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Ma Nishtana: Why is this Night Different? Photo by Gabriel McCormick.

Special Issue

# **Teaching with Games. Formative Gaming in Religion, Philosophy and Ethics**

edited by

Tim Hutchings

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Interview

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## Playing to Grow. Roundtable Interview on Games, Education, and Character

Owen Gottlieb, Matthew Farber and Paul Darvasi

### Abstract

In this roundtable interview moderated by Paul Darvasi, lecturer at the University of Toronto and co-founder of Gold Bug Interactive, Owen Gottlieb and Matthew Farber discuss research and practice at the intersection of religion, character education, and games in schools. Gottlieb is an associate professor at the Rochester Institute of Technology, founder and lead faculty at the Initiative in Religion, Culture, and Policy at the MAGIC center, and founder and director of the Interaction, Media, and Learning Lab at RIT, where he specializes in interactive media, learning, religion, and culture. Farber is an associate professor of educational technology and coordinator of K12 and Secondary Teacher Education Programs (STEP) at the University of Northern Colorado, where he also co-directs the Gaming SEL Lab. He writes for Edutopia, has authored several books and papers, and has collaborated with UNESCO MGIEP, the iThrive Games Foundation, and Games for Change. This conversation occurred over Zoom on 10 October 2022, and is sometimes specific to how schools, education, and educational television function historically and currently in the United States.

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Games can allow players to safely explore the outcomes of their actions and choices. As multimodal experiences, some games can also be paired with books, including religious texts, to teach morals and ethics. Many games can be leveraged to teach character education skill, social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies. In this

roundtable interview, conducted and moderated by Paul Darvasi, lecturer at the University of Toronto and co-founder of Gold Bug Interactive, Owen Gottlieb and Matthew Farber discuss research and practice at the intersection of religion and character education in schools. Gottlieb is a scholar of religion, media, technology, and education, as well as the designer of several digital and tabletop games based on the Jewish experience. Farber has written several books and papers on games and SEL skill-building.

**Darvasi: We are here today to discuss how games might be leveraged in the classroom to explore character education. That is to say, how might games occasion exploration and reflection on morals, ethics, empathy, civic citizenship, service, and social and emotional learning (SEL)? To start, let’s clarify what we mean by character education.**

*Farber:* Character education has long been part of schools. Character education programs tend to focus on aligning students with a school’s core values, including character traits such as honesty, resilience, and a growth mindset. Character education is integral to a school’s culture, visible with signs posted around schools. It can manifest in schoolwide or grade-level assemblies and small group advisory discussions common in US middle and high schools. In advisory programs, activities are led on topics like upstanding, standing up for somebody you see bullied, and other opportunities to build character. Schools sometimes award students with certificates when staff observes positive behaviors. SEL is more closely aligned with emotional intelligence, considered the starting point for developing social and emotional competencies, such as teamwork and collaboration, emotional regulation,





*Time Jump: New York* (2013) was designed so that it could also be used in public schools (see Figure 1). It brought important history lessons to Jewish learners while carefully maintaining secular history standards. I tend to think most about character education when considering religious education because there, character is even more foregrounded than, say, in civic and democratic education goals for secular schools. In supplementary or complementary religious schools, character education, in the sense of values, are intentionally at the core of the lessons that we teach. And so that is a line that I've gone back and forth on regarding what I emphasize in the lessons that I teach with games. For certain audiences, it is a focus on *what are the values?* and for different audiences, it might be a frame such as civic and democratic education – participation in our democracy. The frames differ. In a religious setting, I might use the frame of Hillel's formulation of the Golden Rule: *do not do to others what is detestable to you* (I always try to point out that Hillel's formulation is in the form of prohibitional boundary), whereas in a civic and democratic education setting, I might turn to find a best-case fair hearing for opposing views. The skill-set approach is different. That said, teaching perspective-taking and the ability to articulate a best-case, fair hearing for an opposing view are also valuable character education skills.



Figure 1. Images from *Jewish Time Jump: New York*. © Gottlieb and Ash.



It is worth noting that a historical approach is not an amoral approach. In *Jewish Time Jump: New York* we happened to have a very clear moral case in which 146 shirtwaist factory workers, mostly young Jewish and Italian women died – in a factory with doors chained shut and faulty fire escapes. The protests and outcry afterward led to serious labor laws. The moral outrage is clear, and yet in a historical approach, we seek to also understand the perspectives of the business owners despite the clear moral culpability.

**Darvasi: Matthew's book, *Gaming SEL: Games as Transformational to Social and Emotional Learning* (Farber 2021), opens with a discussion of how Fred Rogers impacted his audiences in the United States with prosocial messages. You've also touched on Rogers in your own work, right Owen?**

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*Gottlieb:* Yes, Matthew and I are both influenced by Rogers' work and PBS (Public Broadcasting Service, in the United States) more broadly and of that time period. I'm actually currently working on a history now of instructional broadcasting in the 1970s and 1980s which aired on PBS and at the time, a part of we now refer to as SEL was under the rubric of *affective education* and *health education*. Instructional television producers created a variety of affective series for multiple age groups – so, fifth and sixth graders, junior, and high school students – addressing challenges from bullying to domestic violence to prejudice, to moving. Today, we see *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* on television (in the United States) and some games being created by PBS and Schell Games for preschoolers. But there is not a lot of what we would now call SEL being created for older children and adolescents. I think there is a need for the design and development of games for SEL for these older audiences.

**Darvasi: In the past, moral instruction relied on myths, religious texts, parables, and fables. How does the tradition of guiding moral comporment through narrative relate to the more contemporary notion of bibliotherapy?**

*Farber:* Bibliotherapy is an approach to infusing character education in literacy. Traditionally, bibliotherapy includes reading materials that help individuals understand themselves and others’ points of view (Heath, Smith and Young 2017). Examples can be traced to Aesop’s fables, myths, and religious parables shared orally and intergenerationally.

Present day, sometimes we see this approach when children experience trauma. For example, if a child’s parents are going through a divorce or the death of a pet or family member, a caregiver or sometimes a therapist may read a picture book with similar narrative themes. There is a long tradition of bibliotherapy, actually. For instance, researchers at Brigham Young University recently mapped children’s books and bibliotherapeutic materials to SEL frameworks.

Contemporary bibliotherapy can be any literary narrative that is reinforcing any form of societal value or cultural norms. Peekapak is an example, a set of multimodal ebooks on SEL and character education, such as honesty and respect. In addition, there are games where children can practice skills modeled in the books (Farber and Merchant 2022). In this case, bibliotherapy is not necessarily themed to trauma. But neither were Aesop’s fables or religious parables. Bibliotherapy can be used to teach any lesson, positive or traumatic. Narrative video games, a modern form of storytelling, can be bibliotherapeutic too. In *Lost Words: Beyond the Page* (2021), a game written by Rhianna Pratchett, players work through levels mapped to stages of grief (Farber and Erikson 2023). The story is set in a fictional world and in a young

girl's journal as her grandmother passes away after having a stroke. As a multimodal and interactive bibliotherapeutic text, this game – like a book – can potentially help children cope with grief and loss (ibid.).

**Darvasi: As you were talking, it made me think that the textual influence on moral education seems to be, on one hand, prescriptive where you are laying the laws and rules to guide conduct. On the other hand, the type of literary analysis that is typical of a high school English class is a means to more openly explore character, motives, and choices. We can read Hamlet to probe depression and decision-making in the context of adolescence, which can be considered a form of character instruction. Similarly, how might games also be texts to explore character and morality? Is it possible to extend the status of text to a game? Can bibliotherapy include games? If so, what unique advantages, if any, do games offer over other media, such as print or film?**

*Farber:* Games are a practice space to play with emotions, free from real-world outcomes. Let's take ethics as an example, a common aspect in many character education programs. We can discuss ethical dilemmas, like the trolley problem, with students. If you see a runaway trolley with failed brakes careening towards five people who are standing on a rail line and can pull a lever to cause the trolley to switch tracks – the track where a baby was crawling – would you? Should you? A popular thought experiment, games often put these dilemmas in motion. Playing games can also prepare us as we encounter dilemmas in our lives. When the vaccine

was created for the COVID-19 pandemic, who should be prioritized to receive it first? Why test and wear masks? *Quandary* (2013) is an educational game on themes of ethics and perspective-taking, where players solve disputes that never satisfy all in the group (see Figure 2). What makes games unique is player agency; players experience the outcomes of their impossible choices.

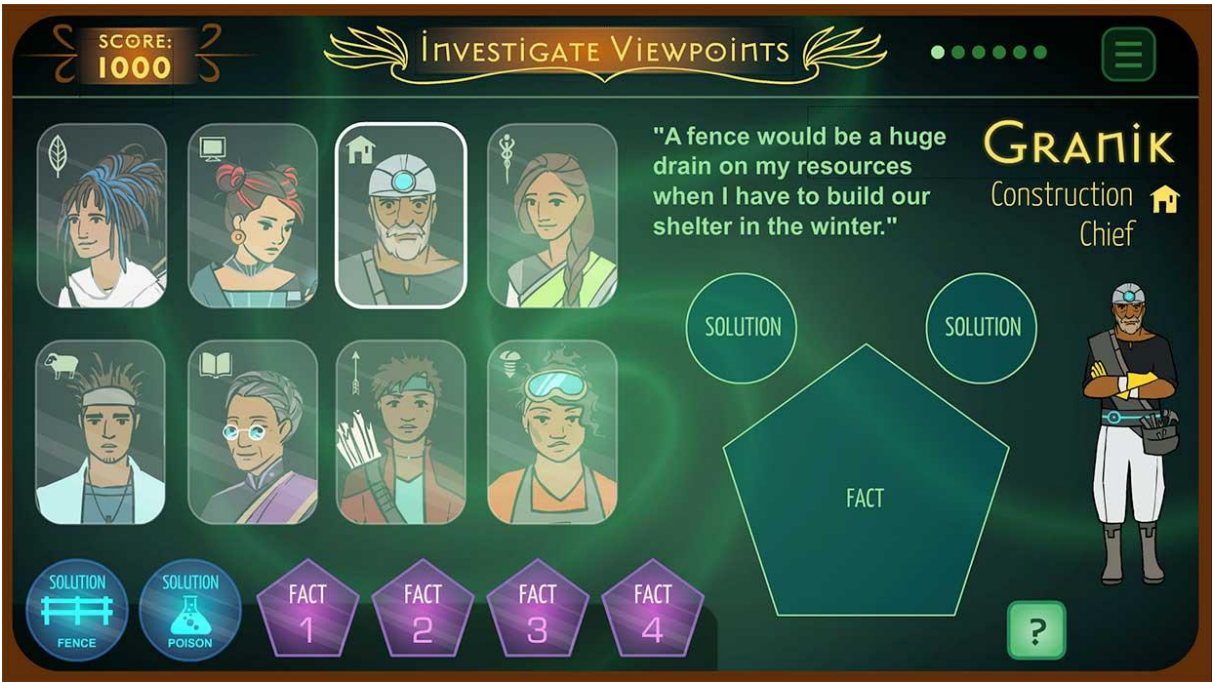


Figure 2. Image from *Quandary*. © Learning Games Network.

Let's take Victor Hugo's (1862) *Les Misérables* as another example. In the book, readers may experience theory of mind as they read a narrative about the protagonist Jean Valjean who must steal bread to survive. On stage, in film, or on television, viewers may form a parasocial bond with the actor who inhabits Valjean's circumstance and situation. *This War of Mine* (2014) is a video game with similar scenarios, where players may need to steal food, medicine, and toilet paper to survive (Farber 2021). Before stealing, players receive a narrative about people in similar situations whom they could steal from. In *Life Is Strange 2* (2018), players also encounter a similar ethical dilemma. Playing as runaway brothers, at one point in a



systems are rule-based systems. And so, the question was: how might we use a game-based system to kind of bring to life a religious legal code? Legal codes are very important in both Judaism and also in Islam. I'm also interested in the debates around legal codes and how these codes and debates indicate the *realpolitik* of the times. I'm interested in how people were able to create systems of sustainable governance and collaboration and cooperation in and across societies in which they lived. So, if we could take a legal code and put players in the position of role-players within that code, could we actually recreate legal cases through active play? So, what if you play through a legal situation and then ask a player to decide: are you going to follow the law? Are you going to break the law? Are you going to go above and beyond the law to help your neighbor? What approach are you going to take? And then leave the playfield open so that it is not so clear what would lead to a win-state (because we can end up with a very boring game if our choices are always clear, and it is in danger of becoming moral preaching).



Figure 3. Image from *Lost & Found*. © Gottlieb and Schreiber.

And here, I think about Ian Bogost (2007) and procedural rhetoric to understand that an affordance of games that is different than, say, the educational television that Matt [Farber] and I are both so interested in. We are interested in educational television historically and for what means for both us and for today, but Bogost, at least in



2007, and others would argue that the medium of games is different. Can we use the affordances that are unique to games with regard to the procedures in them in addition to the stories? One can generate stories through that legal case play. But I have been really playing for quite some time now in roleplaying within procedures that arise out of the emergent game structure. Yes, I am also interested in narrative and interactive narrative. One of our games is a storytelling game for teaching legal reasoning. But for strategy games, I'm more interested in the procedures of play leading to questions of ethics, morals, and the law and also character education.

**Darvasi: Could you provide some specific examples of how games in classrooms have supported the exploration of ethics, morals, and comporment?**

*Gottlieb:* We have been concentrating on teaching history with the *Lost & Found* series (Gottlieb and Clybor 2022). That includes perspective-taking and different approaches to historical empathy – both cognitive and affective. It's not exactly character education. It is more about trying to understand what a person's position might be in that historical moment and balancing between presentism (actually thinking that we could be in that space at that time) versus understanding what the impinging forces on that person or place might be. So, kind of getting lost in the time and place, but at the same time, having that tension and awareness that we are not, in fact, there. I think that productive tension can be harnessed for character education. The *Lost & Found* games are about lost and found objects in society. What are your obligations? What are your responsibilities to your neighbors with regard to safeguarding those objects or returning them? When are you held responsible? When are you not? And why?

Let's consider the games in non-secular settings, though they are often used in secular contexts. So, if I were to play those games in a religious-education context, then it becomes: what happens when you don't do the right thing? What if you did not return your neighbor's cow? How does your neighbor feel? How might they treat you in the future? What does that do to your society? There you get this nice mix of *realpolitik*: we would risk damaging positive reciprocity in society. If you do not treat someone well, you probably cannot expect them to treat you well. And then you can get at the fabric of society, meaning that these laws are not just education for *character's* sake but that society rests on these things as well. And so, the kind of the mix of *what does it mean to be a good person?* in the game is a person who can build and be a part of a community. The religious obligation to one's neighbor has ethics and also a practical necessity for keeping communities together.

**Darvasi: In this case, does the game *per se* do the instructional work, or does instruction benefit from additional context in order to arrive at the learning objectives?**

*Gottlieb:* I am always thinking about: how do we wrap game-learning inside of the curriculum? So *Lost & Found: New Harvest* (2020) for example comes with a pretty extensive booklet to help folks connect to deeper learning, and then I've been working with Dr. Shawn Clybor to develop a curriculum for the *Lost & Found* games (2022). I have designed extensive curriculum for *Jewish Time Jump: New York* with the Jewish Women's Archive, so I always think about my games having a curricular component, whether that is in classrooms or informally at summer camp or at home – I work to include mechanisms for reflection. I've always been of the perspective that I want to have access to primary sources for historical material and references beyond the game, as well. The educator is critical in the deployment of learning games,

whether that's in building in reflection, time to think on these questions, or pushing the learners to go deeper. We know that learning really happens when there is that time to stop and consider, either guided by the game itself or an instructor. However, I actually think it's quite hard to achieve that within a game. You might have an emotional experience at the moment, but what do you do with that emotional experience? How do you process it? Interestingly, Fred Rogers does it through the parasocial and always built it in that there would be emulated discussion with the viewers of his show. I think Fred Rogers had the sense that the child would ideally discuss the shows with their parents as well. I am actually curious about the question of reflection time in the television show *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (1968-2001). It was created with quiet moments, too: he would ask reflective questions and pause as if he were there leading and teaching the child.

**Darvasi: Owen, many of your games are set in the past. The adage that the past is a foreign country implies that our view of the past can be clouded by prejudices formed by our history context. We interpret the past through the lens of our current values, beliefs, cultural practices, access to resources, and sociocultural paradigms, all of which would be different in the past. The study of history, then, invites us to empathize with other mindsets and socio-cultural circumstances. When you set a game in the past – like the *Lost & Found* series – players are, to some degree, asked to empathize and take perspective. Can these qualities be practiced and cultivated through play? Are games in some way particularly suited to the task?**

*Gottlieb:* I think so. I can give some anecdotal evidence from the forthcoming chapter

that I have with Shawn Clybor (Gottlieb and Clybor 2022). Students were playing *Lost & Found* and some of its prototypes in his high school history classes. If someone drops a coin, the law requires you, under certain circumstances, to return that coin and find that person. If it is a really negligible denomination, you were not obligated to return it. Otherwise, you were required to return the coin. Shawn recounts the story of one of his students who identifies as Jewish and took it to heart. The boy witnessed a classmate drop a coin on the school bus, and the boy left before he could call out to him. He later called the student who had dropped the coin on the phone and told them, "I am obligated by Jewish law to tell you that you dropped the quarter." Whether that quarter is negligible today is one question, but the sense of responsibility made salient by the game is marked in this case. Perhaps it is not historical empathy, as we think of it, from an affective perspective, although I would argue cognition and affect go together. I am assuming that the game had some impact on that student. This is, of course, anecdotal: a case of one. I think that when we role-play in situations that include affective content, it can more deeply engage us. Role-play can be a powerful teaching modality. It is used to teach pastoral education to clergy as well. I believe that through role-play and perspective-taking, games can help support character education.

**Darvasi: Matthew, you’ve researched and written about integrating games in a variety of instructional environments. Can you share some examples of cases where they were used to support character education, SEL, moral instruction, etc.?**

*Farber: Quandary*, mentioned earlier, infuses character education and SEL with science, English language arts, and social studies. The website features an array of lessons too, and it is supported by research. But *Quandary* is a bit of a unicorn in this

space, as it is an educational game that has been shown to be genuinely effective and interesting.

In English class and with bibliotherapy, we tend to use off-the-shelf novels, as they tend to be written around an emotional arc, although they are not typically written to explicitly teach. That is where educators come in. A literacy colleague of mine, Jim Erikson, recently mused on a panel about how might Henry David Thoreau's (1854) classic *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* have turned out if he thought about learning outcomes with each chapter he wrote?



Figure 4. Screenshot from *Walden, a game EDU*. © Tracy Fullerton and the Walden Team.

Similar to books, documentaries, and movies, commercial games can be thoughtfully brought into classrooms. This was the approach when graphic novels entered learning spaces. With Tracy Fullerton as lead, along with Matthew Coopilton and her other graduate students, we developed empathy, mindfulness, and perspective-taking lessons for her award-winning game adaptation of *Walden, a game EDU* (2022) (see Figure 4). The game is now closely paired with the book, serving to deepen

experiences of living deliberately in nature, as Thoreau wrote. But this required a curriculum to guide teachers and students.

In one module, students discuss and rank items that they would definitely bring if they had to live off-the-grid, like in the book. Next, they play the game, noting the sounds and visuals on their virtual walk. Passages from Thoreau follow, as does a culminating project where students share their own personal place of solace, their own Walden Pond. This may be a hike on a trail, a park, or any favorite spot; it could even be online. Students are asked to share points of interest along the way for peers to complete, effectively walking in their shoes, mirroring how readers vicariously experience Thoreau’s time in Walden in the book and the game.

Specific to character building, games promote a concept called either productive failure or productive struggle, where players learn through trial and error. Jesper Juul (2013) wrote about the paradox of failure in an extended essay on how humans are failure adverse, yet we play games that knowingly involve failing. Perhaps, he surmised, it is because at some point, we reach catharsis, a washing away of difficult emotions. Catharsis is a term usually applied to books and plays but can be to games as well. As players recover from failing, they may feel relief from overcoming difficult odds. Persistence and resilience to overcome a challenge is part of character education that can be practiced through gameplay.

*Gottlieb:* I thought of two things there. One is kind of thinking about the deepening in *Walden*, which I just taught my students last week. From a religious perspective, I am reminded of Abraham Joshua Heschel’s notion of *radical amazement of* transcendence through the deepening or *noticing*, such as in nature. If we are picking up our heads to see – and things are getting more vibrant in *Walden*, that seems



related to me. It is another way of becoming more focused or more intensely oriented. Rather than difficulty being the key absorption, perhaps engrossment, from a Goffman-like perspective, becomes *noticing*.

Something that Ian Schreiber and I have been exploring for a few years is the use of multiple games at the same time (Gottlieb and Schreiber 2020). For example, Instructional Television (ITV) in the 1970s and 1980s taught using affective education in classrooms, and they might have thirty different stories or lessons that they had dealing with different aspects. Today, game designers for learning often try to have a game that does everything, and certainly, the first *Lost & Found* game can be used in all kinds of contexts, whether that is history, art history, legal history, or comparative religion. But we found that we needed to create a totally different game to be able to teach about legal *reasoning* because we needed the game mechanics to be different. When I studied with Jan Plass at NYU, and he was working on math and science games, they had a very specific, targeted orientation. What I found when I was working on my own games in the humanities, social sciences, religion, culture, and law – I think the targets must be broader. Rather than focusing on teaching complementary angles in geometry, for example, we were trying to teach about trade-off decisions in the face of the law, ethics, and reasoning. These are different kinds of learning problems.

We needed a multi-faceted approach. So, I am a fan of thinking about: can we have more games? Not just because I want a proliferation of games but, clearly, no single game is enough to encompass broader social sciences and humanities topics.

**Darvasi: Agreed. Much like a literary text, the meaning that can be drawn from a game is the product of an interpretive act. This raises the specter of moral relativism and imposing world views. What are the challenges associated with this? Especially in a secular classroom school setting?**

*Gottlieb:* Good question. Can that game, played by different groups of people at a time, be laden with a completely different value set? Because you are talking about the interpretation of a text, right? So different religious groups are going to interpret the text differently. The Purim ritual in Judaism, for example, can be understood through completely different political lenses. Interpretation of values, it seems, is dependent on what tradition of what particular group is performing or witnessing that ritual act.

When I was working on *Jewish Time Jump: New York*, it was a particular moment in history where the moral line was quite clear because 146 people, mostly young Jewish and Italian women died in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. And then, activists change labor laws following that tragic and shocking moment. Even though now we have a subtler understanding of who the manufacturers were and their relationship to the workers at the time, there is a clear moral line with regards to them not having adequate fire escapes and chaining doors closed from the outside. There was a bright moral line there. I remember speaking to my adviser, Bob Chazan, about history and teaching morality – that historians are not amoral and that certain moments in history are particularly clear. I don't think at that moment I was at risk of relativism because of the clarity of the historical moment. And then I learned from Jim Matthews about teaching secondary school students using Lockwood and Harris' (1985) work on reasoning with democratic values which examines ethical problems in history and opposing or conflicting sets of values. So, there is a tradition of

understanding competing values in the secular of teaching history as well as in fields like economics.

**Darvasi: Beyond content, I'm curious about how values can be transmitted and received through rules and game mechanics. Ideologies are woven into the fabric of every game that can reinforce certain values and perspectives. In the context of character education, what place does a critical deconstruction of games have in teaching and learning?**

*Gottlieb:* The chapter I wrote with Shawn Clybor (Gottlieb and Clybor 2022) in Rob Houghton's book on teaching medieval history with games is about curriculum development that Shawn and I iterated over about three years. One of our recommendations underscores the importance of teaching game design literacy. During the curriculum design process, we found that there was some attribution that students were making to elements they thought were historically accurate but were not. Those decisions were actually done for game design purposes, such as fitting a game into a 45-minute class period. Now, Ian Schreiber and I had published about that set of design choices, so we could actually give the article to the students about how the game is designed (Gottlieb and Schreiber 2020). Games and religious scholars have long understood media in terms that encompass games. In our chapter, (Gottlieb and Clybor 2022) Shawn and I ask: how can we use media design literacy to inform a better understanding of history? How do you inform students who are playing and thinking about playing with design about media literacy regarding games?

I've also been teaching my students now at the undergraduate level, in my Games for Change course, about how games are being designed and used at Harvard and a few other places to address mis- and disinformation. Something important in *Lost & Found* is that you can play as a villain. You can break the law. You can treat the community really badly. And we had to make a viable path that you could get to a win state. You know, we set some boundaries: a floor, for example. Basically, if anybody in the community goes destitute, everybody loses. So, we did set a floor there, and in that way, we are trying to reflect the underlying principles under the law. Those laws do not only address *realpolitik* but also have a theological perspective of what is required to build and sustain a community that functions well. People have to treat each other in a good way, and historically, that is understood in a religious context, even though we can understand it in a historical context without the theological component. And that was what my teacher, Rabbi Dr. Michael Chernick refers to as the *fifth level* of interpretation – after you understand the law from a translation perspective and from a legal perspective, and then you analyze the debates that lie underneath the law. You can look to the deeper theology (Gottlieb 2018). You do not need to consider theological issues to play the game, even though that level is always available to us in religious legal systems.

**Darvasi: And what about the idea of consequences? How do games allow us to safely explore the outcomes of our actions and choices?**

*Gottlieb:* “What if?” is at the core of *Lost & Found* too. What if I were to act this way toward my neighbor? What if I were to make this decision? What impact would it have? And so how does responsibility relate to cause and effect? And the fact that games can give us these feedback systems of cause and effect, where, if you are a player and you take an action, in a good game system, you will get feedback. We

think about these days being beyond reward and punishment theology, but at the same time living in a community with other people. Truly, considering the *realpolitik* (German for practical politics): there is a cause and effect, and you will see that cause and effect. If we think about pollution, Deuteronomy warns that the skies will turn to iron if we do not take care of the land. Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi taught, and Rabbi Judith HaLevy teaches, that there is a reciprocal relationship between humans and the environment that can be seen in the Bible. To me, that is teaching about climate change: if you don't steward your environment, you're going to end up with iron skies and acid rain. I think games are well suited to demonstrate cause and effect through interactive relationships and feedback. Games are also excellent for modeling systems, even ones for which we do not have other good models. Modern theology has moved beyond reward and punishment models, but the reciprocal relationships, between cause and effect remain.

**Darvasi: Can we draw connections between religious laws and the rules of games, and can these be productively leveraged for instruction?**

*Gottlieb:* Yes, I think so. We might look back to what I was speaking about earlier about the relationship between games as rule-based systems and legal systems as rule-based systems. And why I thought that interplay was important to play with. Rules are an important element of games.

*Farber:* I once asked philosopher and games studies expert Sherry Jones the question: can a video game teach ethics? "Games are just an opening to a conversation," she responded (Jones as quoted in Farber 2021, 133). Explicitly, games are rule-based systems. Through procedural rhetoric, games can start that conversation. In learning

contexts, the conversations can be Socratic, leading to more questions.

Explicitly, some games put the trolley problem into action. In *Layoff* (2009), a serious take on *Bejeweled* (2001), players downsize a corporation by clicking on tiles. On each tile is a backstory of the employee. A study on this game found boosts in empathy as players navigated the rules-based systems (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014).

Sometimes, rules-based systems explicitly drive home an ethical message. In the original *BioShock* (2007), Ayn Rand's (1943, 1957) laissez-faire ideology of objectivism is challenged through violent procedural rhetoric (Sicart 2009). *Papers, Please* (2013) has a rule-based system aligned with an authoritarian regime. Playing as a border agent, players make moral choices that often require breaking these rules.

Other times, games are implicit with rules. *Super Mario Bros.* (1983) reinforces a hero saves the girl trope; *Space Invaders* (1978) has a masculine, defend-the-home message common during the Cold War era of the late 1970s, when the game first appeared in arcades (Newman 2017). The classic modern edition of the board game *The Game of Life* (1960) rewards players who go to college and get married. As Jones suggests, conversations are where implicit and explicit messages in games come to light. Similarly, with books – from novels to religious texts – discussions are often where learners make meaning. For some reason, perhaps because video games are on computers, we assume that procedural rhetoric through gameplay may be enough. At Games for Change in 2022, Bogost (2022) argued a failure in his hypothesis. I think it is more of a shortcoming: games, like books, cannot and should not need to be all-in-one systems. They are all an opening to conversations (Jones, cited in Farber 2021).



**Darvasi: What are your thoughts on the future of the use of games for character, education, and moral development, especially in light of the metaverse and immersive realities?**

*Gottlieb:* I am teaching graduates and undergraduates these days and also coming to understand the crisis in the country with regard to mental health. We certainly see it on the university campus. I think there is an opportunity and need for what I think we are considering SEL games today in our conversation.

I believe SEL games are needed for older children and young adults. We have wonderful games for preschoolers. What kind of games might we be able to bring to high school, to college, to even graduate students, to help people with being more resilient in truly difficult times? Perhaps we could have more collaborations with mental health professionals and game designers and people who know how to help build resilience for people or teach coping skills. Goodness! There is so much to try to cope with today, especially being in a pandemic for almost three years now. We have not really, as a society, dealt with what the pandemic and losses of friends and loved ones, have meant to many of us.

I think it is an area that could certainly use more energy and more investment and experimentation. I'm excited about what it has to offer, and, as you mentioned, like the metaverse, I think, all the more so are going to need SEL games. I am teaching a class right now on documentary and actuality games, and the power of some of the games with the Oculus headsets to put people into places with others with whom they can empathize is powerful. One of my students brought a game to a class called *We Live Here* (2020) about a homeless woman. The player spends time in the woman's tent, including during a police raid. We are going to need real guidance from SEL perspectives as we head into more and more immersive game

environments. I wish there were more people working in this area, as I think it could bring about a lot of good.

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