

Spring 4-20-2015

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## Recommended Citation

Gottlieb, O. (2015). Jewish Games for Learning: Renewing Heritage Traditions in the Digital Age. In H. Campbell (Ed.), *Digital Judaism: Jewish Negotiations with Digital Media and Culture* (pp. 91–109). Routledge.

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Appears in:

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Author's Post-Print

Jewish Games for Learning:  
Renewing Heritage Traditions in the Digital Age

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KEYWORDS: Judaism, games, digital games, heritage, simulation, ritual, games for learning, game-based learning

Abstract:

Rather than a discontinuity from traditional modes of learning, new explorations of digital and strategic games in Jewish learning are markedly continuous with ancient practices. An explication of the close connections between traditional modes of Jewish learning, interpretive practice, and gaming culture can help to explain how Jews of the Digital Age can adopt and are adapting modern Games for Learning practices for contemporary purposes. The chapter opens by contextualizing a notion of Jewish Games and the field of Games for Learning. Next, the chapter explains the connections between game systems and Jewish traditions. It closes with a case study of current trends in Jewish Games for Learning in progressive Judaism. How can one view Jewish holidays as heritage game systems? How are texts of the Talmud and the social practice of studying Talmud related to practices of digital and analog games and game play? The Talmud section of the chapter examines rules systems in the Talmud, the theoretical model and case generation of Talmudic *sugyot* (passages or sections), and the practice of pairs-sacred study, *hevruta*, in which study partners, sometimes overseen by a senior scholar, seek deeper understanding of the text in a collaborative delving into text and argumentation.

## **Jewish Games for Learning: Renewing Heritage Traditions in the Digital Age**

Owen Gottlieb<sup>1</sup>

### **INTRODUCTION: Jewish Games, Play, and Heritage**

As the mobile phone brings video games to new audiences and console game sales reach into the billions, games and game systems have become the ascendant popular medium of the 21st century. Games are also a part of Judaism's ancient heritage. This chapter argues that there is a fundamental foundation of play and game systems at the heart of Jewish literature and learning.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary endeavors in digital and analog Jewish Games for Learning are practices grounded in traditional, yet seldom-discussed systems of Jewish games and play for learning.

For some Jews, a shift from print to digital raises deep-seated concerns regarding cultural continuity. The notion of the Jews as "people of the book" is often tied to print media, but for at least the first hundred years after the advent of the printing press, print was not considered sacred (see Gottlieb, 2013). In the summer of 2013, *Reform Judaism Magazine*, "the world's largest circulated Jewish magazine,"<sup>3</sup> featured a cover article by clinical psychologist Wendy Mogel titled "Invasion of the Machines." Mosel asks and answers questions such as "How can [digital] 'immigrant' parents set digital boundaries that make sense for their 'native' children?" and "Should parents be concerned about their children becoming cyber-addicted?" (Mogel, 2013). The article argues that the answer is yes. In this article the emphasis is on fear. Technology and new media, such as video games, pose high risk to children:

For one, video game manufacturers spend lots of money studying the neuroscience of behavior. Talking to the owner of one of these companies, I was stunned by his

knowledge of children's brain development. He told me straight out that his corporate mission is to understand how to make games as addictive as possible. (Mogel, 2013)

In a marked contrast, scholars, researchers, designers, philanthropists and classroom educators are developing learning games, gathering at conferences such as Games for Change, Games Learning Society and Digital Media and Learning. These educators look to video games as models of the most rich and compelling elements with which to improve learning environments, from scaffolding to just-in-time feedback. Learners will play games for hours until they find the solution to a level (problem). How can educators and designers use the engrossing nature of games to enhance the teaching in STE(A)M,<sup>4</sup> history, language, civics and other subjects? It happens that traditional Jewish learning shares many parallels with games systems as well, and perhaps this is why there is a nascent movement of Jewish Games for Learning.

Rather than a discontinuity from traditional modes of learning, new explorations of digital and strategic games in Jewish learning are markedly continuous with ancient practices. An explication of the close connections between traditional modes of Jewish learning, interpretive practice, and gaming culture can help to explain how Jews of the Digital Age can adopt and are adapting modern Games for Learning practices for contemporary purposes. The chapter opens by contextualizing a notion of Jewish Games and the field of Games for Learning. Next, the chapter explains the connections between game systems and Jewish traditions. It closes with a case study of current trends in Jewish Games for Learning in progressive Judaism. How can one view Jewish holidays as heritage game systems? How are texts of the Talmud and the social practice of studying Talmud related to practices of digital and analog games and game play? The Talmud section of the chapter examines rules systems in the Talmud, the theoretical model and case generation of Talmudic *sugyot* (passages or sections), and the practice of pairs-

sacred study, *hevruta*, in which study partners, sometimes overseen by a senior scholar, seek deeper understanding of the text in a collaborative delving into text and argumentation.

The purpose of this exploration is twofold: first, to demonstrate how new media are providing novel ways of viewing ancient Jewish systems for the acquisition of cultural practice. Second, this chapter shows how viewing Jewish practice, study, and inquiry through the lens of the game system can illumine seldom-explored aspects of the tradition, such as model generation in Talmudic texts and study. New Jewish Games for Learning are continuous with Jewish learning and culture over the ages, and the construct of the game, informed by contemporary Games for Learning research, can demonstrate new ways to understand both ancient and contemporary Jewish practices.

## **WHAT ARE GAMES FOR LEARNING?**

"Games for Learning" are often related to "Serious Games." Games for Learning refers to a class of games that is concerned with drawing on research in education, the Learning Sciences, and Media Studies regarding how to best improve learning environments. Learning Sciences comprises a number of fields including cognitive science, computer science, anthropology, design studies and educational psychology. Games for Learning are distinct from games found in "educational software," because they draw from and contribute to findings in field research. Often, they are concerned with tying a game or simulation's core mechanics (roughly the actions that the players take during the game), to the desired learning. These games are often concerned with solving complex problems, using inquiry-based learning. Many times they involve some kind of disciplinary role playing, such as that of a scientist, a journalist or an engineer. There are two academic branches of Games for Learning, both of which are relevant to the case study later

in this chapter. The first branch dates back to the 1970s (see Horn, 1980<sup>5</sup>; the journal *Simulation and Gaming*, 1970; and Dukes and Waller, 1976). During this period, Fred Goodman was an important teacher and game designer. He founded the Interactive Communications & Simulations Group at the University of Michigan.

A more recent branch of Games for Learning emerging in the academy and among game designers can be traced back to the literacy studies scholar, James Paul Gee and his colleagues' work in the early 2000s (see Gee, 2003). The Games, Learning, and Society Conference (GLS) is in its 10th year, and the Games for Change Festival in its 11th year. Today, funded along with Digital Media and Learning (DML) initiatives by prominent foundations such as the MacArthur Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Games for Learning labs are branching into academies around the world.

## **DEFINING "JEWISH GAMES"**

To understand the roles of games and play in Jewish tradition, it is important to begin with definitions. Digital systems often provide faster interfaces and feedback mechanisms than analog games (i.e., board, card games). That said, often, the underlying structures of games are common across both digital and analog games. In this chapter, simulations refer to modeled procedural systems, following Salen and Zimmerman's (2003) definition: "a procedural representation of aspects of 'reality'" (p. 243). Games are then a subset of simulations, typically, those with defined goals. This chapter refers to game play using Salen and Zimmerman's definition of play: "Play is free movement within a more rigid structure" (2003, p. 304). This more rigid structure is bounded by *rules*, one of the essential formal elements of games (see Fullerton, 2008, pp. 68-71).

Games have long been a part of Jewish culture—from table-top games played by Jews such as mahjong (see Lewis, n.d.; Luu and Cavallaro, 2005) to those played by and invented by Jews, such as *Rummikub* (Hertzano, 1978), a tile game created by Israeli game designer Ephraim Hertzano. In recent years, digital games have emerged that include Jewish characters or themes, such as *Shivah* (Gilbert, 2006), or references to Jewish themes or issues, as in *Red Dead Redemption* (Cantamessa, 2010). There are a variety of children's educational software products including games oriented toward enculturation of Orthodox or Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) children and some simple Hebrew games for progressive Jews. Wagner (2013) presents a number of these games in her presentation "Mitzvot Mash-Up: Interactivity as Transformative Interpretation."

Yet these games tend to be oriented toward either trivia or simple identification, such as learning Hebrew letters through matching or memorizing blessings. These games do not draw from the current educational research on games and learning. They seldom if ever tie game mechanics to the desired learning. For example, firing a laser beam at the correct letter Hebrew letter does not tie the action (firing a laser beam) to the learning of language. Nor do these games hint at the powerful traditions of play used in Jewish sacred texts and learning. Likewise, popular games involving Jewish trivia or symbol recognition, such as the Jewish version of the popular card game *Apples to Apples* (Kirby and Osterhaus, 2007), do not involve inquiry based learning or teach beyond object recognition (e.g., this is a Challah; that is a Torah scroll).

The popular conception of ancient Jewish gaming may very well be that of the *Dreidl*, the spinning top game that children play on Chanukah. But the *Dreidl* is not so ancient. Rather than dating to the time of the Maccabees and the Hasmonean Dynasty (163-142 BCE), the earliest known version of the game dates to the 16th-century English game called *totem*, and a later

German derivative that found its way into Eastern European Jewish tradition (Golinkin, 2000, pp. 177-178). Ancient Jewish games are to be found elsewhere.

In order to understand the connection between contemporary Games for Jewish Learning and the deep roots in Jewish tradition, it is important to move beyond these commonly known children's toy-oriented conceptions of Jewish games. One must consider the simulations involved in ritual, such as those found in holidays. And it is crucial to consider the highly complex and ancient Jewish games found in both the compositional structures of rabbinic literature and in the practices surrounding the study and proliferation of those texts.

### **RITUAL AND HOLIDAYS AS REENACTMENT, SIMULATION AND PLAY**

By examining the relationship between play, ritual and simulation, Jewish holiday rituals can be understood as game systems. In *Godwired*, Wagner (2012b) turns to Johan Huizinga's writing on games and ritual, explaining that the formal elements of play relate closely to those of ritual. Play, like ritual, is a kind of order-making process. Ritual and play both "transport the participants to another world" (Huizinga, as cited in Wagner, 2012b, p. 2). "Ritual and play, then, both set apart a time and space in which special happenings occur, shaped by rules and in some ways different from our daily life, somehow nurturing in their predictability and in their 'other-worldliness'" (Wagner, 2012b, p. 2).

Similarly, Harlene Appleman, a Jewish educator for more than 40 years and the executive director of the Covenant Foundation, whose mission, according to its website, is "celebrating innovation and excellence in Jewish Education," argues that Jewish religious expression is directly connected to play, simulation, and games through the practice of reenactment (<http://www.covenantfn.org/about/mission> accessed December 8, 2013). "The core of Judaism is

reenactment . . . whether you're looking at *tefilah* [prayer], which is a reenactment of what happened in the Temple, or the Passover *seder* which is a reenactment of telling the story [of Exodus] . . . Judaism isn't a stranger to play" (Appleman, interview, March 28, 2012).

One can also understand Jewish holiday rituals as simulations, because rituals, like simulations, are modeled procedural systems. The Seder not only reenacts the telling of the story of Exodus, but it simulates aspects of an Exodus experience, using all the senses. The participants are taught from a young age, they are to say that not "they" but "I" made Exodus from Egypt. They taste the bitterness of slavery by eating bitter foods and taste tears using salt water. Purim and Chanukah simulate survival from persecution. *Tu BiShvat* simulates a fruit harvest in the middle of winter. Yom Kippur simulates death; Shavuot and the Shabbat morning Torah service, the Jewish people receiving Torah at Sinai; Rosh Hashanah, the birth of the world; and *Sukkot*, the fall harvest season.

Games are simulations with goals. The goals of a ritual observance such as Passover include, achieving a connection to a sense of history, deepening ties with family and community, and the passing on of story and values associated with it. And so, these rituals function as games for the acquisition of cultural practices: heritage games. These heritage games use the same elements that contemporary Games for Learning employ: the repetition of behaviors to be learned (game mechanics) in a modeled procedural system (a simulation). While understanding holiday ritual practices as game systems requires considering simulation in the context of goals for cultural transmission, the games and play employed in Jewish sacred text study are direct and striking.

## **RABBINIC LITERATURE AND GAME SYSTEMS**

The structures of Jewish sacred text and the traditions of learning of those texts, this author argues, are related to and often rooted in game systems, simulations, and forms of play. In Judaism, learning from sacred text is itself a religious, spiritual, and cultural expression and practice. Jewish sacred literature includes the Hebrew Bible as well as rabbinic literature. The rabbinic literature includes but is not limited to the *halachic*, legal literature, the *aggadah* (stories), exegetical literature, and the theosophical and ecstatic mystical writings. The *halachic* literature itself is vast, including legal codes such as sections of Torah (the Five Books of Moses), the first legal code, the Mishna, legal debate and interpretative literature, most prominently; the Babylonian Talmud (the Talmud also includes *aggadic* as well as exegetical literature such as glosses); and case law, *responsa*. While some attention has been given to the *aggadic* and exegetical literature, little attention has thus far been paid to the relationship between the *halachic* literature and game systems.

Wagner (2012a, 2012b) has noted parallels between digital games, play and the rabbinic midrashic (rabbinic, interpretive) literary tradition (both exegetical and narrative). Replayability describes the multiple ways to play a game. Similarly, there are multiple ways in the Midrash to interpret a passage of Bible. Wagner also notes the narrative parallels between some video games' narrative structure and the Jewish *heichalot* mystical apocalyptic writings. Beyond Wagner's discussion of narrative, it is important to also note that at the heart of much rabbinic literature is wordplay. Midrashic exegesis often turns on the use of homophones and homographs, as meaning is derived through playing alternative meanings of words or different ways of reading words. The game of wordplay is very much at the heart of rabbinic meaning making.

Scholar of history and literature of religion, James Carse (1987), describes two classes of games in his philosophical work *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*. He writes: "I. There are at least two kinds of games. One could be called finite, the other infinite. A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play" (p. 3). Carse (1987, p. 39) aligns evil with the end of infinite play, and by so reasoning, it appears, he places a sense of benevolence in the infinite play. Carse stated in a radio interview: "One of my favorite examples of an infinite game is the rabbinical tradition in Judaism . . . every text, every truth is open to further question . . . God himself is open to question" (Gordon, 1997). This chapter argues that not only does the play within rabbinic texts fit the model of the Carsean infinite game but that so does *hevruta*, the traditional processes of learning and studying sacred texts in pairs.

Essential contemporary understandings in economic game theory trace their earliest roots to a bankruptcy case in the Babylonian Talmud (Aumann and Maschler, 1985). With the exception of this foundational case in the field of economics, there has been little if any exploration of the *halachic* literature regarding its relationship to game systems. The examination of the Talmud (meaning learning or study) as a nexus of game systems and play is essential for understanding Jewish sacred literature's relationship to the games.

### **Talmud and Games**

Games can sometimes have narratives, but games always have rules; *halacha*, or Jewish religious law, is an evolving rule-based system. Examining the Talmud and Talmud study can allow for the clearest illustration of the connection between Jewish tradition and game systems. The Talmud is a primary source for legal debates. It preserves minority opinions, unresolved

debates, as well as stories and tales. Traditional modes of Talmud study preserve the social practices of debate and problem solving as a means of learning.

"If the Bible is the cornerstone of Judaism, then the Talmud is the central pillar ... In many ways the Talmud is the most important book in Jewish culture, the backbone of creativity and of national life. No other work has had a comparable influence on the theory and practice of Jewish life, shaping spiritual content and serving as a guide to conduct" (Steinsaltz, 2010, p. 3). The Babylonian Talmud (redacted roughly 600 CE—this discussion concentrates on the Babylonian as opposed to the Jerusalem Talmud) comprises the Mishnah, an early law code, (redacted 250 CE) and the Gemara, commentary, debate, and stories on and around the Mishnah. A standard printing of the Talmud also includes numerous other commentaries (such as medieval commentaries of Rashi and the *Tosafot*), indices, cross-references and glosses. The Talmud combines complex legal debate, including hypothetical case analysis, with narratives that, like the Midrash, often turn on literary wordplay. The narratives often demonstrate principles congruent with or in contrast to the legal debates that appear nearby in the text. The legal debates are sometimes resolved, sometimes left unresolved in a case of *teku*, let it stand, an essential case of Carse's infinite game.

### **Players, Roles and Rules in Talmud**

Players in many games take on standard roles, while in other games, there are a variety of roles that players must take in order to play (Fullerton, 2008, p. 51). Consider team sports such as soccer, or the cooperative board game *Pandemic* (Leacock, 2008), or raiding parties with varied roles in *World of Warcraft* (Pardo, Kaplan and Chilton, 2001). Professor Eliezer Diamond teaches that understanding the rhetorical game at work in a passage of the Talmud is particularly

helpful for unpacking a passage (Diamond, personal communication, summer 2007). What is the "game" underlying the dialogic exchange between rabbis? What is the role each player takes and for what, often, implicit rhetorical teaching purpose? In a Talmudic debate, the surface debate often serves other implied purposes. Professor Diamond recommends the Eric Berne book *Games People Play* on transactional analysis as a means of understanding rhetorical game play and roles in the Talmud. Role taking in the Talmudic debates and stories has an important rhetorical function just as role taking in games can be an essential formal element, determining play. Once roles are determined, what are the boundaries of play? These boundaries and often the procedures that occur within the game, are determined by rules.

How are rule systems in the Talmud related to rules as an essential formal element of games? Salen and Zimmerman (2003) refer to different classes of rules in a game: operational, constitutive, and implicit. Operational rules are the guidelines players follow. Constitutive rules are the underlying formal, logical, and mathematical structures. In Salen and Zimmerman's example illustrating constitutive rules, they remove the art from a Chutes and Ladders (Milton Bradley) board and then list out the numerical logic underlying the moves on the board: If you land on X, you move to Y. The game shifts from a board to a list of constitutive numerical rules. Implicit rules are unwritten and refer to rules such as those of sportsmanship (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003, pp. 130-133). All three of these kinds of rule structures can be found in the text of the Talmud and the social practices of Talmud study. Operational rules are easily located in the Mishnah which gives extremely concise statements of law. These Mishnaic laws have constitutive rules in their underlying logic, such as in the case of torts and the calculation of damages. Highly complex constitutive rules also occur in the Talmud. One example is the case of distribution of debt in bankruptcy to three debtors (Ketubot 93a). Game theorists have shown

that the Talmud demonstrates remarkably complex mathematical and economic understanding and that it arrives independently at conclusions today calculated with modern mathematical game theory (Aumann and Maschler, 1985). There is a wide-ranging spectrum of constitutive and operational rules to be found throughout the Talmud.

Implicit rules are most easily identifiable in the social practices of Talmud study and interpretation. These rules can be found in the use of principals of exegetical hermeneutics used within Talmudic dialogues and debates. These hermeneutics are then applied in the practice of study to understand other passages of Talmud. For example, Pesachim 113b includes a *sugya*, or passage of the Talmud, that circumscribes hatred. Single witnesses cannot testify, and so in this case a single witness to a terrible act is permitted to hate his (in this case, Jewish) neighbor. The proof text given in the *sugya* is a citation of the passage of Exodus (23:5) mandating that one must raise the fallen donkey of a neighbor that one hates. The Talmud explains that the only case of permitted hatred is if one witnessed, as a lone witness, a terrible sexual transgression. Lone witnesses are not permitted to testify. One hermeneutic used in Talmudic literature and argumentation is *kal v'homer*, or "all the more so." If X is true for Y, then *kal v'homer*, all the more so, it is true for Z. An implied rule in this passage of the Talmud, which does not appear in the text is: if you must assist the neighbor that you hate, and you cannot act as a single witness against a neighbor you have witnessed committing a terrible act, and if the cases of being allowed to hate are so circumscribed (perhaps, only this one case), then *all the more so*, must you treat your neighbors with kindness, care and respect.<sup>6</sup> This conclusion is an implicit rule, derived from the text through the social practice of study and knowledge of hermeneutic principles elsewhere in the Talmud. Once rule systems are in place, games can allow for modeling various possible outcomes within those rule systems.

### **Hypothetical Cases: Games and the Talmud as Complex Modeled Systems**

Games are particularly well suited for modeling problem cases within complex, rule-based systems. Games and simulations allow theoretical cases to be visualized on a board or screen. Video games and analog strategy games demand that players learn and manage many layers of rules, resources, and strategies in the delineated conflict and/or collaboration space. Because the map is not the territory games and simulations allow scenarios to be altered, shifted, refocused, and rerun. What if player X makes decision Y? How will the rules, other players' decision, and chance determine an outcome? Next time, a player can choose an alternative strategy and see the new results. What if a player selects these tools as opposed to those tools in approaching the problem? Similarly, learning scientists have used simulators to allow students to experiment with center of mass and center of gravity while creating digitally rendered structures. If the structures crash, those learners can quickly rerun the simulation without having to spend time manually rebuilding the structures (Shaffer, 2006, pp. 41—72). Digital simulations such as these allow for play and quick experimentation with hypothetical scenarios. Games go a step further, posing problems to be solved (make the structure stand up on its own).

Talmudic debates are often posed as problems that are framed by questions, with a variety of hypothetical cases and scenarios. These hypothetical cases range from the practical concerns to the highly theoretical and unrealistic concerns (see Steinsaltz, 2010, p. 4). These scenarios serve a variety of purposes including the exploration of a principle or the need to address previously unconsidered cases. The construction of the Talmud text often appears to be a kind of scenario generation machine. Often the redactors of Talmud generate scenarios through harmonization practices: they work to differentiate apparently contradictory rulings: ruling X

does not apply to case Y but, rather, ruling X applies to case Z. Embedded within the scenarios are all the complexities of the interpretation and hypothetical application of the Mishnaic law code.

Wrestling with the problems and questions is a significant part of the process of studying and learning the Talmud. The process of working on a problem can supersede resolution, both because sometimes the debates are unresolved and also because the study of sacred texts themselves is considered a spiritual practice. The form of the writing in the Talmud is highly elliptical, requiring external sources to unpack the sparse phrases and allusions, or an experienced teacher who has learned the process of coming to an understanding with that sparse text. How do learners play out these problems and scenarios? What is the learning game? The Talmud, and Torah study in general, is embedded in the social practice of pairs' sacred study called *Hevruta*.

### **The Push-Pull of Talmud Study: *Hevruta* as Infinite Game**

Beyond the literary characteristics of the texts, the social practices involved in the study of rabbinic literature involve a variety of games and modes of play as demonstrated in the push and pull of *hevruta* (sacred pairs study). Torah study (the study of Jewish sacred text, not limited to the Five Books of Moses, which are also referred to as "Torah") is held in the highest regard in Jewish religious life, as it is understood to lead to the critical virtuous behaviors including peacemaking, acts of compassion, and accompanying the dead for burial (see Eilu Devarim daily prayer, Mishnah Peah 1:1, Talmud Shabbat 127a). When two people study Torah together, the Mishnah (Avot 3:2) teaches that the Divine Presence settles between them, *hevruta* study is teamwork, often competitive striving, in which study partners challenge each other and, through

the challenge, reach for deeper insights and further understandings, *hevruta* can be understood as a game in which a competitively structured interaction serves both "sides" to achieve his or her goal: greater learning. The game provides an illusion of competition, for if the goal is in fact deeper learning, then the competition is a kind of ruse or rhetorical structure in which conflict or confrontation serves both parties. In *hevruta*, competition and conflict between parties *are* collaboration.

This game of sacred study is played for the purpose of continuing play, as in Carse's (1987) infinite game, *hevruta*, and sacred study in general, is for the continual learning of Torah, reaching towards greater holiness, and the application of Torah principles to life, through action (such as in the discussion in Kiddushin 40b). There are even traditions of Torah study continuing in the messianic age (Silberberg, n.d.).

*Hevruta* is learned in a social setting, not only with one's study partner, but in the case of study in a *beit midrash*, house of study, with seasoned teachers overseeing study pairs. Similarly, most games, with the exception of solitaire-style games, are played in some form of community. In the case of video games, communities of practice share strategies and video play-through on YouTube, form clubs, write fan fiction, and attend events together. Just as with *hevruta* study, what happens in the room (outside of the printed text or in the case of video games "off the screen") is critical to understanding the context in which learning occurs (Stevens, 2012).

### **Reviewing the Connections between Talmud Study and Game Play**

Both Talmud study and game play involve rules, roles, hypothetical cases, modeling, and learning in a community. In the case of a strategic game, the player must learn the rules and strategies for problem solving in a variety of scenarios. This occurs with other players in the

moment, as well as the wider extra-textual community of players. The processes for learning Talmud, likewise, involves learning problem solving using modeled cases in rule based scenarios. The study is done in partnership with one's *Hevruta* partner and in the wider community. The next section turns to two branches of Games for Learning, both with implications for contemporary experimentation in and application of Games for Learning for Jewish communities.

### **CASE STUDY: CONTEMPORARY JEWISH GAMES FOR LEARNING**

A few years ago the tide began to turn for games-based learning in formal educational settings, from cautious interest to excitement and deep engagement . . . The organized Jewish community was largely absent within that space, until 2011. —Barry Joseph, who was at the time Director, Online Leadership Program, Global Kids, Cofounder Games for Change (personal communication, February 28, 2012)<sup>7</sup>

Over the last 2 years there has been marked increase in publicity, action in the field and grant dollars awarded for games and game design for learning in progressive Jewish education in North America. This case study examines contemporary and nascent interventions in games and simulations for Jewish learning, centered on investment by the Covenant Foundation (see Note 1). This case study attempts to document the recent history and some of the investment activity by the Foundation in Jewish Games for Learning both in the words of members of the staff of the Foundation, and from the author's perspective. The choice of the Covenant Foundation is because thus far, it appears to be the only Foundation to fund development in Jewish Games for Learning. While both Natan (a group of young Jewish philanthropists) and the Jewish New Media Innovation Fund (a joint effort of Jim Joseph Foundation, Righteous Persons Foundation

and the Schusterman Family Foundation) have funded digital projects, none of the projects include games or simulations for Jewish learning. The Avi Chai Foundation has subsidized attendees to the Games for Change Festival (including the author of this chapter), but appears to have not have invested further in Games for Learning as of the time of this writing.

This case explores the thought leadership (those taking the first steps to bring Games for Learning to Jewish education) in the current, nascent Jewish Games for Learning field and the perspectives of leadership at the Covenant Foundation regarding the foundation's investment in digital games and simulations for Jewish education. The case also draws on recent journalism, conference presentations, interviews, and correspondence with colleagues and public figures, as well as the author's own experience founding and running the organization ConverJent: Jewish Games for Learning. The chapter traces trends of acceptance and resistance in the use of games and game design in Jewish education, as well as opportunities and challenges facing a growing field.

### **Jewish Games for Learning and the Covenant Foundation**

In the world of Jewish education, digital media and more recently, Games for Learning, have received little attention outside of the work of individual teachers, principals, and the work of The Covenant Foundation. In recent years, Barry Joseph, a leader in secular Digital Media and Learning (DML), and a founder of the Games for Change Festival has been working with the Covenant Foundation, providing training in digital media tools and techniques, including a Serious Games intensive during the summer of 2011 (Appleman, interview, March 28, 2012; Schifrin, 2011). In January 2012, Joseph presented a workshop on Games for Learning at Covenant's annual project director's meeting. Over 2012, Joseph noted that he has seen interest

and receptivity in the Jewish education community growing. During that time, Joseph conducted trainings and consultations on games-based projects for CAJE (Center for Advancement in Jewish Education) in Miami, iCenter in Chicago, the San Francisco Contemporary Jewish Museum, the Jewish Education Project, Camp Ramah, and the North American Jewish day school conference (Joseph, personal communication, July, 16, 2012).

In May of 2010, the author founded ConverJent, Jewish Games for Learning, incubated at Clal, The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. Over the last 3 years, the author has run workshops, trainings, and presentations on Jewish Games for Learning at venues including Union for Reform Judaism Kutz Camp, Hebrew Union College (New York and Los Angeles) East End Temple in Manhattan, Clal's Rabbis Without Borders Program, the Jewish Outreach Institute Conference, the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland, the Games Learning Society Conference and a number of other synagogue schools. The author has also worked with organizations including the Jewish Education Project and has published articles on the subject of digital media and Games for Learning in *Contact* (Gottlieb, 2012), *Sh'ma* (Gottlieb, 2011c), the *CCAR Journal* (Gottlieb, 2011b), and *eJewish Philanthropy* (Gottlieb, 2011a). In 2013, the author piloted the digital mobile GPS Augmented Reality game/simulation and interactive story *Jewish Time Jump: New York* (Gottlieb and Ash) with Hebrew supplementary schools. The author also worked with and then observed a rabbinical student in the creation of a supplementary Hebrew school course in digital mobile game design for Jewish Learning. Following its release in May 2013, *Jewish Time Jump: New York* was nominated for Most Innovative Game of 2013 by the 10th annual Games for Change Festival.

In the summer of 2011, the Avi Chai Foundation, working in concert with Presentense, funded nine attendees (including the author) to attend the 8th annual Games for Change Festival.

The Games for Change Festival brings together professionals, academics, government, learners, and others around games for learning and social impact. In January 2012, the first funding of digital Jewish Games for Learning came to fruition. The Covenant Foundation funded two Games for Learning projects through their grants. Russel Neiss and Rabbi Charlie Schwartz of Not-A-Box Media Lab (Schwartz, interview, 23 July 2012) received an Ignition Grant to create The Aleph Bet App (Neiss and Schwartz, 2012), an early childhood game for learning the Hebrew alphabet on an iPhone and an iPad, which was released in December 2012. At the same time Covenant awarded a Signature Grant to ConverJent, for the creation of a location-based mobile GPS game/simulation and interactive story to teach Jewish History in New York City, which became *Jewish Time Jump: New York* (Gottlieb and Ash, 2013).

### **Covenant's Motivations for Games in Jewish Education**

Why has the Covenant Foundation taken the first step into digital Jewish Games for Learning? The foundation was established in 1990 to "significantly improve Jewish education in North America" (Isaacs, 1997, p. 9). The two major programs of the foundation are its grants and annual awards. The grants are awarded to "launch and/or replicate promising innovative educational initiatives for Jewish educational improvement" (Isaacs, 1997, p. 9). The awards are to recognize and celebrate Jewish educators.

Executive Director Harlene Appleman noted that the Covenant Foundation's interest in technology and media reaches back to its earliest moments, due in large part early on to the influence of Eli Evans:

One of the driving forces, the chairman of our board, was the president of the Revson Foundation and was very interested in technology and saw it as an opportunity to kind of

enhance and enrich the Jewish world, so you know, many things are driven by passion and information and Eli Evans really knew what that world could be. He was joined by other people on our board who were equally as passionate and informed around the area of technology—whether that was media or the internet. Whatever it was, the board, in general, there was a feeling and a thought process that evolved around technology and its potential. (Appleman, interview, March 28, 2012)

Joni Blinderman, associate director of the Covenant Foundation, discussed the foundation's interest in "serious" digital games today:

Digital media, games, serious games, are now looked upon as a way to educate, to seriously educate. The whole society the whole world is looking at this in a different way now than it certainly did ten years ago . . . then the conversation was "we can't have them [learners] play games because it's all this violent energy," right? And then suddenly there was a sophistication, from the outside [of the Jewish community], that we began to understand and learn about, and others have as well certainly, that they can be used for educational purposes. So let's dig in there and let's see who's doing what. (Blinderman, interview, March 28, 2012)

Beyond seeking to incorporate media and technology into Jewish education, some of Appleman's philosophical understandings of Judaism and education connect directly to concepts of play and simulation. Appleman described her training in secular education as an important factor in looking to games as a way to educate, dating back to the sixties. She noted that simulations have been a part of Jewish education for as long as she has been a part of Jewish education.

Appleman also spoke of the importance of her time at family camps as a factor in demonstrating to her the power of Games for Learning in the Jewish community:

I spent a lot of time in family education at family camps . . . and I saw the power when parents and kids could play together when they had the opportunity to have a good time and good laugh and learn something. And all of that was a piece of it. It was watching the magic that it could work. In a weekend people could learn something that it would take years to learn otherwise and it was because they were engaged and having a good time. (Appleman, interview, March 28, 2012)

Beginning in 2006, Appleman had initial conversations regarding the technology-based historic simulations that were coming out of the work of the Interactive Communications & Simulations Group (ICS; the group that Fred Goodman cofounded). Covenant would go on to provide a grant to the Jewish Court of All Time (JCAT) project.

Place Out of Time (POOT), the foundation for the JCAT is an on- and offline simulation for middle and high school students (J. Stanzler and M. Fahy, interview, August 2, 2012). Users role play historical figures with guidance from university student mentors. POOT was a creation of the ICS team, including Goodman, Jeff Stanzler, Jeff Kupperman, Michael Fahy, John Miller and Gary Weisserman (Samuel Scheck Day School). It was based on a model that included elements of a virtual constitutional convention and a non-virtual transhistorical "banquet." The idea was to bring together characters from different historical periods and put them into "productive tension" for fruitful interactions. Run in concert with a university course and supporting the work of mentors, the simulation uses web-mediated interaction featuring designed-in antagonism (the court) and clearly defined scenarios drawing on current issues. Under a 3-year Signature Grant from Covenant, JCAT has been developed and run by a

partnership between the University of Cincinnati's Center for Studies in Jewish Education and Culture, the RAVSAK Jewish Community Day School Network, and ICS (J. Stanzler and M. Fahy, interview, August 2, 2012.).

### **The First Video Game Grants from Covenant**

The 2012 Covenant Ignition Grant to Not-A-Box and Signature Grant to ConverJent appear to be the first investments from a foundation in digital Games for Learning in the Jewish community. While there are commercial digital games from Jewish educational companies, the Not-A-Box and ConverJent projects draw on the growing body of knowledge in Games for Learning. While not devoted particularly to the academic literature, Not-A-Box's rabbi Charlie Schwartz references the publications of the Joan Ganz Cooney Center and the Horizon Report, demonstrating considerations regarding contemporary research. ConverJent's work in digital, analog games, and teaching game design for Jewish learning, specifically draws from research in the Learning Sciences, Media Studies, and the broader bodies of research used in DML circles, from cognitive science to anthropology. Will the investments in 2011-2012 signal a shift towards investment in research-based Jewish Games for Learning? As DML expands in secular schools, as young learners become more attached to their digital devices, more engrossed in secular digital games, and as pedagogies and institutions shift towards the digital, the levels of philanthropic investment in Jewish Games for Learning will likely be a determining factor. With a relatively small population and high costs of software production, Jewish Games for Learning will require support from foundations supporting Jewish education.

### **Resistance and Obstacles to Jewish Games for Learning**

There are a number of barriers still in place that are slowing the acceptance of Games for Learning in Jewish education. Barry Joseph writes of the secular adoption of Games for Learning: "The 'tipping point' is still a ways off—trepidation remains strong in many circles about perceived content in video game and formalizing informal learning—but there is a strong community of practices that has emerged across the country" (personal communication, February 28, 2012).

In the Jewish community, ironically, trepidation may be less of a concern while adoption of technology may be a more challenging barrier. As Jewish supplementary schools seek new ways to engage students—at what Harlene Appleman calls a "deadly time of day" (Appleman, interview, March 28, 2012) and day schools seek ways to set themselves apart from other school choices (see Mitzmacher, 2012), DML and Games for Learning are attractive options.

If one accepts Appleman's notion that reenactments are at the core of Judaism, and if as the author claims, that rabbinic literature is particularly congruent with Games for Learning, then the attraction seems obvious. The smaller school sizes and networks of schools in the Jewish community could also mean that Jewish education could more quickly adopt DML and Games for Learning than secular schools, which have larger bureaucracies.

ConverJent has often turned to paper-based game-design classes and workshops because the Jewish supplementary schools tend not to have computers or mobile devices on-site. This is likely due to both lack of funding and perhaps also the longstanding Jewish attachment to the printed page (Gottlieb, 2013). At Jewish summer camps, at least currently, digital devices are typically verboten (see Bordman, 2013).

While paper-based gaming and game design use the same kinds of pedagogies as digital games for learning (collaborative, problem-based, design-based, inquiry-based learning), the

benefits of digital Jewish Games for Learning include the ability to embed assessment of learning and to gather data from each learner. Digital games are often easier to duplicate and distribute as well, eliminating the need for the manufacturing and physical distribution required for board and card games. Perhaps most important, digital games use the technology which is rapidly approaching the status of the cybernetic: Learners now use their digital apps and tools on their phones and tablet to extend their abilities to learn and create, whether in locating information or in designing new media productions as part of "participatory culture" (see Jenkins, 2006, and Squire, 2010). It may be demand in secular schools for ever-increasing digitally enhanced and informed learning opportunities that pushes further investment in digital Jewish Games for Learning.

## **CONCLUSION**

Some of the rhetoric in the progressive Jewish community in North America emphasizes fear and concern regarding video games and digital technology. At the same time a group of Jewish educators, exemplified by those in the case study are beginning to embrace and develop contemporary research-based Games for Learning. These educators, designers and funders seek to take advantage of the best learning attributes that video games and analog games have to offer. Games offer powerful modes of involving learners in inquiry and problem-based learning and opportunities for transmitting cultural practices and values. Although seldom discussed and analyzed, Jewish tradition itself is replete with game and simulation systems—in holiday rituals; in rabbinic word play and narrative; in the roles, rules, and modeling of Talmudic discourse and communal study practices.

By bridging Games for Learning, Jewish education, and Jewish Studies, this chapter attempts to open the door for a cross pollination of understandings and investigations. Game systems resonate through Jewish tradition and through contemporary secular society, and so Jewish culture offers a unique body of literature and tradition for Game Studies and Games for Learning. For example, Talmudic modes of model generation could lead to deeper engagement in teaching problem solving in STEM subjects. The study of Jewish ritual simulations and games could provide clues into the mechanics of one of the most enduring Games for Learning: the Passover seder. And what can Game Studies and Games for Learning contribute to Jewish education and Jewish Studies? How can research in the Learning Sciences and Media Studies help Jewish educators bring the heritage of ancient game systems into contemporary modes and media for today's learners? Such research can unlock new ways of parsing or decoding rabbinic literature. Just as economists have turned to unlocking Talmudic mathematical puzzles to push forward their field, so too can those researching Jewish civilization consider expanding their fields through the frame of the game.

## NOTES

1. The author of this chapter is a PhD candidate in Education and Jewish Studies and is a Reform rabbi. The author is also the founder and director of ConverJent, an organization dedicated to Jewish Games for Learning. The researcher stance of the author is that of both a proponent in the Jewish community of games-based learning and that of a social science researcher inquiring into the design and use of digital and analog games and game design for education and cultural heritage. In 2012, ConverJent received a Signature Grant from the Covenant Foundation (featured in the case study) to build a

mobile game/simulation to teach Jewish history. As one of the only current practitioners of research-based Jewish Games for Learning the author's perspective can allow for a window into the nascent activity in the area.

2. "Jewish education" in this chapter refers to the discipline of intentionally nurturing an understanding of and an affinity for any or all of the aspects of Jewish civilization. "Jewish learning" refers to the development of such an understanding and affinity.
3. According to its website page regarding its demographics, "*Reform Judaism* has the largest circulation of any Jewish magazine in the world. We reach 310,000 Jewish families who are members of 900+ Reform synagogues in the United States and Canada"; see <http://reformjudaismmag.org/adinfo/demographics/> [Accessed December 8, 2013].
4. STE(A)M stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, (sometimes Art), and Math.
5. Horn (1980, pp. 531-539) has an entire section devoted to games for learning religion with a number of Jewish games, including two created by rabbis.
6. The author learned this passage and the reapplication of this exegetical hermeneutic from Rabbi Dr. Michael Chernick.
7. As of the time of this writing, Joseph is Associate Director for Digital Learning at the American Museum of Natural History.

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