the sun decides to stay after 5 pm and we say can say goodbye to school for awhile.

Source

<https://childmind.org/article/seasonal-affective-disorder/>



A Peek Into Our Minds:

From the day we opened our eyes and set foot into this world, our lives have been filled with unforgettable moments and experiences that have shaped us to be who we are today. However, as many may know, these moments, although they have passed, always live within us because we've been keeping and cherishing them for a very long time. Biologically, though, we remember our memories because they are safely kept in one of the most complex organs in our body, the brain, specifically in our hippocampus. But haven't you noticed that it's almost impossible to vividly recall our times as small babies and toddlers? Yet, although it may sound confusing, it's actually normal and the way things are supposed to work, because our memories only start to stick in our minds the moment we turn three or four. More interestingly, though, our brain doesn't actually fully develop until we're in our mid-twenties. Cool right?

A Moment To Think Back To:

So, one may ask oneself, what about these memories? Why are they so important? Well, the answer is quite clear. For a moment, reflect on this and think about people who have been a crucial part of your life. How do these snippets of your past and long-term relationships make you feel? It doesn't matter if they're negative or positive;



what's important is that they live within us. These memories are the moments that make us each unique from anyone else. And you see, that's where nostalgia comes in. Nostalgia allows us to reminisce about these specific times in our lives that have impacted us as a person. It permits you to cry when thinking back to heartwarming moments in your life. How did it feel when saying goodbye to someone you truly loved? It permits you to gleefully laugh when remembering a funny situation. How unserious was that joke cracked during the middle of class? Have you ever thought back to a moment or maybe even an interaction with a classmate you had a friend-crush on? How gleeful you were able to feel when having that conversation. But, haven't you realized? Don't you feel like now, as high schoolers, these specific memories from our childhood seem to appear more and more by the day? It's as if they know we're after them.

Good Times:

The child's age could be described as the moment when life was at its peak and its happiest. It's a past filled with speciality. We were excited to go to school, yet we never wanted to wake up early. We enjoyed playing outside for hours, although we would end up smelling like a bunch of wet dogs. We always wanted to make friends and play freeze tag or hot potato during gym or recess. We loved to get creative and make a complete mess when crafting things like Christmas ornaments and snowflakes during the winter, or even make things like cute "To-do lists" for the summertime. We had names for our stuffed animals, purchased at either a random toy store, or it was just one passed down by an older sibling or cousin. We even believed bottles of gold and white glitter were pixie dust, and that our old curtains were a part of the new trendy dress collections.

Most importantly, we were innocent and curious to know more about the world and ourselves, and believed anything our peers would tell us. But now, as teenagers, we have started to set these fantasies aside and slowly stopped doing these things. And now, the life that was once a fantasy has become a reality.

Looking Forward:

As the days grow older, so do we, and the majority of us feel the need to look back on our childhood memories because we are afraid of growing up and want to freeze time forever. Now, it all seems so sudden. As elementary and middle school students, we continued to tell ourselves, "Oh, it's too early" or "I'll have plenty of time when I go to high school," each time our parents told us to start becoming independent. But before you know it, your future is already here, slowly beginning. Soon, we'll be high school graduates and off to college, where many say "real life begins." In the meantime, though, our days consist of having to study for either our advanced or AP classes, having to finish the piles of homework we weren't able to finish during school time, and maybe even



having to stay up and finish a creative project we had been brainstorming for days prior. Ah, but where does nostalgia come in again? I want all of us to realize that instead of us longing for our childhood memories, wishing to go back, we could use our nostalgia as a guide for motivation. When you're feeling stressed, I want you to think back to those moments that made you feel satisfied, comfortable, and at ease. These are the moments that will truly give you a feeling of warmth and help you move forward. Think back to that young kid, how proud they would be that their dream has finally been completed.

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<https://sites.google.com/view/nehstheeaglet/home?authuser=1>