Beyond the Page

Pairing Children's Literature with Video Games

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A patron walks in and asks for the latest *Minecraft* book—luckily a copy was just checked in! Like other media reinforcement books, popular video game books often demand multiple copies and frequent replacements. A satisfied patron might walk out with a target book and a stack of other titles.

But what if the model were flipped, and instead of reinforcing a single franchise, connections among games and books represented the library's wider book and media collection? We introduce recent narrative video games for tweens, encouraging exploration of themes and topical connections between games and the children's literature collection.[1]

In a recent largescale UK National Literacy Trust study ($n = 4,626$), researchers found that 79 percent of children ages 11 to 16 reported playing video games encouraged them to improve as readers.[2] Playing video games led respondents to read, including game reviews, blogs, books, and fan fiction. Further, 73.1 percent of respondents who reported not enjoying reading stated playing video games helped them to "feel more part of a story than reading a book-based text."[3] For such reluctant readers, can bridges be built between books and games?

In addition to potentially promoting literacy, games can be a safe practice space for children to play with emotions, free from real-world consequences.[4] Distinct from other media forms, video games allow players to have agency over outcomes and vicariously experience consequences of their choices.[5] When games put players in a moral quandary, and when they encounter a similar dilemma in a book, readers' emotions may be primed and ready to bring to the print narrative.

For example, reading about a book character who steals food to survive might engender a sense of pathos. However, when presented with a similar moral quandary in a video game, a wider palette of emotions emerges because the player is participating. In addition to joy and pride, research on video games suggests that players may vicariously feel guilt, shame, and regret—emotions they can bring to similar experiences in reading.[6]

Permission to Feel author Mark Brackett suggests emotional awareness should be the starting point of social and emotional learning (SEL).[7] The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), where Brackett serves as a board member, defines SEL as a process through which people "acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities,
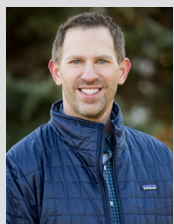
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manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions."[8]

In many video games, players use digital avatars to "perspective-take." Players may also develop virtual empathy with non-player characters, cooperate in teams, and establish strategies to achieve goals.[9] Some video game experiences are not necessarily "winnable" in the traditional sense but instead come to a resolution, much like the story in a novel does.

For instance, *GRIS* is a puzzle platform video game painted in watercolor, steeped in symbolic metaphor, with game levels mapped to stages of grief. Players overcome obstacles, which can lead to feelings of catharsis. After all, you don't "win" grief, you arrive (hopefully) at acceptance.

Through the media psychology lens, some games offer pure escapist diversions from real life.[10] However, other games—much like books, comics, and movies—have increasingly matured to provide players a rich and nuanced experience. There are contemplative video games. Some can inspire emotions like awe, sadness, tenderness, and compassion. In others, players confront difficult emotions vicariously, such as grief and loss.

In one experimental study, children who experienced sorrow in media showed a similar depth of emotional response as when they remembered personal traumas, but the media experiences came without a rise in anxiety.[11] Games can provide a low-risk context for encountering difficult emotions.

The CASEL SEL Framework takes a systemic approach where SEL is infused throughout children's lives—not just in classrooms and schools. Systemic SEL means that these opportunities should manifest and be reinforced in all settings children inhabit, including home and community.[12] Communities can include online spaces, where learning is self-driven (e.g., fandom, *Minecraft*, YouTube), as well as in-person informal learning environments like museums and libraries. Here is where librarians come in. Children's librarians are well-positioned as learning brokers, where they can facilitate tween patrons to connect their interests to existing opportunities, such as pairing games to books with similar themes.

Children's librarians might recommend pairing books with a hero's journey arc, such as Riordan's *The Lightning Thief* series, for fans of games with similar structures, such as the award-winning emotional game *Journey* (2012). The TED Ed Talk "What Makes a Hero" may also be a useful informational pairing. From *Star Wars* to *The Hunger Games*, this animated talk teaches about a story pattern so often used in movies and books. After reading, playing, and watching, tweens may begin to see themselves as heroes in their own adolescent journeys.

Video games can do more than put players into other people's shoes. As with "impossible field trips,"[13] they can mentally transport players to faraway situations. This article suggests pairing narrative and emotional arcs of books and video games. We also recommend books to pair with games, playing on similarities to encourage children to become more active readers.

Pairing Video Games with Children's Literature

Book pairings with video games are an ideal, yet underutilized, approach to harnessing the interests of child readers.[14] ALSC already recognizes the potential of various book pairings for engaging readers across titles, including fiction to nonfiction pairings,[15] and researchers have found that book-to-book pairings can increase strategic reading and reader engagement.[16] The game titles we discuss here exemplify story-based and atmospheric gaming, where the play is more about experiences, narratives, character development, tone, and setting than about winning or achieving goals in a token economy. These games emphasize multimodal media's evocative, social, and exploratory potential—pleasures of story already recognized in children's literature.[17] Among the earliest titles in story-based gaming to be marketed to tweens, these games' literary aspirations make them strong candidates for pairing with children's books.

***Never Alone* (*Kisima Ingitchuna*) (2014).** In this Peabody Award-winning video game based on an Inupiaq Alaska Native folktale, players control Nuna, a young girl on a hero's journey, and her companion, a mystical arctic fox. A core aspect is "the symbiotic relationship between Nuna and the fox that befriends her."[18] Often, the only way to succeed is to work together. When players do so, "cultural insights" are unlocked, documentary video clips from and about the Iñupiat people.

The symbiotic relationship embodies the importance of collaboration, teamwork, and goal setting, which are SEL competencies. Further, because *Never Alone* is based on a traditional folktale and the creative contributions of an Iñupiaq poet and storyteller, it is prime for pairings with fiction and nonfiction books involving Alaskan native cultures, such as Paula Ikuutaq Rumbolt's *The Legend of Lightning and Thunder* (2013) or Russ Kendall's *Eskimo Boy: Life in an Iñupiaq Eskimo Village* (1992). Pairing tween books with this game's Cultural Insights segments can promote cultural empathy as players and readers perspective-take inside the Iñupiaq village.

***Alba: A Wildlife Adventure* (2021)** is a game with potential to take tween readers on a social and emotional journey. In this winner of *Pocket Gamer*'s Best Apple Arcade Game of 2021, players control Alba, a young girl staying with grandparents on an island off the coast of Spain. On her adventures, she takes photos of wildlife for her in-game journal. Her hero's journey is a quest to persuade island residents to sign a petition. Local politicians want to build a new hotel resort where protected wildlife live. Are prospects of economic gain worth the trade-off of harming ecosystems? Questions like this engage players in ethical decision-making, an important SEL competency. *Alba* might be paired with books that explore similar themes, such as Carl Hiassen's *Hoot* (2002), or Samantha M. Clark's *The Boy, the Boat, and the Beast* (2018), or matched with informational books on Mediterranean and Spanish cultures.

Figure 1. Screenshot of a word with magical properties from *Lost Words*.

These titles are noteworthy for their approach to diversity.[19] Games, like books, can serve as mirrors and windows through which diverse players encounter and enact diversity in gender, race, culture, color, and languages through the game's avatars, environments, and social interactions.[20] Story-based games also represent a breakthrough opportunity for meaning-making through action representation for children. Moreover, they are opportunities to engage children in the library's book collection via similarities in social and emotional themes, and similarities in literary forms such as character, setting, and story grammar. Another narrative game takes these trends a step further by making clear overtures toward books and words as playful objects and putting reading and writing center stage in gameplay.

***Lost Words: Beyond the Page* (2021)** is another game with universal themes that can be paired with tween books. Released to widespread critical acclaim,[21] it is a single-player (or reader) adventure built on the hero's journey and stages of grief. Emotional depth makes the game a powerful experience for learning emotional awareness, empathy, and resilience. The gameplay involves moving back and forth between Izzy's journal and the fantasy world of the novel she is writing.

Words are integral to the game, where she hops from phrase to phrase among lines in her journal, finding keywords to help her make decisions, overcome obstacles, and create more profound meaning as she faces a heartbreaking personal loss. Visual and interactive elements create a purposeful relationship between words and images,[22] as the player journeys with Izzy through eight chapters. Each chapter begins as contemporary realism in her journal and switches to a fantasy world inside Izzy's creative writing project. Players literally and figuratively traverse her story, experiencing what she cares about and how her losses change her.

Lost Words goes further in promoting reading and writing through direct emphasis on words as paths and objects of power. Words are objects and environments in the game, with players literally walking on words in the journaling segments. In the fantasy segments using the game controller to drag the word "rise" over objects (such as megaliths in figure 1) results in the object lifting. The word "hope" illuminates darkness and "break" destroys obstacles. Break and hope are also metaphors for the anger and acceptance stages of grief, respectively.

Lines of handwritten words make up the platform or floor a player must walk across to journey from page to page in Izzy's journal (see figure 2). This harks to the magic of walking into a book Disney animators created in the 1960s when Winnie the Pooh bounced on words, looked at sentences, and moved between pages. Bringing the book to life is a mission creators of *Lost Words* embrace.

In addition to Izzy journaling to find her way in life, both she and her fantasy protagonist gather words as tokens, using them to face obstacles or find the path forward. Both authors of this article are avid readers, and we realize how powerful and unusual it is for a video game environment to build this kind of explicit value for words, sentences, pages, writing, and books—not merely as backgrounds or context but as integral aspects of gameplay.

We suggest pairing *Lost Words* with both realistic and fantasy novels featuring a hero's journey and with stories dealing with

Figure 2. Screenshot of the interactive journal from *Lost Words*.

loss and grief (a book list is provided near the end of the article). Pairings might also include nonfiction books on grieving, or the world myth tales the hero's journey derives from.[23] To explore this potential, we will dive deeper into connections possible when pairing this game to a specific novel.

In ***The Thing About Jellyfish*** by Ali Benjamin (2015), Suzy is still reeling from a difficult breakup with her best friend, Franny, during summer before middle school. Her confusion doubles when she learns Franny has inexplicably drowned on a family vacation to the ocean. As her grief compounds she stops speaking completely, turning all her attention to jellyfish stings as the cause of Franny's death (Franny was a fabulous swimmer, after all).

Her relationships at home and school become fraught and distant. She makes emotional space only for obsessive study of jellyfish stings and a quest to meet the international scientist who knows the most. Alternating chapters between conventional novel style and introspective journal writing, we follow Suzy as her lost words lead her on a journey toward inevitable conflicts, disappointments, and finally to resolutions including rediscovery and new comfort with her voice.

Lost Words Beyond the Page Paired with *The Thing About Jellyfish*

The creators of both *Lost Words: Beyond the Page* and *The Thing About Jellyfish* have purposefully built stories around both the hero's journey archetype and the psychological stages of grieving.

Both works use journaling as a window into the main character's mind and heart. Both emphasize young people's feelings of powerlessness and disorientation when losing someone they love. Both emphasize the power of words and language. The specific comparisons we draw below between this game and book are examples suggestive of broad potential for thematic book sets, where a story-based game like *Lost Words* might act as a gateway to books and vice versa. (Spoiler alert for both the game and the book in the following section.)

Pairing *Lost Words* with *The Thing About Jellyfish* helps players and readers see how creators treat similar structures and themes in different media. How do storytellers in video games and books help people think and feel as they read and play? *Lost Words* and *The Thing About Jellyfish* share structural and thematic connections. In both works the main character

- loses a loved one;

- journeys through stages of grief via a hero's journey structure; and

- uses words as explicit forms of empowerment and disempowerment.

In *Lost Words*, Izzy loses her grandmother, a mentor and guide for her as a young writer. Starting with a stroke and hospitalization, and progressing toward death, Izzy is forced to come to grips with how aging, illness, and death change her family. She writes the death of the grandmother into her fantasy novel, where her main character is a protégé to the magical

matriarch—this grandmother's passing in the fantasy world mirrors Izzy's loss in the realistic world.

By contrast, Suzy suffers from Franny's rejection, feeling the loss all too common when friendships shift between elementary and middle school. They are still on bad terms when Franny drowns. Suzy struggles with self-doubt as she faces the sudden impossibility of reconciliation with her former friend. What does it mean to lose a childhood best friend, compared to losing an elderly family member to illness and old age? How might readers and players think about death and grieving across these two scenarios? How do everyday conflicts and feelings that already exist between people further complicate the process of grieving?

The psychological journey of grief is fictionalized in *Lost Words* through Izzy's creative writing, a fantasy novel. Her fictional hero suffers a parallel loss to her realistic one, but with dramatic outcomes in the fantasy setting. In *Jellyfish*, the psychological journey plays out in fully formed travel plans Suzy makes to run away to Australia. She is positive her compulsive study of jellyfish will solve Franny's unexplained death, and that traveling to the lab of the world's top jellyfish scientist will bring resolution.

In both works, the hero's journey embodies denial and bargaining stages,[24] where both characters escape the harsh and realistic present into an imagined journey. Each journey plays out in its own way. The hero protagonist of Izzy's novel goes through a series of interactive episodes pursuing a dragon, culminating in a confrontation that ironically does not resolve her loss. In the book, Suzy's elaborate journey is revealed mostly in the journal, where she puzzles together thoughts and feelings that make running away feel like her only option, which also doesn't work out as expected. Each work has its unique way of deconstructing the journey as the characters reach acceptance of grief.

In *Jellyfish*, the thematic use of words begins when Suzy stops talking after Franny's death. She withholds her voice, seeing her failures as problems of misunderstanding words. When she speaks, she feels she makes things worse. Of the two, the book is more literally the story of "lost words." What does it mean that Suzy withholds language and keeps distant from friends, family, and teachers, yet articulates herself so well in her private journal? How and when does she finally dare to use her voice again? In *Lost Words*, when Izzy faces the loss of her mentor the words in her journal literally crumble around her. She simultaneously reaches impasses and character difficulties in her fantasy novel. Throughout her fantasy journey, the hero gathers magic words and puts them in a book to be used when she gets stuck. These

single-word puzzles are figures for Izzy's feelings of anger and betrayal. What do words mean to Izzy, and how does her recovery of words and language help her find a path forward? Across the two works we experience two different versions of lost and found words, which create openings for people to consider the impact of each story's way with words.
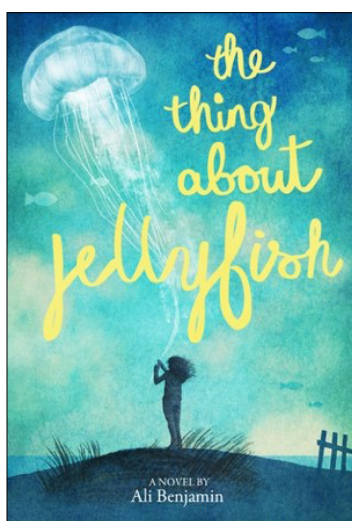
Video Games as Literature?

Some may treat video games as tween literature. Are they literature? Should we honor them by "reading" them with the same tools we use to discuss books? New modes of media, new forms of storytelling, and new technologies always open paths for artists who believe in the experience of storytelling, its openings for interpretive, evocative, and generative response. We should consider "games as cultural artifacts . . . by showing how games are socially significant and can be analyzed as such."[25]

It's important to note that this same value question was directed in past decades at media we now accept, such as dime novels, movies, children's picturebooks, and comic books. The games we review here are the work of attentive creators who understand both interactive game modalities and narrative. Those involved in children's media can learn much about story-based video games as recent art forms by inviting them into our literary environments.

Major distributors such as Microsoft have done much to help children get wide access to well-known games like *Minecraft*, and book publishers have created a large shelf of popular fiction as well as informational and guidebooks to build on game familiarity. Beyond company-sponsored media reinforcement, authors like Mark Cheverton have published original fiction based in the *Minecraft* world. *Blockopedia* is an informational text based on minerals and ores from the game. Further, many libraries now host *Minecraft* events, seeing the benefit of gaming as part of a larger informational literacy.

Outside the *Minecraft* franchise, HarperCollins publishes a graphic novel and activity-book series called PopularMMOs, which builds its titles on a variety of gaming worlds featured on the popular YouTube channel of the same name. Yet these expansive "transmedia storytelling" traditions may miss thematic connections between games and texts because they build mostly on existing settings and characters from the games.[26] Building on thematic connections, as we discuss here, depends on librarians getting to know the human themes available in narrative games and how these might work with thematic readings of existing children's literature. The ways themes play out across different ensembles of characters and settings offers

gamer-readers a clear opportunity to discuss each work's treatment of themes, and the affordances and constraints of each different form of media.

Story-Based Games in the Work of Children's Librarians

The themes and structures in *Lost Words: Beyond the Page* can support pairing to other tween books with similar elements. The hero's journey and the stages of grief are specific forms we consider when pairing this game with a book. Knowing some themes and structures in *Lost Words*, consider its potential with the following titles, both recent and well-established.

- *The Line Tender,* Kate Allen, 2019

- *The Land of Yesterday,* K.A. Reynolds, 2018

- *The Bone Sparrow,* Zana Fraillon, 2016

- *The Shark Caller,* Dianne Wolfer, 2016.

- *The Shark Caller,* Zillah Bethell, 2021

- *Swallowed by a Secret*, Risa Nyman, 2020

- *Maybe a Fox*, Kathi Appelt and Alison McGhee, 2016

- *Milo: Sticky Notes and Brain Freeze*, Alan Silberberg, 2010

- *The Fourteenth Goldfish,* Jennifer Holm, 2014

- *A Monster Calls*, Patrick Ness and Siobhan Dowd, 2011

- *The Book Thief,* Markus Zusak, 2005

Building a thematic pairing goes beyond noticing simple connections in setting and character. This list of novels was built by considering the narrative arc of *Lost Words* and then searching for books with thematic connections to its treatment of the stages of grief and the hero's journey—both of which were explicitly noted by Rhianna Pratchett, the author of the game. In *The Bone Sparrow*, for example, the journey of a refugee child in a detention center involves doing all he can to forge a friendship with a girl on the other side of the fence, while striving to confront his own grief for his missing father and his family's struggles as refugees. This child's journey and stages of grief can be compared to those of Izzy in *Lost Words*, exploring emotional similarities and comparing affective experiences shared across the two media forms.

Book-Game Pairings in Readers' Advisory and Shelving

Realizing that many children spend much of their free time gaming, readers' advisory is a ripe area in practice for making connections between games and books. To be ready for readers' advisory, children's librarians might play *Lost Words*, *Alba*, and *Never Alone*

to discover thematic, structural, and SEL connections to books. Our specific look at themes in *Lost Words* and *The Thing About Jellyfish* is a start at these kinds of connections.

Librarians might ask patrons about themes and emotional experiences they appreciate in books and games or ask directly whether patrons have played story-based games yet. Since the genre is relatively new for children, librarians may be the first to help children learn about a rich new form of story. Gamers who play story-based games may be ready to discuss their themes and structures.

Curated lists of books with connections to games might underpin recommendations across games and books—we provide a start in Table 1. Further, what role might game-to-book pairings take in a library's plans for summer programs or book clubs? Games such as *Lost Words*, *Alba*, and *Never Alone* beg to be displayed alongside books. We imagine book displays where games are shown alongside sets of books, simultaneously promoting both game play and reading.

Collections and Catalog Concerns

What place do story-based games have in the library's collection? Would it take new infrastructure and organization or are resources dedicated to games and gaming? Do librarians search for well-reviewed story-based games as well as the educational games we often see in children's sections? What might circulation look like? Some libraries circulate hard media like cartridges while others purchase licensing agreements or subscriptions.

Further, many cataloging systems allow for Goodreads- or Amazon-like connections among titles ("If you enjoyed this, you might enjoy that") through locally selected subject tags. Subject tagging books so story-based games appear as recommendations (and *vice versa*) would be a way of supporting patrons in moving between the two media forms. Table 1 may be a useful tool in collections and cataloging, illustrating multiple thematic connections between games and books.

Not all librarians have equal access to digital gaming consoles, current computers, and high-speed broadband. Although we encourage librarians to advocate for resources that would put gaming infrastructure in place, the question remains: What about now? Some narrative games, such as *Walden, a game EDU*, are free to play and have been built to be played in the internet browser on bare-bones computers such as Chromebooks—without any installation of software.

If library computers are simply too few or too old to support gaming at the library, there are a host of story-based card and tabletop games that might be paired with books. In addition to the familiar role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, games such as *Werewolf*, *La Mancha*, *Love Letter*, and *For the Queen* can be purchased for a library's collection and can prime readers for experiences that bridge games and books. Libraries throughout the nation already host tabletop gaming nights, and making book

Table 1. Themed Pairings of Games and Books

Game	Theme	Book(s)
Lost Words: Beyond the Page (2021)	Grief, hero's journey	*The Thing About Jellyfish*, Ali Benjamin (2015)
Journey (2012)	Hero's journey	*Rescue*, Jennifer A. Nielsen (2021) *Marcus Vega Doesn't Speak Spanish*, Pablo Cartaya (2018)
Alba: A Wildlife Adventure (2021)	Human relationship to nature	*Hello, Universe*, Erin Entrada Kelly (2017) *The Last Bear*, Hannah Gold (2021)
Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna) (2014)	Interdependence	*A Journey to the Mother of the Sea*, Mâliâraq Vebæk (1999) *The Legend of Lightning and Thunder*, Paula Ikuutaq Rumbolt (2013)
Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (2017)	Exploration & discovery, resilience & rebuilding	*The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Boat of Her Own Making*, Catherynne M. Valente (2012)
Walden, a game EDU (2022)	Human relationship to nature	*Thoreau: A Sublime Life*, Maximilien Le Roy (2016) *The Story That Cannot Be* Told, J. Kasper Kramer (2020)
Unpacking (2021)	Self-reflection & growth	*The Eleventh Trade*, Alyssa Hollingsworth (2018) *I Can Make This Promise*, Christine Day (2019)
Hades (2018)	Resilience, family	Journey of the Pale Bear, Susan Fletcher (2018) *A Long Walk to Water*, Linda Sue Park (2010)
GRIS (2018)	Grief	*The Line Tender*, Kate Allen (2019)
That Dragon, Cancer (2016)	Loss, grief	*A Monster Calls*, Patrick Ness (2011)
Portal 2 (2011)	Unreliable narrator	*The Westing Game*, Ellin Raskin (1978) *The Magic Thief*, Sarah Prineus (2008) *The False Prince*, Jennifer A. Nielse (2012)
Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy (2021)	Family & belonging	*Boston Jane*, Jennifer Holm (2001) *The Good Thieves*, Katherine Rundell (2019) *Pine Island Home*, Polly Horvath (2020)

Note: A downloadable PDF version of this table is available at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1J2mIgw0Nh_7U-fZRO0vyYkj66uWsqypU/view?usp=sharing.

connections to the games played at these hosted events would be a perfect opportunity to point gamers to the book collection.

Request Narrative Children's Games

The gaming industry would likely respond if libraries expressed demand for more story-based games. Society already witnessed a large shift around comics, where the explosion of graphic novels for older readers led quickly to demand for and production of children's titles. Libraries have been perfect partners, embracing comics across the collection. This is now an important shift for the game industry, where the children's market has been dominated largely by closed-ended educational games with specific learning outcomes, rather than literary games encouraging open-ended, interpretive, and evocative response.

We ask librarians to contact game developers, letting them know what kinds of narrative themes are likely to dovetail well with the already deep book collection. We also encourage use of professional journals, press releases, and exhibitions at national and regional conferences to emphasize narrative games for children.

"Reading" Beyond the Page

Narrative games are not just about what is on the screen, but also what goes on in the player's mind and heart. Likewise, books are more than what is on the page. Yes, in both a novel and a narrative game, a plot is presented and followed. But do readers/players find openings to decide how to think and feel about where

the story goes? Perspective-taking and empathy are important aspects of SEL growth we hope for when people participate in both books and narrative games.

The stages of grief and the hero's journey we discussed between *Lost Words* and *The Thing About Jellyfish* emphasize stories as emotional journeys, where what we feel for Izzy and Suzy is far more important than the most literal reading of what happens on the screen or page. One purpose of reading fiction is to vicariously experience emotions and relationships, to gain insight into the human condition in a wider imagined world. In game play, perspective-taking is scaffolded through the controller and interactive elements, whereas identifying with a novel's protagonist demands an imaginative leap into identification. Game play may be a door to reading for young people ready to perspective-take and feel empathy in games, who would benefit from approaching a book with perspectives and emotions already in their minds and hearts.

Games are new media, and librarians know about patrons' desire for media reinforcement. Children want to read books that build on movies, television, and music they know and love. Connecting books and games is not unlike matching books to movies or television. Yet making those matches thematically instead of by franchise feels like a different kind of recommendation. In this spirit, rather than following only marketed media reinforcements, book-game pairings put librarian knowledge about books (and other media) at the forefront.

Acclaimed narrative games have begun to walk up to the expectations of award-winning literature. Their treatment of human

themes, current issues, and diversity may be unexpected for people who think mainly of the individualistic first-person shooter or addictive phone app when they hear *video game*. As fans of librarians and libraries ourselves, we see a great future where books and narrative games become tandem ways of making meaning and gaining experience. &

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