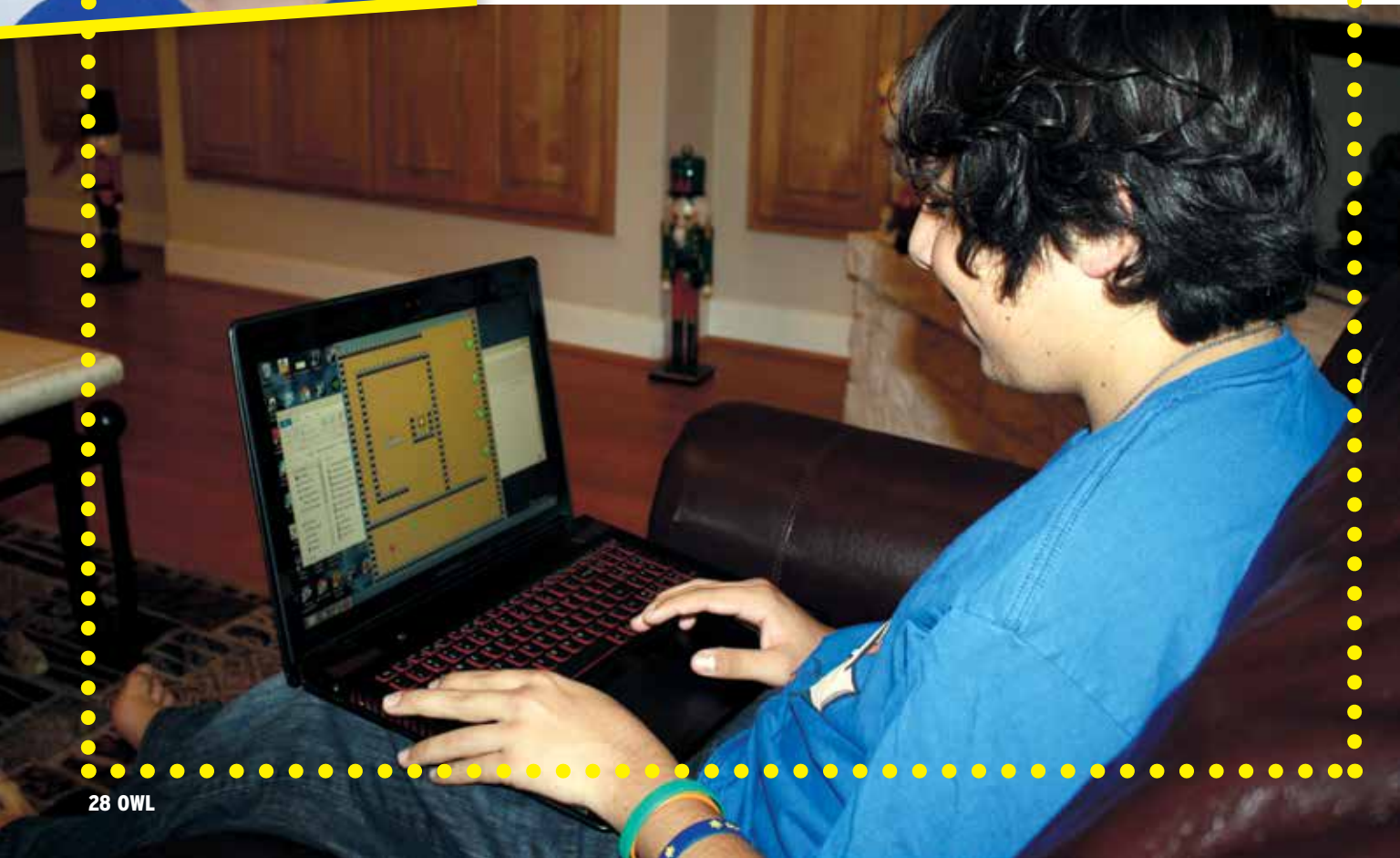


Video Games for a Cause



In 2008, 12-year-old Steven Gonzalez from Texas was given a less than 2 percent chance of survival after doctors discovered he had an aggressive form of cancer. Six years later, Steven has beaten the odds and turned this challenge into a way to help kids heal through video games.

Steven was diagnosed with leukemia in the sixth grade. After he underwent chemotherapy and a blood transplant, his weak immune system required him to be isolated in a sterile environment for 100 days. To cope with the isolation, Steven began mastering computer programs and video games—eventually deciding to make his own video game, called *The Survivor Games*. OWL talked to Steven about his experience.



OWL: When did you realize that you could help someone with video games?

Steven: After I was diagnosed with leukemia at age 12, I developed my first video game, a *Pac-Man*-type maze game. When I gave it out to kids in the hospital, I saw what a good reaction it got. In the following months, kids were coming up to me and talking to me about the game, telling me about various glitches and their recommendations on how to fix them. Despite what they were going through, they were really excited when they talked about games and were able to connect with me even if they met me only once. After that, I started reflecting on how video games played the same huge role in my treatment. I realized that this benefit didn't have to be unique to my story but could be something every kid could benefit from.

OWL: How is *The Survivor Games* different from other video games?

Steven: Unlike your average video game, *The Survivor Games* is a virtual arcade that offers a selection of widely played games and at the same time encourages social activity with other players. Unlike some online gamers, who can be mean-spirited and competitive, the other *Survivor Games* players will be cancer patients as well. While there may still be mean players, the fact that the other people have a better understanding of what you are going through should tone down the harshness and encourage players to stand up for each other.



A screenshot of Steven's game

OWL: Who has helped inspire you with the *Survivor Games* project?

Steven: Both of my parents and my uncle Eddie have really been my inspiration. They have helped me form and shape *The Survivor Games* based on my experience. With their help, I was able to understand what aspects of video games really helped me get through cancer. That knowledge helped propel *The Survivor Games* forward and shape it into the awesome idea it is today.

OWL: What is your advice to youth who want to make a difference?

Steven: Go out and try, because you never know unless you try and give it your all. It takes only one person with the passion to make a difference. If the passion is there, then an idea to make that difference will come, and so will the help you need to make that change.

One of Steven's many talents: unicycling!



What's Next for Steven?

He plans to graduate with a business degree from the University of North Texas. Healthwise, Steven is feeling great and goes to the hospital once a year for checkups. He wants to grow and develop *The Survivor Games* with the help of his uncle. Above all else, he plans on continuing to live his life to the fullest.

Do you know someone who's making a difference? Email and tell us at owl@owlkids.com.