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# Introduction: Jewish Gamevironments – Exploring Understanding with Playful Systems

Owen Gottlieb

## Abstract

The study of Judaism, Jewish civilization<sup>1</sup>, and games is currently comprised of projects of a rather small set of game scholars. A sample of our work is included in this issue.

**Keywords:** Judaism, video games, Jewish Gamevironments, gameenvironments

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It is not surprising that much of the research in Judaism and games today revolves around the relationship between games and learning. Traditionally, learning has had a central place in Jewish life, likely rooted in the great value Torah study has held over the centuries in Judaism. By Torah study, I mean the study of the widest variety of sacred Jewish literature. The study of Jewish sacred text is held as immeasurably important, along with acts of compassion, peacemaking, honoring one’s parents and accompanying the dead for burial (see the *Eilu Devrarim* daily prayer, Mishnah Peah 1:1, Talmud Shabbat 127a).

That sacred textual study could be held at equal value to good deeds, implies that the study of how to be a good person is expected lead to good acts. I believe that this historic high regard for sacred text study, has, over the history of the Jewish people, also lead to a passionate embrace of both learning to learn and of helping others learn to learn. Determining to what extent this theory has held in the past, or

how it may or not hold today could be the subject of an entire other study.

This special issue highlights two very different kind of game-learning environments. In “*Global Conflicts, Episodic Framing and Attitude Change Towards the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*,” Ronit Kampf explores the impact of game design emphasizing “episodic framing,” a term used to express the inclusion of “human interest” moments. With the term “human interest,” Kampf refers to a particular kind of character based emotional experience during the course of the game – moments of interpersonal drama that appear to help players to see the complexity and humanity of the other. Even in times of great player stress, Kampf shows, these emotional stories can make a significant impact on idea formation in the process. Kampf’s work suggests how future designers may potentially experiment with using episodic framing and possibly promote attitudinal shifts towards impartiality – a step in the process of understanding across divides.

In my article, “*Finding Lost & Found: Designer’s Notes from the Process of Creating a Jewish Game for Learning*” I provide context and history of the process of bringing two learning games to market. Set in Fustat (Old Cairo) of the twelfth century, the *Lost & Found* series seeks to teach medieval religious legal systems and the first two games in the series use very different means of approaching the subject. The first game, *Lost & Found*, on which the article concentrates, is a complex strategy game, combining collaborative and competitive play in which players must balance the needs of the community with individual family needs, all while navigating the laws of lost and found objects from Moses Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*. The second game *Lost & Found: Order in the Court – the Party Game*, is a fast-paced storytelling game centering on legal reasoning as players try to out-story-tell one another about how laws from the legal court may have come into being in the first place. A future



solitaire, but learning games of inter-relationship, of empathy-seeking, of examination of collaboration and storytelling. Such games promote conversation between people, just as the dialogic is at the heart of Talmud debate and the writing of the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. Games can bring people together, across a table, or through a console or internet connection. As we continue to examine games and Jewish civilization, I suggest these examinations may be most fruitful when they are about the connections games can foster between people.

### References

Kaplan, M. M., 1994. *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America.

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<sup>i</sup> With “civilization” I refer to the sense of civilization used by Mordechai Kaplan (1994), including religion, language and literature, art, folktales, culture, ethnicity, history peoplehood, and the variety of expressions of the Jewish people).