POV
Community Engagement & Education
DISCUSSION GUIDE

Thank You for Playing
A Film
by David Osit and Malika Zouhali-Worrall

www.pbs.org/pov
Interactive media and video games are emerging as a wildly innovative art form. At the same time, society is questioning its dependence on technology more than ever: It seems to be bringing us closer together and yet at the same time driving us farther apart. We are fascinated by this tension, which is why we set out to make Thank You for Playing.

From the moment we first heard about Ryan and Amy Green’s video game, “That Dragon, Cancer,” we wanted to know more about why the couple had chosen a medium so often associated with explosions and violence to convey one of the most emotional and spiritually challenging experiences a family can face: raising a young child with a terrible disease. Once we saw for ourselves how many people were profoundly moved by the game, and how playing it often facilitated more, rather than less, social interaction, we were hooked and knew we had to keep following this story. The fact that a video game was capable of awakening this sort of empathy astounded us, and we soon realized that Ryan isn’t only a video game developer, he’s also an artist—and programming is his paintbrush.

Thank You for Playing explores the very personal experiences of a family battling cancer and the beauty and hope that can be found in the artistic process, while also examining the age-old question of where the boundaries lie in representing difficult emotional experiences in art. Ultimately, we hope the film will challenge people to reexamine their own assumptions about bereavement, technology, video games and art.

David Osit and Malika Zouhali-Worrall
Directors/Producers/Editors, Thank You for Playing
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Letter from the Filmmakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Potential Partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Key Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Using This Guide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Background Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The Video Game: “That Dragon, Cancer”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Selected People Featured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>in Thank You for Playing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>General Discussion Questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Discussion Prompts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Taking Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>How to Buy the Film</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Writer**
Faith Rogow, PhD  
*Insighters Educational Consulting*

**Guide Producers and Background Research, POV**
Eliza Licht  
*Vice President, Content Strategy and Engagement, POV*

Aubrey Gallegos  
*Director, Community Engagement and Education, POV*

Alice Quinlan  
*Coordinator, Community Engagement and Education, POV*

**Design:**  
Rafael Jiménez

**Copy Editor:**  
Natalie Danford

**Thanks to those who reviewed this guide:**  
David Osit  
*Director/Producer/Editor, Thank You for Playing*

Malika Zouhali-Worrall  
*Director/Producer/Editor, Thank You for Playing*
When Ryan Green, a video game designer, learns that his 1-year-old son, Joel, has cancer, he and his wife, Amy, begin documenting their emotional journey with a video game. *Thank You for Playing* (83 min.) follows Ryan and his family over two years as they create “That Dragon, Cancer.” The game, the making of which began as a cathartic coping exercise, becomes an immersive poem/autobiography/memoir that sets the gaming industry abuzz. Ryan is confronted with accusations of exploiting tragedy and debates about the possibility that games can stretch beyond the trivial to engage players in profound experiences.

As it chronicles the decisions and details that go into creating a video game, *Thank You for Playing* remains focused on providing an intimate and deeply reflective account of what it’s like for a family to cope with childhood cancer. It is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and a portrait of parents embracing hope in the face of death.
Thank You for Playing is well suited for use in a variety of settings and is especially recommended for use with:

- Your local PBS station
- Groups that have discussed previous PBS and POV films relating to cancer, childhood illness, end-of-life issues or video gaming, including *A Lion in the House* (Independent Lens 2006), *Sun Kissed* (POV 2012), *Seven Songs for a Long Life* (POV 2017) and *Web Junkie* (POV 2015).
- Groups focused on any of the issues listed in the Key Issues section
- Faith-based organizations and institutions
- Medical professionals and support staff
- High school students, youth groups and clubs
- Cultural, art and historical organizations, institutions and museums
- Civic, fraternal and community groups
- Academic departments and student groups at colleges, universities and high schools

Thank You for Playing is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people looking to explore the following topics:

- art
- childhood cancer
- digital storytelling
- end-of-life and palliative care
- faith/religion
- family
- gaming
- health/illness
- media literacy
- medicine
- oncology
- parenting
- pediatrics
- technology
- video game design
- video games

USING THIS GUIDE

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection, designed for people who want to use Thank You for Playing to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit [www.pov.org/engage](http://www.pov.org/engage)
The Video Game: “That Dragon, Cancer”

When Joel Green was 1 year old, he was diagnosed with an atypical teratoid rhabdoid tumor (AT/RT), a fast growing and aggressive tumor. Just before he turned 2, Joel was given between a few weeks and a few months to live. Joel’s family needed a way to process and express their complex emotional journey through Joel’s cancer. For Joel’s father, Ryan Green, a programmer and game developer, the interactive storytelling medium of video gaming was a natural fit. For 18 months, filmmakers David Osit and Malika Zouhali-Worrall followed Ryan and his wife, Amy, as they created a video game called “That Dragon, Cancer” and recruited their sons into the process of documenting their daily life in Love- land, Colorado, for this unusual work of art. Ryan and Amy wrote the script together, and it took four full-time people to finish the game. For Ryan and Amy, who are practicing Christians, “That Dragon, Cancer” also provided a way to explore their faith.

“That Dragon, Cancer” is an interactive and immersive narrative video game that pushes the boundaries of the art game genre by allowing users to “play” the Greens’ real-life story. Over the course of about two hours of poetic gameplay, “That Dragon, Cancer” leads players through Joel and his family’s four-year battle with cancer. The game has been praised for articulating a new standard for emotionally compelling video gaming. A gaming console company eventually invested in the game, turning Ryan’s hobby into his family’s main source of income.

“That Dragon, Cancer” is one of a growing number of video games that are designed to share real-life personal experiences in a creative, interactive way, rather than with a traditional win/lose structure. (See the filmmakers’ New York Times Op-Docs piece, “Games You Can’t Win,” for additional examples.) “That Dragon, Cancer” also presents as a type of art therapy in itself, for both the creators and users. In creating “That Dragon, Cancer,” the Green family accessed an outlet to process their story as a family and share it with others. Artistic outlets like this can help create safe space to ar-
To articulate grief and emotions that might be hard to face more directly. By encouraging the expression of grief, art fosters healing, and the release of emotions—be they guilt, fear, sadness or anger—makes room for new emotions and ideas. “That Dragon, Cancer” allows users to witness the emotions of confusion, loss and grief that affect a family dealing with cancer. Players can, for a few moments, get to know Joel and grieve together with his family.

Sources:


Selected People Featured in Thank You for Playing

**Ryan Green** - indie game developer and Joel's father

**Amy Green** - writer, speaker and Joel's mother

**Joel Green** - diagnosed at age 1 with cancer, he exceeded doctors’ expectations and lived to be 5 years old

**Caleb (7), Isaac (5) and Elijah (2)** - Joel's brothers

**Josh Larson** - works with Ryan and Amy at their studio, Numinous Games, to create the video game “That Dragon, Cancer”
Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen or pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion:

- If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, whom would you ask and what would you ask them?
- What did you learn from this film?
- Did anything in the film “speak truth” to you?
- If a friend asked you what this film was about, what would you say?
- Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly moving or jarring. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?

At the end of your discussion, to help people synthesize what they’ve experienced and move the focus from dialogue to action steps, you may want to choose one of these questions:

- What did you learn from this film that you wish everyone knew? What would change if everyone knew it?
- If you could require one person (or one group) to view this film, who would it be? What do you hope their main takeaway would be?
- Complete this sentence: I am inspired by this film (or discussion) to ________.
Drawing Meaning From Video Games

Ryan observes, “When people think about what a video game is, it’s hard for them to wrap their head around what it is we’re doing. But I think most people wouldn’t have a problem with a serious film, or a book that talks about tragedy.” What is specific to a video game as a storytelling format? In your view, is the format well-suited for telling serious stories? Why or why not?

Amy says, “Over and over again I have my doubts like, can people love Joel? And I just know they can’t love Joel the way we love him. But I think that’s the big experiment. [Members of the team] are going to push the boundaries a little bit to say what can you experience emotionally in a video game? How can you connect?” Do you think a video game like “That Dragon, Cancer” can help people experience empathy for others? How does or doesn’t it help people connect?

Ryan acknowledges that “even in the midst of working on a game about my son, who’s terminally ill, there’s a certain escape” because “when you’re creating art, there’s a certain level of abstraction—it’s not real.” In what ways are games (or art in general) an escape and in what ways do they amplify real emotions? How is it possible for Ryan’s art to immerse him in the experience of caring for Joel and at the same time provide him with critical distance?

At the conference, we see players moved to tears. How might these people respond to the argument that entertainment mediums are inherently trivial and can’t be used to tell profound stories?

Ryan reads this online comment:

I keep hearing about this game and it keeps annoying me that Joel’s dad is turning his struggle into a piece of interactive entertainment... I’m sure the guy has convinced himself that he’s got good intentions... but I have to say that I feel he’s just bullsh***ing himself and this whole endeavor is just self-indulgence.

What do you imagine prompts responses like this?

As Ryan walks around the video game convention exhibit...
hall, we see that many popular games involve shooting and explosions. Why do you think violent combat is such popular game content?

Why do we choose to play the games we play? Would you want to play “That Dragon, Cancer”? Why or why not?

Creative Choices

Ryan, Amy and the team struggle with details like how to create an avatar for Joel, which of his facial features to include, whether to use genuine recordings of Joel’s cry, whether to “interrupt” the narrative with traditional game play. How do such details influence players’ emotional reactions to (or engagement with) the game and story?

In the game, drowning imagery accompanies news that Joel is terminally ill. If your role in the game was “ally,” what would you do in this scene?

Ryan and Amy decide to have Joel’s brothers record dialogue. What do you think the boys gain from being involved in the process? What might the drawbacks be?

Amy tells Ryan, “I know that you don’t want too many elements of real game play, but I would love if in this scene, the player gets to where they’re actually having fun... People going through grief have to do that anyway. Does that make you uncomfortable?” What would your answer be? Should fun be included in a story about losing a fight with cancer?

Amy and Ryan discuss how to end the game appropriately, pondering how best to symbolize Joel moving on while they stay. As a potential player, how would you want the game to end?

The design team needs to play scenes over and over. To cope, one of the developers, Josh Larson, adds a button so that players can skip Ryan’s narration and then observes, “What surprised me about that was, there’s a certain emotional feeling that you get from just skipping the audio over and over again. It almost feels like you’re trying to skip past the soul of the game. I can only do it so much before needing to take a break. Just because emotionally it’s very odd.”
What does his experience suggest about the nature of repetition and the process of desensitization?

Ryan and Amy used a particular art form—game design—to process and express the emotional content of their life experience. How do you choose to share your life experiences? How does the way that we choose to share affect the connections we make with others?

Coping With Cancer

What do you have in common with the Green family? Were any of their experiences familiar?

What did you see Ryan and Amy do that helps Joel’s siblings cope with his illness and eventual death?

Amy says, “I knew that we wouldn’t enjoy the time we had left if I was constantly trying to prepare myself to lose him. And eventually I came to the conclusion that I don’t think it would really help me to mourn him in advance. I would much rather live like he’s living than live like he’s dying… [Contrary to doctors’ predictions] it wasn’t four months. It’s been two and half years now and so, to spend two and a half years perpetually thinking your son’s about to die would be miserable.” What role does perspective play in shaping how we experience events? How do you think Amy and Ryan’s choice to “live like he’s living” instead of focusing on Joel’s impending death influences the family’s experience of Joel’s illness?

Ryan and Amy explain that God will help Joel fight against the cancer dragon, but that leads Caleb to wonder about other children from church who have died. And as Joel continues to suffer, Ryan admits to being disappointed in God. How does faith provide strength and comfort but also open doors to doubt and disappointment?

Ryan says, “I think in America… we’re very afraid of death. We don’t like to talk about it. We hide it behind closed doors.” He wants to use the game to challenge this avoidance: “I want to bring players face-to-face with that shadow of death and ask them what they really believe.” What do you “really believe” and how do your beliefs influence the way you deal with the topic?

Ryan talks about the importance of “in the middle of drowning, choosing rest.” What do you think Ryan means by “choosing rest”?

Ryan recounts, “One of the first things people ask me is,
‘Was it kind of strange showing a game about terminal cancer to this [convention] environment? I’m thinking, why is that so strange? Why are we all walking around anonymous and not talking about the things that shape the way we are? One of the first things you think about when you’re in the hospital with your kid is ‘I’m surrounded by 500 families going through the same thing, but all the doors are closed.’ It’s tragic to me. You’re not alone. I’m not alone. I think we’ve been told a lie that it’s safer to escape. I see people saying, ‘I use games as a form of escape.’ I mean, what are we escaping from? Are we going to spend our whole life escaping from the thing that makes us us?” In your own life, where do you encounter “closed doors” that prevent human connection? What would it take for some of those doors to open?

Ryan says to the filmmakers, “I’m trying to rationalize to myself why I’m talking to you right now, why I’m even allowing you here and why I do this stuff with the game. I guess my only answer is I don’t know what else I’d do. And that I just feel this compulsion to just share it...because as soon as it’s gone, it’ll be a shadow and I won’t be able to remember it...I’m so scared I’m going to forget Joel. I don’t want to forget him. So maybe I’m pointing at as many cam-

eras as I can at him—at us—just [to] freeze this moment.” How do you memorialize the things/people/experiences you treasure?

Ryan reflects, “The most fulfilling and meaningful and passionate and compassionate moments of your life can be in the middle of the deepest loss you can experience. I think that can be beautiful. I hope it’s beautiful.” What did you learn from the film and the Green family about how loss opens up possibilities for compassion, connection and beauty?

---

**Additional media literacy questions are available at:**

[www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php](http://www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php)
Taking Action

- Consider any individuals or communities that you think might benefit from playing “That Dragon, Cancer” and purchase copies for them. Remember to explain what the game is about before they play. (Note: Please exercise caution in sharing the film or game with families or individuals who are currently dealing with terminal illness. Consider whether it is appropriate, helpful or healthy to share at this time. If family members express interest, make sure they fully understand what they are about to experience before watching the film or playing the game.)

- Screen the film as part of a professional development workshop for oncology/pediatrics/palliative care staff. Follow up with a discussion about the ways in which understanding families’ experiences improves medical professionals’ ability to provide excellent care.

- Use the film and the game to give high school students an alternative vision for the possibilities of gaming and encourage them to try creating games themselves, using free-to-use programs such as the MIT Media Lab’s Scratch (see Resources). Download a standards-aligned lesson plan to accompany the film at http://www.pbs.org/pov/thankyouforplaying/.

Ryan Green works on his video game, “That Dragon, Cancer”. Photo courtesy of StillPhotographer
**RESOURCES**

**FILM-RELATED WEB SITES**

**THANK YOU FOR PLAYING**
www.thankyouforplayingfilm.com
Information about the film and filmmakers.
www.facebook.com/thankyouforplayingfilm and
www.twitter.com/tyfpfilm

**“THAT DRAGON, CANCER”**
www.thatdragoncancer.com
In addition to information about the game and its creative team, the website includes the team’s blog and information about Joel’s cancer and treatment. The game is available to purchase for iPhone, iPad, PC and Mac.

**THE NEW YORK TIMES: “GAMES YOU CAN’T WIN”**
This is a short film by the same filmmakers about “That Dragon, Cancer” and other video games that deal with similarly personal and profound struggles.
http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/17/opinion/games-you-cant-win.html?_r=0

**Original Online Content on POV**

To further enhance the broadcast, POV has produced an interactive website to enable viewers to explore the film in greater depth. The Thank You for Playing website—www.pbs.org/pov/thankyouforplaying—offers a streaming video trailer for the film; an interview with the filmmakers; a list of related websites, articles and books; a downloadable discussion guide; a lesson plan with streaming clips; and special features.

**Childhood Cancer**

**AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY**
www.cancer.org/cancer/cancerinchildren/index
The largest cancer advocacy group in the U.S. provides statistics, general information and links to support groups.

**CANCERCARE FOR KIDS**
http://www.cancercare.org/tagged/children
CancerCare for Kids provides free, professional support services for parents, children and adolescents affected by cancer, as well as information about helping children understand cancer and additional resources.

**NATIONAL CANCER INSTITUTE**
This organization offers basic information on types of cancer, treatment options and research.

**Gaming**

**DAILY GOOD: “15 SERIOUS GAMES AIMING TO CHANGE THE WORLD”**
http://www.dailygood.org/more.php?n=5209
This page offers a list of video games designed to raise awareness about social justice issues.
GAMES FOR CHANGE
http://www.gamesforchange.org/

Founded in 2004, Games for Change facilitates the creation and distribution of social impact games that serve as critical tools in humanitarian and educational efforts. “That Dragon, Cancer” won its award for most innovative game in 2016.

SCRATCH
https://scratch.mit.edu/educators/

Created by the MIT Media Lab, this is a free-to-use platform that enables people without any prior experience to program their own interactive stories, games and animations.

REACTIONS TO “THAT DRAGON, CANCER”

These are just two of the many reviews of the game. In very different ways, both delve into the potential for video games to tell serious stories.

- The Guardian: “That Dragon, Cancer and the Weird Complexities of Grief”

- The New York Times: “This Video Game Will Break Your Heart”
  http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/06/arts/that-dragon-cancer-video-game-will-break-your-heart.html

Ryan and Amy Green with their family.
Photo courtesy of Thank You For Playing
HOW TO BUY THE FILM

For information on how to purchase Thank You for Playing, visit http://www.thankyouforplayingfilm.com.

POV

Produced by American Documentary, Inc., POV is public television’s premier showcase for nonfiction films. The series airs Mondays at 10 p.m. on PBS from June to September, with primetime specials during the year. Since 1988, POV has been the home for the world’s boldest contemporary filmmakers, celebrating intriguing personal stories that spark conversation and inspire action. Always an innovator, POV discovers fresh new voices and creates interactive experiences that shine a light on social issues and elevate the art of storytelling. With our documentary broadcasts, original online programming and dynamic community engagement campaigns, we are committed to supporting films that capture the imagination and present diverse perspectives.

POV films have won 36 Emmy® Awards, 19 George Foster Peabody Awards, 12 Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Awards, three Academy Awards®; the first-ever George Polk Documentary Film Award and the Prix Italia. The POV series has been honored with a Special News & Documentary Emmy Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking, three IDA Awards for Best Curated Series and the National Association of Latino Independent Producers Award for Corporate Commitment to Diversity. More information is available at www.pbs.org/pov.

POV www.pbs.org/pov

Since 1994, POV Digital has driven new storytelling initiatives and interactive production for POV. The department created PBS’s first program website and its first web-based documentary (POV’s Borders) and has won major awards, including a Webby Award (and six nominations) and an Online News Association Award. POV Digital continues to explore the future of independent nonfiction media through its digital productions and the POV Hackathon lab, where media makers and technologists collaborate to reinvent storytelling forms. @povdocs on Twitter.

POV Community Engagement and Education

POV’s Community Engagement and Education team works with educators, community organizations and PBS stations to present more than 650 free screenings every year. In addition, we distribute free discussion guides and standards-aligned lesson plans for each of our films. With our community partners, we inspire dialogue around the most important social issues of our time.

American Documentary, Inc. www.amdoc.org

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation.

Major funding for POV is provided by PBS, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and National Endowment for the Arts. Additional funding comes from Nancy Blachman and David desJardins, Bertha Foundation, The Fledgling Fund, Marguerite Casey Foundation, Ettinger Foundation, New York State Council on the Arts, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, Ann Tenenbaum and Thomas H. Lee, and public television viewers. POV is presented by a consortium of public television stations, including KQED San Francisco, WGBH Boston and THIRTEEN in association with WNET.ORG.

You can follow us on Twitter @POVengage for the latest news from POV Community Engagement & Education.

Front cover: The avatars Ryan Green created of himself and his son Joel for the game, “That Dragon, Cancer”.

Photo courtesy of Thank You For Playing