#ARMMEWITH GAMES

20 empathy games for young people in the age of school shootings

Featuring recommendations from leading game designers and educators

Can games help young people growing up in an age of lockdown drills and mass shootings?

We live in an age where the media is dominated by two distinct tropes around the discussion of video games. One narrative depicts politicians who decry video games as a cause of aggression amongst young people. The other narrative represents research on the potential of screen-time (including gaming) as a positive force in the lives of young people, and argues that the moral panic around video games—think of all the *Fortnite* articles you've read recently—is overstated.

At our studio, Literary Safari, we repeatedly encountered this dialectic while creating *William H.G. Butler Middle School*, our illustrated story on Instagram which explores the impact of mass school shootings. We were also struck by the research studies we came across which show no evidence of the link between video games and aggressive behavior. These studies cite video games as a medium that can be designed to build empathy and social-emotional learning skills.

Inspired by the #ArmMeWith movement on social media—in which teachers asked to be armed with everything from more books to bullying prevention programs to prevent school shootings—we asked leading game designers and educators for recommendations of games that can build empathy and social-emotional skills in these strange times of mass shootings.

Our **#ArmMeWithGames** list includes adventure, puzzle, battle, narrative, and live action role play games. We invite you to share your own game recommendations with us on Twitter @litsafarimedia using the #ArmMeWithGames hashtag.

"Video games can engage players with more than just action. Impactful games are about serious topics and can create conditions for deeper learning. Some can even be used in classrooms to help children develop an awareness of both their own and their peers' emotions. This list curates some of the best and most innovative game experiences that can help foster social emotional learning in children."

Matthew Farber, Ed.D.

Assistant Professor of Technology, Innovation and Pedagogy at the University of Northern Colorado, and author of *Gamify Your Classroom*

A NOTE TO PARENTS FROM DR. KAREN SCHRIER

As an educator and a mom of young children, I often hear fears about games and the need to "protect our kids" from them. But, as a games researcher and designer, I also know that games are not simply all bad or all good—it's much more nuanced than that. Like all forms of media, games may help kids connect, feel, express, and learn about each other. Some games have even been designed to foster empathy and share perspectives, such as *That Dragon, Cancer,* which explores grief over a son's cancer diagnosis or *Revolution 1979: Black Friday*, which re-enacts historical points-of-view on the Iranian Revolution. Even popular games may help players grapple with complex emotions, such as how to manage loss. Though it is meant for more mature players, *Red Dead Redemption II* explores themes such as losing family, identity, trust, and one's role in society. Likewise, *Fortnite* players may have to cope with losing games against strangers, friends, or family. Games are yet another way for us to explore who we are and what it means to be human.

I invite you to read through the games on this list, and to consider whether they may be appropriate to share with the young people in your lives. Many are award-winners and were mindfully designed with engaging game mechanics that also support social-emotional learning. I hope you can play some of these games together!
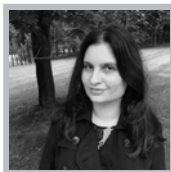
Dr. Karen Schrier

Associate Professor and Founding Director of the Games & Emerging Media program at Marist College, and author of *Knowledge Games*

D**ID** YOU KNOW

A recent University of Wisconsin-Madison study published in the *npj Science of Learning (a Nature Partner Journal)* found that video games can boost empathy by changing neural connections in the brain.

A NOTE TO TEACHERS FROM JOEL LEVIN

In recent years, there have been countless articles posted online extolling the virtues of using video games as an educational tool. Games are often presented as a panacea that can teach any subject and engage the most reluctant student. But when I talk to real teachers and parents about using games in the classroom, their views are more nuanced. Some express skepticism, saying that game-based learning is a gimmick that takes away from other valuable instructional time. Some worry that excessive gaming may lead to addictive or violent behavior. Other people enthusiastically support the idea and tell me about personal stories of the children in their lives and what they have accomplished with games—but they also tell me how much work was involved.

Games have the potential to transport our students to other realities and let them have valuable learning experiences. They can teach both traditional academic subjects and can be used to bolster empathy and social-emotional intelligence. But games are not a silver bullet. Just by booting up a game in a classroom, you will not automatically reap the benefits. Like anything else that's worth doing in education, there is serious work to be done. Teachers must learn what is possible with the games and they must decide how to map their existing lesson plans to a game-based model. They must develop new classroom management strategies and be able to troubleshoot on the fly, and probably the first few times they try using games, they will encounter some setbacks. But if they persevere, amazing experiences are indeed possible.

There is an art to teaching games in the classroom. But it is one that is worth learning because the potential is there and—when it all works—the benefits are real.

Joel Levin

Founder of MinecraftEdu and technology teacher at the Stephen Gaynor School, New York City

Recommendations

80 DAYS

80 Days is an interactive, choose-your-own-adventure, narrative game based on Jules Verne's classic novel *Around the World in 80 Days*. Playing as Passepartout, the valet to the main character Phileas Fogg, players control every action and must find the quickest path from city to city, all the while balancing Fogg's health and finances. This award-winning game teaches players accountability through the decisions they make which impacts the plot into success or disaster.

Available on: 🖥 📱	Single-player	High School

A NORMAL LOST PHONE

A Normal Lost Phone is an investigation game in which players search through a missing person's phone to solve the puzzle of what happened to them. Players read text messages and emails and look through photos and apps which reveal intimate details about the main character's life up until the evening they disappeared. The game touches on social media issues affecting teens today and is an opportunity to consider how devices and online activities can put our privacy and safety on the line.

Available on: 🎮 🖥 📱	Single-player	High School

AMONG THE SLEEP

Among the Sleep is an award-winning first-person narrative game played from the perspective of a two-year-old child experiencing parental neglect. The game begins with the player being awakened in the middle of the night by a mysterious sound and then setting out to find his/her mother in a nightmarish version of their home. This game assesses the effects an environment of alcohol abuse and domestic unrest can have on a young child.

Available on: 🎮 🖥	Single-player	High School

Recommended grade levels are based on the complexity of game mechanics and topic/subject of game

DON'T STARVE TOGETHER

Don't Starve Together is a multi-player video game in which players have to gather supplies and assemble the tools they need to survive. Players navigate a mysterious land while trying to maintain their health, sanity, and hunger levels, keeping away from darkness and deadly creatures. This game is a well-rounded survival game that allows players to play individually or collaboratively and to experience the mental toll of loneliness and unhealthy environments on an individual.

Available on:	Multi-player	Middle School & Up

ELUDE

Elude is an exploration game that aims to enhance the understanding of what people suffering from depression are going through. It was created by the Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab. The game takes place in a forest—a metaphorical representation of varying moods—where players climb trees and resonate with passions that are represented by colorful birds. Ultimately and uncontrollably, players are dragged down, but through gameplay, are challenged to find their way back to the top, where true passions lie. *Free*

Available on:	Single-player	Middle School & Up

MY CHILD LEBENSBORN

My Child Lebensborn is a mobile tamagotchi game set in post-WWII Norway in which players assume the role of foster mother/father to a child experiencing hate based on their biological parents' Nazism. As caregivers, players must take care of the emotional and physical needs of a child who is ostracized by its surrounding society. The game is a portrait of exclusion and othering, but aims to change this narrative by demonstrating the power of social-emotional learning and care.

Available on:	Single-player	Middle School & Up

NEVER ALONE

Never Alone is an adventure game based on Iñupiat (Alaskan native) traditions and characters. It follows the journey of a young girl, Nuna, and her fox as they try to uncover the source of the dangerous blizzards that threaten her village and restore balance to nature. Created with the guidance of nearly 40 Iñupiat elders and community members, the game is based on themes of togetherness, interconnectedness, respect for all things, and cooperation—essential components of social emotional skill building.

Available on:	Multi-player	Middle School & Up

Recommended grade levels are based on the complexity of game mechanics and topic/subject of game

NIGHT IN THE WOODS

Night in the Woods is a narrative adventure game about the angst and confusion of being a young adult entering the real world. The game follows a cat named Mae, who recently dropped out of college and has returned to her hometown to find it isn't how she remembers it and that the people she once knew have moved on with their lives. Players experience a coming-of-age story through animal characters that reflects on relationships, financial stress, and personal responsibility.

Available on:	Single-player	High School

PAPERS, PLEASE

Papers, Please is an award-winning simulation puzzle game set in a fictional communist nation where players take on the role of an immigration official at a border crossing. Players have to choose which migrants get in and which must stay out through a developing plot of political unrest and nuanced social mini stories that assess moral choices and individual responsibility. Each decision made dictates the fate of the player, supporting characters, and outcome of the story.

Available on:	Multi-player	High School
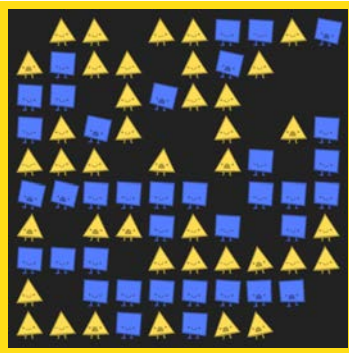
PARABLE OF THE POLYGONS

Parable of the Polygons is a playable blog post on how harmless choices can lead to a harmful world. The game is formatted like an article but contains mini-games that use cute and colorful geometric shapes to show how individual biases can lead to institutional biases such as segregation and marginalization. This game is based on the work of Nobel Prize winning game theorist Thomas Schelling. ***Free***

Available on:	Single-player	Middle School & Up

PLEASE KNOCK ON MY DOOR

Please Knock on My Door is a narrative game in which players attempt to help a person suffering from depression and social anxiety. Through mundane daily activities, players walk alongside the game's central character and watch as they try to cope through life, work, and friendship. The game aims to help players understand the fears and struggles of what it's like to live with depression and demonstrates the power of opening up to others.

Available on:	Single-player	High School

Recommended grade levels are based on the complexity of game mechanics and topic/subject of game

PRISM

Prism is a game for elementary school students where players assume the role of a nocturnal fox who seeks help from other animals to save their forest from an impending flood. Through the metaphor of the fox's struggle of navigating during the daytime and communicating with diurnal animals, players experience the feeling of sensory overload and the difficulty of social communication that their peers with autism may experience. The game promotes empathy and ultimately teaches children how to be better friends to those with autism spectrum disorder. ***Free***

Available on: 🖥️📱	Single-player	Elementary School

SIGN

Sign is a live action role-play game (played with direction cards) that is based on the experience of 50 deaf children in 1970s Nicaragua. At that time, the country did not have a form of sign language—if you were deaf, you had no tools for expression. In Sign, players follow a piece of this journey and experience the frustrations of not being able to communicate. Through gameplay, participants create connections and develop tools to express themselves.

Available on: 🂡🂮	Multi-player	Middle School & Up

STARBOUND

Starbound is an open-ended, multi-player, adventure sandbox game in which players explore a galaxy full of planets, spaceships, and unique alien civilizations. Players can build anything from a simple hut to towering fortresses. A game like this—similar to Roblox, Lego Worlds, Minecraft —provides opportunities to explore creativity, community building, and even social-emotional skills, as it takes a lot of interpersonal communication to build a thriving starfaring civilization!

Available on: 🖥️	Multi-player	Elementary School

THIS WAR OF MINE

This War of Mine is a simulation war game in which players assume the role of average citizens attempting to survive a conflict that's destroying their town. Inspired by the 1992-96 Siege of Sarajevo during the Bosnian War, the game asks players to make difficult decisions in desperate situations. Through gameplay, players also experience a socio-emotional connection with the game's supporting characters who may become depressed or disturbed as a result of their circumstances. A table top version of the game is available.

Available on: 🎮🖥️📱🂡🂮	Single-player	High School

Recommended grade levels are based on the complexity of game mechanics and topic/subject of game

Unmanned

Unmanned is an unconventional war simulator game. Players assume the role of a soldier who controls an unmanned attack drone in his office by day, and then goes home at night to lead a suburban life. Through gameplay that combines battle actions with everyday activities such as shaving, players learn that the conflict that grips the soldier is not on the battlefield, but in his mind. ***Free***

| Available on: 🖥	Single-player	High School
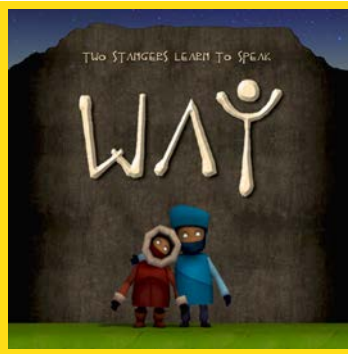
Way

Way is a two-person game, where both players (who are anonymous strangers) play together using only nonverbal communication. The players are separated by a split screen and must work together to overcome obstacles that they can only do with the help of the other person. At the very end, once the players win the 20-minute game together, they are finally in the same screen and can write messages to each other atop a map of the world. ***Free***

Available on: 🖥	Multi-player	Middle School & Up
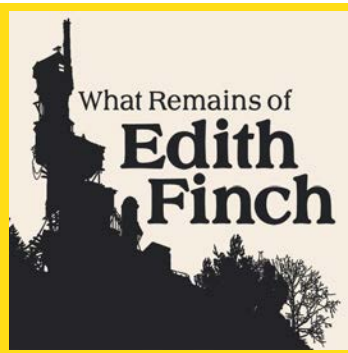
What Remains of Edith Finch

What Remains of Edith Finch is a narrative exploration game in which players assume the role of protagonist Edith, who returns to her childhood home to investigate her family's history. Players enter the elaborate Finch house and discover the eccentricities of Edith's family, how they lived, and how they died. The first-person perspective of the game promotes empathy-formation by making players experience the unknowable thoughts of various family-members, which also helps Edith better understand herself.

Available on: 🎮🖥	Single-player	High School

Wonder city

Wonder City is a web-based game that puts the player into the shoes of a high-school girl who discovers she has superpower abilities. Through decision-making gameplay, players express themselves and discover their style of heroism. The game realistically represents race and body image by empowering young girls to adopt their superhero identity and championing their own values. It is an extension of an independent documentary film, *Wonder Women! The Untold Story of American Superheroines*. ***Free***

Available on: 🖥	Single-player	Middle School & Up

Recommended grade levels are based on the complexity of game mechanics and topic/subject of game

Zoo U

ZooU is a choice game set in a school for young zookeepers. The game was designed by psychologists and therapists for school and classroom use and features a teacher interface. The gameplay invites kids to navigate social situations in a familiar setting that correlates to their own real-life experiences at school. Faced with solving social problems, players are reminded to consider the perspectives of all parties in question, the goal being to build social emotional skills such as compassion, friendship, and confidence through adaptive gameplay.

Available on: 🖥	Single-player	Elementary School

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Multimedia

Podcast: Funny As Tech
*Karen Schrier Explains
Empathy and Video Games*

TV: Adam Ruins Everything
*Behind the Myth that
Video Games Cause Violence*
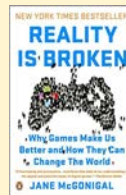
TED Talks
Talks on Gaming

Books

Power Play
Asi Burak &
Laura Parker

**Gamify Your
Classroom**
Matthew Farber

**The Art of
Screen Time**
Anya Kamenetz

**Reality is
Broken**
Jane McGonigal

**Knowledge
Games**
Karen Schrier

**The New
Childhood**
Jordan Shapiro

Game Lists

GAMES FOR CHANGE

ithrive GAMES

tg teacher gaming

common sense

Click images to access

Recommended grade levels are based on the complexity of game mechanics and topic/subject of game

Contributors

Asi Burak is a veteran of the videogame and tech industries, an award-winning executive producer, and co-author of *Power Play: How Video Games Can Save the World*. Burak was named one of the "Digital 25: Leaders in Emerging Entertainment" by the Producers Guild of America and Variety Magazine. He has spoken at TED Talks, Harvard Kennedy School, and Sundance, and is a faculty member at the School of Visual Arts' MFA in Design for Social Innovation.

Paul Darvasi is an educator, game designer, speaker, and writer. He teaches English and media studies in Toronto, Canada and is a doctoral candidate at York University. Paul has worked with the US Department of Education, and recently wrote a working paper for UNESCO on how commercial video games can be used for peace education and conflict resolution. Paul's work has been featured on PBS, NPR, CBC, the Huffington Post, Edutopia, and MindShift.

Nick Fortugno is a game designer and a founder of Playmatics, which has created a variety of digital and real-world games for organizations including Red Bull, Disney, American Museum of Natural History, and the Corporation of Public Broadcasting. He is co-founder of the Come Out and Play street games festival and has taught game design and interactive narrative design for 15 years at institutions such as Columbia University and the Parsons School of Design.

Aleksander Husøy is a teacher of English and Social Sciences in Norway. One of Scandinavia´s leading practitioners and educators in the use of games in learning, he was the 2015 recipient of the National Teacher Prize *The Golden Apple* for innovation in the use of technology in education. He has produced a series of teacher guides on games and learning for the Norwegian Directorate of Education and iThrive Games.

Steve Isaacs is a teacher at Bernards Township Public Schools in New Jersey, an edtech influencer, community builder, and leader in the area of teaching Game Design and Development. Steve is co-founder of #EdTechBridge, a monthly Twitter chat and community working to create better EdTech for students, a champion for esports in education, and lead content producer for Minefaire, a massive Minecraft fan experience. He was honored as the ISTE Outstanding Educator in 2016.
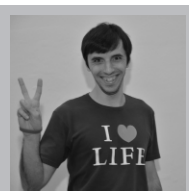
Alexandr Iscenco is a co-founder of MEGA, the Moldovan Environmental Governance Academy, a social entrepreneurial organization focused on delivering services of game development, gamified trainings, and e-learning. He organized the first innovation camp and hackathon for teachers on using gamification in education on conflict resolution and peace building in Moldova. This initiative, Operation P.E.A.C.E., resulted in board games and online games which were then distributed in six participating countries.
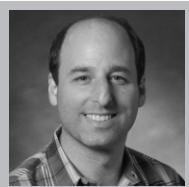
Barry Joseph is the VP of Digital Experience at Girl Scouts of the USA. Known as a changemaker who is passionately devoted to envisioning new ways digital media can "address significant personal and social issues," he is a driving force in both youth development and digital learning. Prior to Girl Scouts, he was Associate Director for Digital Learning at the American Museum of Natural History and founding Director of the Online Leadership Program at Global Kids.
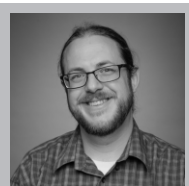
Joel Levin is a teacher who collaborated with the creators of Minecraft to make MinecraftEdu, a custom remix of the original Minecraft designed for classroom use which he subsequently sold to Microsoft. Since then, he has co-founded TeacherGaming.com and created KerbalEdu and other games designed for teachers and students. He is now back teaching technology at a school in NYC and recently gave a TED Talk on Minecraft's potential to teach more than just academics.
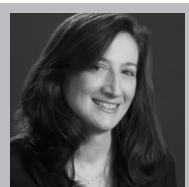
Michelle Miller is the President and Co-Founder of Games and Learning. An early e-game producer, Michelle headed PBS KIDS Interactive during its initial start-up phase. She has also directed digital operations for Greenpeace International and the March of Dimes and consults for kids' media and education companies.
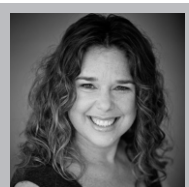
Susanna Pollack is the President of Games for Change, the leading global advocate for the power of games as drivers of social impact. In her role there, she produces the annual Games for Change Festival. She also developed the G4C Student Challenge to bring a games design challenge to middle and high school students across NYC and launched the Games for Learning Summit with collaboration from the US Department of Education and the Entertainment Software Association.

Robin Sharma is the Gaming Curriculum Developer at UNESCO's Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP) in New Delhi, India. MGIEP's Games for Learning initiatives harness the power of play to transcend national boundaries, hone problem solving skills, and promote empathy. Robin is the lead implementer of the Gaming Programme, which supports research and develops products to integrate digital games for socio-emotional learning within and outside the classroom.

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES

Educators Share How Video Games Can Help Kids Build SEL Skills by Tina Nazerian (*EdSurge*)

Digital Play for Global Citizens by Jordan Shapiro (Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop)

The Limits and Strengths of Using Digital Games as "Empathy Machines" by Matthew Farber and Karen Schrier (UNESCO MGIEP)

It Starts with a Flicker: How Games Can Bring Humanity Closer Together by Karen Schrier (*Variety Magazine*)

The **#ArmMeWithGames** list is a companion resource to **William H.G. Butler Middle School**, an Instagram-style graphic novella which explores the impact of mass school shootings on America's schools, children, and families. Pair it with **#ArmMeWithBooks**, a list of book recommendations from award-winning children's authors.

Download the graphic novella and discussion guide to foster dialogue between students, teachers, and parents.

LITERARY SAFARI