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# NURTURING PLAY-MAKERS & ACTIVE INVESTIGATIVE AGENTS: SCHWARTZ TAG, GOOD VIDEO GAMES AND FUTURES OF JEWISH LEARNING

Rabbi Owen Gottlieb

## MAY THE SCHWARTZ BE WITH YOU

I am a Reform rabbi who was never a camper at Jewish camp, yet many Jews attended my camp in northern New Jersey. I can't imagine camping anywhere other than Summer Super Stars; my years there were formative. It was a haven for children who loved learning and creativity. It stoked the fire of our curiosity and set us free to create, explore and learn with great teachers and counselors and build deep friendships. I often refer to it, with great affection, as “geek camp”—a gifted-and-talented day camp with college-level courses (project-based, with no homework) in the morning and afternoons of sports, computer programming and pool time. While in the 1980s this kind of experience for children was rare, the internet and digital media have opened up opportunities for similar exploration to all children with a net connection and some guidance from teachers who care. In the twenty-first century learning is increasingly a culture of designers and “makers” (see <http://makerfaire.com/>). Some of the educational gifts originating in gifted and talented programs have become available to anyone with a YouTube account, a Google group and the desire to share media with friends (or make friends by sharing media).

One particular experience during my time at Summer Super Stars—the creation of a game—shows the link between gifted education and learning in the digital age and demonstrates how we Jewish educators can best leverage the offerings of the digital age and the medium of the video game. The game was called Schwartz Tag. As in “The Schwartz,” the stand-in for “The Force” in Mel Brooks’ now-classic *Star Wars* parody, *Spaceballs*. My buddy Walter and I created a pool-based game using a waterlogged Nerf ball. Schwartz Tag incorporated the various rules of the pool at camp (no running on the deck, always be ready for a buddy check) and well as our desire for a friendly, compassionate, challenging, fun and funny game. No “pegging”—you had to touch the player with the ball still in your hand (though you could hide it or fake it with a teammate/partner). You had to say “Schwartz” upon the tag, or it didn't count. Within a week the entire camp was playing the game, and the pool became the home of constant tourneys of Schwartz Tag. We had a hit on our hands.

There was one morning class that just wasn't up to Summer Super Stars standards. Though we had courses in archeology, rocketry, botany, Renaissance art, creative problem solving and songwriting, somehow Walter and I had found ourselves stuck in “Computer Applications,” using word processors and other programs. Unfortunately, this wasn't the afternoon computer lab where we created our own homemade programs in BASIC. This was “how to use software”. Zzzzzzz. Without a creative outlet we would act out in class, joke around and get yelled at by the teacher until we could move on to the next class. One morning we were summoned to the office of the principal—the man no camper ever wanted to let down. Ken Bratspies was our hero. He ran the place we all loved. Walter and I were upset; we had pushed our class disruption too far. As we sat in Bratspies' office he said, “So I hear what the two of you have been up

to.” Oh, boy. Then he opened up his desk drawer. What was coming next? He revealed two blue ribbons. “These are Game Creation awards—everybody is playing Schwartz Tag. Good work!”

What role should Jewish educators take in the age of the mobile device and the ubiquitous digital game? What does the modern digital game mean for engagement of learners, and how might we and the learners we work with reflect on the experience of living Jewishly with digital media?

## PLAY VS. DESIGN

At the outset it is important to distinguish the process of game *design*, and learning through design, from the process of game *play* and learning through play. From a player perspective we can learn about optimal educational practice from the best video games. Market forces and talented creators have come together over the last thirty or so years to create highly advanced environments for learning—domain-specific learning. For example, great video games demand hard work, have scaffolding to support the learning and optimize engagement. James Gee’s work<sup>1</sup> stresses this aspect of games. Game *design* as a tool for learning is a mode that can allow for collaborative, situationally specific problem-solving projects involving critical thinking. Such projects can lead to high engagement. Once designers are in the process of design, their internal motivation to achieve their design goals can lead them to deepened curiosity and information seeking, such as research. Designers and project builders can follow their curiosity and creative drive with a teacher as guide. Design processes also lead to “artifact” production by learners. The term “artifact” refers to any product of a design process, be it a paper prototype, audio file, model or story. Seymour Papert’s constructionism<sup>2</sup> is an example of learning theory that emphasizes learning through design and artifact creation.

## GAMES AND EDUCATION: UP WHERE WE BELONG

How can an experiential approach to education, in combination with a games-based orientation, help us reach often-elusive educational goals? In many ways the study of games and game design bring us back to tenets of education that we have long known, including the benefits of self-directed learning and project-based work. The heightened levels of engagement and engrossment in digital games and the growing popularity of the digital game are leading us to look at the ways in which games (both digital and analog) could potentially bring us closer to our long-standing educational goals. Brigid Barron and her colleagues (1998) pointed out the benefits and challenges associated with implementing project-based learning (one of the key areas of experiential learning). Project-based learning requires changes in curriculum, instruction and assessment, and such change is no small feat.<sup>3</sup> What are some aspects of games, be it in play or in design, that connect to what we know about learning? And how might the zeitgeist of youth culture and gaming make it not only possible to implement change through an emphasis in experiential education, but an imperative to remain relevant in the lives of young Jewish learners? Can the ubiquity of games as the ascendant cultural medium give us the political and institutional will to make change?

Researchers who study games and simulations for learning often turn to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of “flow”<sup>4</sup> when addressing issues of engagement. Roughly, flow is a state of high-focused engagement that can be generated in situations with high feedback, a sweet spot between bored and overly challenged. Examples include moments in sports that some describe as “in the zone.” Another kind of zone, Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development,<sup>5</sup> is helpful when thinking about how a good game system models a good learning environment. The Zone of Proximal Development has to do with how a learner can manage problem solving with or without assistance or guidance. Good games keep learners at the outer edge of their competency and provide scaffolding (as-needed, just-in-time support) to reach the

<sup>1</sup> See for example Gee, J. P. (2007). *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. Second Edition: Revised and Updated Edition. Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Papert, S. A. (1993). *Mindstorms: Children, Computers, and Powerful Ideas* (2nd ed.). Basic Books. Harel, I. and S. Papert, (1991). *Constructionism*. Ablex Publishing. Out of print. The first chapter is available at <http://www.papert.org/articles/SituatingConstructionism.html>

<sup>3</sup> Barron, B. J. S., D.L. Schwartz, N.J. Vye, A. Moore, A. Petrosino, L. Zech, L. and J.D. Bransford (1998). “Doing with Understanding: Lessons from Research on Problem- and Project-Based Learning.” *Journal of the Learning Sciences* 7(3), 271–311.

<sup>4</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1991). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (first ed.). New York: HarperPerennial.

<sup>5</sup> Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (14th ed.). Harvard University Press.

next level. Video games also have robust communities of practice,<sup>6</sup> usually online, in which players trade tricks, tips and experiences. They share a lexicon, compete, collaborate, mentor one another and learn more and more advanced approaches to the game together. They create fan videos, stories and fan fiction, meet at live events and organize charities, essentially creating their own “participatory” culture around the game.<sup>7</sup>

Back in 1998, just a few years prior to James Gee’s work that helped set in motion the contemporary Games for Learning movement, Brigid Barron and her colleagues provided four principles of design for project-based learning. These principles can lead to “doing with understanding” rather than “doing for the sake of doing.” The principles are (page 273):

1. Learning-appropriate goals
2. Scaffolds that support both student and teacher learning
3. Frequent opportunities for formative assessment and revision
4. Social organizations that promote participation and result in a sense of agency.

It happens that these are principles found in good games. Good video games match the core mechanics (the specific actions a player performs repeatedly in a game to achieve results) to the overall learning goals of the game. For example, in *Minecraft* a player performs the key mechanics of breaking down objects into component parts and builds objects out of the component parts, teaching “mining” and “crafting.” The mechanics embody the learning and are precisely appropriate. As mentioned above, good games scaffold learning and have robust communities of players sharing in participation and agency; for some, the scaffolding *is* the community. I learned the basics of *Minecraft* by watching a child-produced video demo on YouTube. Today, at venues like The Games for Change Festival, James Gee points out that games have embedded assessment (leveling up in a game). An additional parallel between games and Barron and colleagues’ principles is that game companies and software companies iterate (frequently revise) their software. In fact, the essential process of game design is the “playtest,” which is an iterative design and inquiry process of test, play; test, play.

## GOOD GAMES AND RABBINIC LITERATURE

Note that I use the notion of the “good” game, which Gee uses in his germinal work on Games for Learning, *What Good Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*.<sup>8</sup> Games are often found in Jewish formal and informal education. Many of these games (the best-known in Hebrew supplementary school is perhaps “Jewpardy”) center around trivia or memorization. The kinds of games that Gee discusses are ethically complex video games, often with in-depth role-play and the ability to grow a character’s skill and experience over time. How often do supplementary schools use role-play and collaborative team play in complex ethical cases? Where can we push the boundaries of game play in Jewish education to the level of complexity that youth already experience in their digital games and strategy board and card games, like *Settlers of Catan* and *7 Wonders*? How can we relate lessons of Jewish texts to collaborative team play? Games are the ascendant medium of entertainment (the *New York Times* even features game reviews; it will not be long before they have their own section, as film does today).<sup>9</sup> Although perhaps not all Jewish educators have easy access to digital teaching tools yet, they do have access to settings that are ripe for game-based interactions. These interactions can be designed at locales ranging from supplementary school classrooms to camps. One genre of game interactions that Jewish educators have easy access to is “backyard” games like tag or the New Games of the 1970s (see the *New Games Book* and *More New Games*)<sup>10</sup>. The next step is to move these kinds of games into *good* games for Jewish learning. Luckily, rabbinic literature falls into the categories from which game systems draw their central elements. *Halakhic* (Jewish law) systems are rule-based systems, and games are built through rule-based systems. *Aggadah* (story) is our narrative tradition, and games often interweave narrative. So the sources for the games we play and use in Jewish education—and those we

<sup>6</sup> Regarding communities of practice, see Lave, J. and E. Wenger (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (first ed.). Cambridge University Press.

<sup>7</sup> See Jenkins, H. (2008). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (Revised.). NYU Press. (This is the book from which my organization ConvergJent.org takes its name.)

<sup>8</sup> Gee, J. P. (2007). *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy. Second Edition: Revised and Updated Edition*. Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Schiesel, S. (2011, December 29). “Video Games Worth Waiting for in 2012.” *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/30/arts/video-games/video-games-worth-waiting-for-in-2012.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Foundation, N. G. (1976). *New Games Book*. Main Street Books. Foundation, N. G. (1981). *More New Games*. Main Street Books.

encourage learners to design—should stand on a foundation of Jewish learning and Torah values. The translation of Jewish learning to games, which is challenging, is in many ways more natural than, say, translating that learning to literature or film. This is so because the plethora of rabbinic rule-based systems for ethics and conduct are ripe for game play and design. And so we have an opportunity to open up the world of Jewish interaction from ethics, laws and stories to the ways in which people relate to media today—through play and design. This requires Jewish educators to take the art, craft and skills of game design seriously, and that means developing literacy in games and game design.

### ACTIVE INVESTIGATIVE AGENTS: RAISING THE BAR WITH ARGS, EPISTEMIC GAMES AND MORE

The Covenant Foundation has recently sponsored a digital mobile history game that is being designed at ConverJent, an organization that I founded. The foundation has also sponsored an upcoming early childhood Hebrew language game by Not-A-Box. I believe that the larger Jewish philanthropic community should and will eventually turn toward game-based learning. In the near future we can turn to the *analog* game for critical lessons. Jewish groups today can leverage live in-person play and game design for learning. The Jewish camp and classroom can use game environments to inject a level of depth or “thickness” of learning in Jewish subjects, paired with the increased levels of engagement that good design courses and good games bring forth.

In order to do this we will have to raise the standards of content knowledge while adopting a new philosophical stance in Jewish education. We can train our learners to become what I call “Active Investigative Agents” or AIAs. AIA’s have a curiosity, interest and drive to uncover an answer, and they have a knowledge of and facility with tool sets that they will need to find answers. “AIA” can describe players in learning games such as those created by Sasha Barab,<sup>11</sup> David Shafer,<sup>12</sup> Jim Mathews and Kurt Squire<sup>13</sup> and their colleagues. Mathews and Squire refer to students becoming “active agents.”<sup>14</sup> In these learning games players emulate practitioners of professional investigative disciplines, such as journalists, architects or scientific researchers. For Shaffer, players in his teams’ games are playing toward becoming “professional.” But the meaning of “professional” here is not “with a specific job” but rather as a personal who can extemporaneously solve problems in a discipline, someone who displays what Donald Schön refers to as “reflection in action.”<sup>15</sup> Shaffer’s “Epistemic Games” use practical-based games and simulations to train learners in discipline-based problem solving. In doing so they have found that they can train learners in the skills, knowledge, values, identity and epistemology of each discipline. I treat this topic and its implications for Jewish education at length elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> The term AIA can also describe an aspect of those learners who are involved in participatory culture—creating videos, blogs and zines based on their own interests. The additional stress on “investigation” both highlights the disciplinary focus of this learning approach and shifts the focus to the interest of the students. If we think about nurturing Jewish AIAs, we may be able to turn our thinking from the desire to impart knowledge, heritage and identity toward a desire to nurture intrinsic curiosity and interest in Jewish topics.

In order to explain and explore the two needs—depth of content and the nurturing of AIAs—let us consider for a moment the World of Warcraft wiki, which Jane McGonigal<sup>17</sup> often cites—the second largest wiki after Wikipedia (at current count 92,342 pages). The level of data available to and known by youth and adults playing World of Warcraft is staggering. The wiki is a community-generated compendium through which players share and develop skills in play of the online MMORPG—massively multiplayer online role-playing game. The youth playing games do so with extreme sophistication, and the depth of content knowledge amassed to develop expertise is vast. If youth today become experts in complex gaming system

<sup>11</sup>Barab, S. (2009). “Conceptual Play Spaces.” *Handbook of Research on Effective Electronic Gaming in Education* (Vols. I–III, Vol. III, pp. 989–1009). Hershey, PA: IGI Global.

<sup>12</sup>Shaffer, D. W. (2006). *How Computer Games Help Children Learn* (first ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>13</sup>Mathews, J. M. and K. D. Squire (2010). “Augmented Reality Gaming and Game Design as a New Literacy Practice.” In K. Tyner (ed.), *Media Literacy: New Agendas in Communication* (pp. 209–232). University of Texas at Austin: Routledge.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 220.

<sup>15</sup>See Schon, D. A. (1984). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (first ed.). Basic Books. Schon, D. A. (1990).

*Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions* (first ed.). Jossey-Bass.

<sup>16</sup>For an in-depth discussion of this topic, see my forthcoming paper on Epistemic Games and Jewish Learning (to be presented at the Network for Research in Jewish Education, 2012).

<sup>17</sup>McGonigal, J. (2011). *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. Penguin Press HC.

environments, and the norm in play is to have ever-developing levels of expertise, then Jewish learning likewise must be both engaging and challenging—but it also must deliver the potential for *levels of expertise*, the means to achieve that expertise and, at the very core, an inherent impetus to develop said expertise.

## FICTIVE ENVIRONMENTS AND MOBILIZING JEWISH WISDOM

First I will address this core impetus, motivational and engagement question, and then I will turn to the need to develop the identity and role of an AIA. With regard to motivation and engagement, I am not suggesting a digital badge system, popular in the current push to “gamify” education. But at some point learning must be applicable. What is the real-world application of deep Jewish knowledge? And how does it tie to the interest of a learner? The fast answer would be that perhaps Judaism is the answer to “how to live one’s life”; and yet in the marketplace of many compelling ways to live one’s life, for someone who has not grown up in an environment steeped in Judaism, what does this really mean? I would argue that wisdom is practical knowledge and that Judaism is a wisdom tradition. Games allow for expertise in-game, but an area in which games are often lacking is developing expertise outside the game world. In her work, Jane McGonigal<sup>18</sup> seeks to bridge the gap by having participants play games out in the real world and encouraging action in the real world using fictive narrative. Players in *World Without Oil*, one of many examples, simulated an oil crisis online and then carried that narrative into conservation action in the real world. These ARGs, or Alternate Reality Games, are a means by which the Jewish world could operationalize Jewish wisdom. By constructing a fictive environment with real-world tasks shared by players, learners could build expertise in simulations and then put Jewish values into action. First they would experiment and model Jewish wisdom-ways in the fictive malleable environment, then carry them into action in the “real world.”

## OPERATIONALIZING JEWISH WISDOM THROUGH GAME SYSTEMS

One area to which teaching Torah through game design is, in my opinion, particularly well suited is the transmitting of wisdom tradition. I have come to believe this through my teaching of Torah through Game Design at a Reform synagogue in Manhattan. Wisdom is often recognized when it is situationally applicable. A list of wisdom teachings can easily become meaningless, decontextualized and even hypocritical (as in Shakespeare’s famous parody of wisdom in the devious Polonius’ speech to his son Laertes in *Hamlet*: “Neither a borrower nor a lender be....To thine own self be true”). But games and game designers can generate flexible models of situational behavior. The standard role-playing game (the genre of *Dungeons and Dragons*) is an excellent example. A character is confronted by a situation must react, and depending on the reaction, the game can shift. So what if our learners design their own Torah games? Learners must learn Torah to design the game; designing the situations in which the various laws could apply, they become the teachers. The players must then apply various wisdom positions and ethical dilemmas that force a player to call upon wisdom. The uncertainty necessary in game play could be leveraged. Sometimes wisdom would not work, but over time it would show itself to be a valuable strategic move. Here is an example from Proverbs: “Do not withhold good from one who deserves it when you have the power to do it [for him]. Do not say to your fellow, ‘Come back again; I’ll give it to you tomorrow,’ when you have it with you” *Prov. 3:27–28* (NJPS translation). Resource management is important in many games. Just as in life, we must use our resources wisely, whether they are money, time, food or accessing and calling upon our social networks. So what if a player had to manage his or her resources in order to level up (advance to the next stage of a game)? What would the consequences be if the player withheld “good”? What if that player’s resources were running low and the person might get knocked out of the game? They would have to judge, as we do in life, when they have the power to share good with others and when they have to concentrate on self-care. Here is an example of how a game designer must weigh out and determine the logic underlying the game’s system of consequences. Through this process

<sup>18</sup>In addition to McGonigal’s *Reality is Broken* (2011), cited in previous note, see her TED talk: [http://www.ted.com/talks/jane\\_mcgonigal\\_gaming\\_can\\_make\\_a\\_better\\_world.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/jane_mcgonigal_gaming_can_make_a_better_world.html).

a designer has to wrestle with and internalize the real-world application of wisdom, then teach it through the game to others. The process of designing a system, testing it, playing it and sharing it with others puts learners into a unique and potentially intense situational application of Jewish teaching.

### THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATOR AND GAME LITERACY

As mentioned earlier, teaching using games requires a certain level of game literacy and game design literacy. Understanding the ways in which games are played and constructed (through elements such as “resources,” described above) is a prerequisite for teaching with games. Jewish educators using games should have a familiarity with multiple genres, game mechanics and play styles. The first place for them to start is by playing a variety of good digital and analog games—prize-winning games, popular games—and to familiarize themselves with a number of platforms. Games alone are not an answer, but teachers who understand game systems may very well be a new answer for Jewish education. To be clear, in case that talk of video games raises the notion of technology over educator, educators are critical. For example, in the case of simulations David Shaffer writes: “Wandering around in a computer-rich environment without guidance is a bad way to learn. Learners are novices, and letting them work in a simulation without support leads to the very real human tendency to look for patterns and to develop creative but spurious generalizations.”<sup>19</sup> Jewish digital games, now in their embryonic stages, may someday provide excellent scaffolding, allowing a player-learner to pursue and continue learning on his or her own; however, teachers will remain critical to the process of igniting interest in subject matter and in initiating the use of games to spark learning that can then reach beyond the classroom. Game literacy for teachers goes beyond learning design skills and genres. It also requires at least a rudimentary sense of the research trends in Games for Learning. One such trend involves role-play and discipline-relevant practices.<sup>20</sup> What happens when a player takes on a role or roles in a game? How might this affect the learner’s identity or change the learner’s perspective, values and skills?

### A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT: BENEATH THE CITY OF DAVID

Imagine Jewish learners enter a game in which their role is that of a team of futuristic archaeologists with a variety of roles and skills that they can build over time. I’ll call it Beneath the City of David.<sup>21</sup> There is a philologist decoding languages, a cranky senior archaeologist, the young graduate student and the technical genius using the latest sonar and carbon-dating equipment. They are presented with a dig site, maps and clues from known history, based on a real dig in Israel. Using software we can simulate the site and artifacts. Or we can build it with paper and papier-mâché. You choose. The fiction layer on top of the game involves a ticking clock. The team must solve and locate a number of complex archeological puzzles and piece history back together while remaining ethically true to their character (perhaps some characters are more scrupulous than others, and ethical choices must be played out). If the team can solve the puzzles in time and fit the pieces of a broken amulet back together in time, they will unlock the next level, increase their skills and move on to more complex problems. If they can’t, as a team, complete the puzzles in time, the site will become unstable, and they will have to leave and try again. Along the way they uncover ancient teachings from Jewish wisdom texts with Torah-based clues to game play. They can share data over the web with other teams simultaneously working on the problem. They can post to a wiki and generate pages on the puzzles. The puzzles then reveal applications of Jewish wisdom teachings to the journey of the players. Part of the journey is training them to use simulated or actual tools used by Jewish archaeologists, historians, philologists and modelers. By the end of the process, not only have they learned the content of the puzzles and built bonds with their players, but they also know how to use new tools and technology, some of which are those used by professionals who investigate the questions of the Jewish past and present. They’ve even watched a video of an archaeologist in Jerusalem helping

<sup>19</sup>Shaffer, D.W. (2006). *How Computer Games Help Children Learn* (first edition.). Palgrave Macmillan, p. 68.

<sup>20</sup>See previous references to Barab, Gee and Shafer.

<sup>21</sup>Mathews and Squire (2010) briefly hypothesize about an archaeology game similar to one David Levy taught at Summer Super Stars in the early 1980s: “For example, instead of simply taking a tour of an archaeological site, students might investigate the site as a team of archaeologists who have been hired to research the site and produce a museum exhibit about the people who once lived there,” p. 212.

differentiate game play and the story of the game from the actual daily tasks of a working archaeologist. Through such a game and simulations they become AIAs in Jewish Studies discipline-related practices.<sup>22</sup> They become more literate Jews, having faced puzzles simulating the work of Jewish researchers, and their play choices are informed by Jewish wisdom and ethical dilemmas. Those AIAs re-enter the “real world” as empowered, curious Jewish learners with twenty-first-century skills. The game has helped teach them how to think critically, work collaboratively access and use data to solve problems. This can translate to learning beyond the confines of the classroom, born out of a curiosity nurtured in play.

## MEANING, RELEVANCE AND CURIOSITY

Jewish learning must have a meaning and relevance for learners. Games can create their own internal relevance, such as “solve the puzzle” or “compete,” but games can also create dramatic simulations of events and issues already relevant to learners. These dramatic situations include wrestling with ethical dilemmas, deciding whether to stand up for what is right and feeling compelled to organize in one’s community. Consider that a raiding party in *World of Warcraft* is a highly organized collaborative team with specialized skills, sharing a goal.

Games and game design can draw out or incite the personal taste of learners helping to determine on what path a Jewish AIA will travel. And given the intersecting nature of Jewish learning, those paths are connectable. Searching for an answer to a question on the origins of a classic midrash—from *Bereshit Rabbah* for example—can lead through Jewish history, Greek philosophy, questions of language and culture and cultural context. It can lead forward in time through the Talmud into re-interpretation. It can lead into the modern era, when modern midrash asks questions relevant to today’s context by drawing on wisdom gathered over centuries past. Jewish civilization, like a time machine and refracting glass, can be approached from many angles—but all angles have investigation and curiosity in common. We as a people have struggled and wrestled with ideas, always asking deeper questions. While some of our communities still eschew questions of history and historicity, all Jewish communities can use games as models for, say, a mishnaic passage and its ethical implications.

Games are not *the only* solution. But they are *a kind* of potential solution to some of the key questions we face today in Jewish education. This is because at the core of a Jewish education for the century to come are questions of relevance, curiosity, passion and compassion. Jewish learning must help us find applications of the wisdom that has been handed down to us—help us live our lives better in ever more complex problem-solving situations, be they managing family concerns during a deepening economic downturn or facing the dilemmas in America brought about by inequality in health care. We need Jewish wisdom now more than ever, and we need to understand it in flexible, role-play-based environments. As our curiosity turns to everywhere but our Jewish heritage, we need to re-light the flame of curiosity into our past and the lessons accrued over thousands of years. We need to stoke our curiosity, because it is at the core of our passion for the joy of learning—a passion that has sustained us, along with our faith, through the darkest of times. And how can we continue to train in compassion? Only through practice and teamwork—and collaborative games and simulations are the perfect medium through which to rehearse working together. When we play games together we build strengthened social bonds between us. Jane McGonigal reminds us that we like people better after playing games with them, even after we lose to them, because play involves *trust*.<sup>23</sup>

At the heart of thinking about Jewish learning in the next decades is an “i” word. The “i” word we need to consider is “imagination”—how will we help fire up the imagination of Jewish learners? Games come from and help us practice our imagination, our “what if” mind. They help us envision other ways of being who we are deep down inside. Play archaeologist for a day. Or researcher. Or team leader. Perhaps a wizened elder. Can you imagine yourself there? Can you help learners imagine themselves there? And if you

<sup>22</sup>In my forthcoming paper on epistemic games (NRJE Conference, 2012) I discuss the gaming role of the Jewish “professional” as a learner who uses what Lee Shulman calls “signature pedagogies,” such as the *d’var Torah* form, to solve game problems.

<sup>23</sup>See her TED talk: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dE1DuBesGYM>.

were to imagine yourself in one of those roles, what would you do, where would you go, what questions would you ask? What games would you play? What game would you design? Let's invite one another to design the games of our Jewish future. What might Jewish Active Investigative Agents who grow up in the twenty-teens and twenties be curious about, be knowledgeable about in 2032 or 2046?

## GAMES FOR TASTE DEVELOPMENT

What if there was a way of learning Jewishly like Summer Super Stars? I don't necessarily mean the camp environment. We have wonderful Jewish camps. What I'm referring to is a way of learning in which the young learner's creativity could be nurtured and channeled, where investigation of subjects and ideas was encouraged and supported in team- and artifact-generated projects—projects in which deep content knowledge was expected, but it was gained through inquiry-based learning.

Games-based design and learning may provide a way to shift the discussion from “What should an educated Jew know?” to “How does a learner develop a taste for Jewish learning and living?” What trips the curiosity switches that lead to passion for a subject and the seeking out of community? Great games most certainly do this in their own domains with *contextually meaningful problem solving in communities of practice* that naturally build around good games. In today's environment of participatory and game culture, perhaps now more than ever, it is our responsibility to channel our learners' creative energy in finding the fascinating questions, places and ideas in Jewish culture—and then guiding those learners in designing, playing, exploring and experiencing them.

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- Jane McGonigal's TED talk reference in this chapter can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dE1DuBesGYM>