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

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Ma Nishtana: What is Jewish about Jewish Games?

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Abstract

What makes Jewish games Jewish? We argue that it is not simply Jewish content, but an engagement with Jewish ideas through ritual, intertextuality, and/or culture. We explore this thesis through the analog role-playing game *Ma Nishtana: Why Is This Night Different* (2023). We show how the game engages Jewish knowledge transmission in all three modes, over and above its overt engagement of the Exodus story. This approach can introduce players to Jewish modes of being, including how we intertwine history, ritual, stories, and rules. This in turn can help address misconceptions about Jewish experience, particularly those that derive from Christian supersessionism and hegemony.

Teaching and learning are central activities in Judaism. Text study is one mode of knowledge transmission, where Jews engage with the Tanach, Mishna, Talmud, commentaries, responsa, and more (Steinsaltz 2002). However, Judaism is also a deeply embodied tradition, with *halacha* (a religious-legal code) about everything from food to sex to sleep (Donin 1991). A second mode of Jewish knowledge transmission is therefore through embodied ritual. Finally, Jewish cultural knowledge is, as in other diasporic cultures, transmitted through songs, stories, and shared

values (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002).

In the analog role-playing game *Ma Nishtana: Why Is This Night Different?* (2023), players take the role of one of six characters from the Exodus story. They might portray Moses, his wife Tzipporah, or Pharaoh himself. During the game, the players encounter a series of narrative prompts that they must respond to as their characters. For example, late in the game the players receive the following prompt: "The Hebrew people flee Egypt in a hurry. In this scene, something (or someone) is left behind. We play to find out what convinces us to let go." Each character has two special moves that let them respond to the prompts in unique, character-relevant ways. After playing out all the scenes, the group reflects collectively on what the game experience meant to them.

Ma Nishtana (translated: *What is Different*) can be played with three to six players either in person or over videoconference software. In the former case, the game's host provides the necessary materials, including character sheets and the items for shared in-game rituals such as salt water, leafy greens, and horseradish. When played online, each player is responsible for providing their own ritual materials, and the game includes alternate rituals that do not require players to be co-located. In both cases, however, the heart of the game is in the role-playing and narrative engagement between players.

On the surface, it might seem that *Ma Nishtana* is a Jewish game because it contains Jewish content in the form of the Exodus story. However, we argue that there are deeper ways that *Ma Nishtana* transmits Jewishness: ritually, intertextually, and culturally. Understanding these deeper modes is important because it is easy for outsiders to reduce Jewishness to a set of stereotypes: what one might call the *bagels,*

babka, and bubbies approach to this ancient tradition. These explicit signals code for Jewishness; when they are absent, then Jewishness is assumed to be absent as well (Brekhus 1998).

Treating Judaism in this way creates several problems. First, it erases Jewish diversity. Many public cultural signifiers of Jewishness are associated with the Ashkenazi tradition, which developed in Eastern Europe. Other groups, such as Sephardic Jews or the Beta Israel, are typically not represented. It also fails to capture core philosophical differences within Judaism (Davidman 1990). Second, it contributes to Jewish erasure. For example, Schraub (2019) demonstrates how forcible assimilation operates in the case of white Jews in America. Either white American Jews are hypervisible scapegoats, or they are normalized and therefore no longer understood as Jewish. The latter allows Jewish ideas to be co-opted by the mainstream without respect, credit, or understanding. Finally, the flattening of Judaism feeds antisemitism. In particular, Christian supersessionism argues that Christianity supposedly completes Judaism, and therefore Jews should no longer exist (Svartik 2022). When Jews are understood in terms of surface cultural choices (e.g., foods), it becomes easy to erase the profound underlying differences between Judaism and Christianity, and simply see Jews as Christians without Jesus.

Our analysis of *Ma Nishtana* aims to help you better understand Jewishness on *Jewish* terms. At the same time, we want to be clear that we cannot speak for all Jews. As a minority contribution in this special issue, we are aware that we are likely to be both highly memorable, and seen as group members rather than individuals (e.g., Kardosh et al. 2022). We hope that pointing out this dynamic will help you counteract it as you read.

Toward Jewish Game Analysis

Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman (2003) lay out three ways of thinking about games: rules, play, and culture. Rules describe the formal elements of a game; play includes what happens during the game, such as the lived experience of players and game dynamics (Walk, Görlich and Barrett 2017); and culture explores how the game relates to the larger world. This framework was applied to game analysis by Fernández-Vara (2019). She recommends that a game analysis include an analysis of formal elements (rules), the experience and reception of the game (play), and how it is played in a given context (culture), and encourages the game analyst to describe those elements in whatever order makes the most sense for the game being analyzed.

Once we identified this as our approach, we asked how these three analytic frames might manifest in Jewish terms. We generated a list of Jewish techniques for knowledge transmission, from text study to religious ritual to community norms. From this list, we chose approaches that matched each of the game-analytic frames of rules, play, and culture. We matched *rules* with Jewish practices of textual analysis, as both approaches use a detailed and formal analysis of text (Fernández-Vara 2019). We matched *play* with an analysis of Jewish ritual practice, which is embodied and experiential in the same way as gameplay (Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman 2003). Finally, we matched *culture* with the transmission of Jewish values through storytelling (ibid.).

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Using multiple lenses to analyze the text aligned with Jewish values at a higher level as well. Jews value *machloket l'shem shamayim*, loosely translatable as "holy dissent" (Kaminsky 2017). Jewish traditions do not demand uncritical belief, and Jews do not seek unquestioning consensus. Instead, we challenge one another's ideas, argue, debate, and critically analyze. In one famous Jewish story, the Oven of Akhnai, God

acknowledges that the process of rabbinical analysis trumps God's own word (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Baba Metzia, 59a-b). In another, the rulings of the sage Hillel are upheld specifically because of the respect he showed for other sages' opinions (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Eruvin, 13b). It is within this tradition of holy dissent that we offer our analysis.

First, our analyses of text, ritual, and culture in *Ma Nishtana* are meant to be complementary, as Fernández-Vara (2019) demonstrates in the context of game analysis. When taken together, we believe these analyses provide a fuller picture of how games can be Jewish.

Second, we adapted our analytic methods to account for the presence of the game's co-designers, Rabinowitz and Bisogno, on the writing team. On the one hand, they have an insider's understanding of the game, as well as insight into the design process. On the other hand, Jewish analysis must resist appeals to authority (e.g., Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Baba Metzia, 59a-b). To avoid treating the designers authoritatively, Hammer drafted a set of key points, then asked Rabinowitz and Bisogno for feedback. Once the team reached agreement on these key points, the designers provided relevant examples and Hammer selected which ones to incorporate. Through this process, we both evoked ideas that the designers had intended with their work, and uncovered new interpretations.

Third, we have incorporated short reflective passages from each of the authors. While we found ourselves in agreement about the analysis presented in this paper, our writing process brought up individual memories, stories, and thoughts. We see this as a way of "preserving the minority opinion" (Hammer 2020, 5). Look for indented

sections beginning with one of our names, like the one below, which provide individual commentary on our collective analysis.

> Hammer: I've been exploring the integration of reflective writing in research texts for some time. Jewish models of commentary have given me formats to experiment with, such as the marginalia of *Toward Jewish HCI* (Hammer 2020) and the multiple layers of authorial footnotes in *From When We Read* (Hammer 2019).

Finally, we recognize that other Jews' perspectives and experiences may differ from ours. For example, we are all Ashkenazi, we were all raised in America, and we are all college-educated. These experiences shape our perspectives on Jewish practice (Brettschneider and Rose 2004). However, we also have substantial Jewish diversity among the authors of this piece. Hammer attended *yeshiva* and practices traditional text study, including *daf yomi* (Sefaria n.d.); Rabinowitz engages Jewish imagination through the Jewish leftist tradition and through traditional folk tales; Bisogno encounters Jewish thought through philosophy, such as Levinas, Butler, and Spinoza. We believe that these differences make our analysis richer, and help convey what makes *Ma Nishtana* Jewish beyond the confines of a single approach.

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Play: *Ma Nishtana* as Ritual Learning

Ma Nishtana explicitly lives in conversation with the *Pesach* (Passover) Seder. Even the name of the game is taken from an element of the Seder. To understand *Ma Nishtana,* we must therefore first understand the Seder and how it functions as a learning experience.

Pesach is celebrated in the month of *Nisan*, which falls in the spring of the Jewish luni-solar calendar. It is in part an agricultural holiday, but its primary contemporary

function is to commemorate *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, the Exodus from Egypt (Assmann 2015). The holiday includes a number of ritual observances, including special prayers, abstaining from eating *chametz* (leavened bread), and, of course, the Seder. While there is substantial variation in Jewish engagement with the other aspects of *Pesach*, the Seder is one of the most commonly performed and central experiences of Jewish life (Lipka 2020, Mitchell 2022).

The Seder is a ritual feast that takes place on the first night of the holiday, and again on the second night in the diaspora. It has fourteen steps that are completed in the same order every year. *Urchatz*, for example, means to wash, and refers to the first of two symbolic hand-washings. In *Magid*, participants collectively tell the Exodus story, while in *Shulchan Orech* the group eats dinner. Taken together, these steps guide Seder participants through a series of interlocking ritual elements: telling stories, eating bitter herbs, drinking four cups of wine, saying prayers, and singing songs together (Donin 1991).

> Hammer: In the Hammer family tradition, we close the Seder with an obscure Yiddish song passed down from my father's father. *Charlie Bim Bam* is a counting song where each verse adds a new item, from one up to thirteen. By the last verse, we would be red in the face, pounding on the table, singing as fast as we could to get all thirteen items in one breath. As a child, I memorized the song phonetically; as an adult, it's one of the reasons I've begun studying Yiddish. This year will be the first time I can sing it and understand every word.

The Seder is codified in the text known as the *Haggadah*. In turn, the *Haggadah* explicitly marks the Seder as a ritual for teaching, learning, and remembering. For example, near the beginning of *Magid*, the *Haggadah* tells two contrasting stories. One is about five rabbis who stayed up all night discussing *Yetizat Mitzrayim* at their Seder (Pesach Haggadah, Magid, Story of the Five Rabbis n.d.). The other is about four children with different capacities, and instructs the reader how each one should

be taught (Pesach Haggadah, Magid, the Four Sons n.d.). Taken together, these stories make clear that everyone at the Seder is a learner, even if one is already a wise rabbi. As the Seder text explicitly says: "even if we were all sages … we would be obligated to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt" (Pesach Haggadah, Magid, We Were Slaves in Egypt n.d.). These stories also emphasize the role of generational transmission, whether between parents and children or rabbis and their students. Even for a child who is too young to ask a question, the parent is obligated to tell the story (Pesach Haggadah, Magid, the Four Sons n.d.).

As a learning experience, the goal of the Seder is not simply to convey information. Someone who knows the order of the Ten Plagues, for example, may not be able to use the knowledge creatively or apply it in contexts outside the Seder. Instead, the Seder seeks to transform participants through a journey from *shibud* (bondage) to *geula* (freedom). Jews are not just commanded to know the Exodus story, but to see ourselves as if we had experienced it (Pesach Haggadah, Magid, Rabban Gamliel's Three Things 7 n.d.). That experience, in turn, is meant to move us to action. This call to action can be seen in the opening words of *Magid*, when participants invite all those who are hungry to join them (Pesach Haggadah, Magid, Ha Lachma Anya n.d.). The call becomes even clearer in the Sephardic tradition, which reads *li'rot* (to see) as *li'ha'rot* (to show). It is not enough to experience oneself as having been redeemed, one must show it in ways that are visible to others.

Ma Nishtana shares the core design goals of the Seder, such as re-experiencing the Exodus story and generating active knowledge. These goals are already aligned with the capacities of role-playing games as learning experiences (Hammer et. al. 2018), and *Ma Nishtana* draws on the formal characteristics of the Seder as design tools to accomplish them. For example, the Seder uses multi-sensory, embodied experiences

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to engage participants in ways that go beyond the cognitive (Myerhoff 2008). The taste of bitter herbs symbolizes the bitterness of slavery; the crunch of unleavened matzah reminds us of the haste in which the Hebrews left Egypt; the feel of cool water on our hands is at once the Nile and the Red Sea. *Ma Nishtana* adopts these embodied experiences as game elements. Over the course of the game, players may eat bitter foods, break a piece of matzah, and/or wash their hands with water.

The connection is made richer because each game section is named after a section of the Seder, and echoes the embodied experiences of that section. In *Urchatz*, Seder participants symbolically wash their hands. In the *Urchatz* section of *Ma Nishtana*, participants are instructed to wash their hands in the same way: "Each player pours water from a cup once on each hand over a sink or basin." However, *Ma Nishtana* also offers an alternate ritual for each section, which is designed to be used when players are gathered remotely. These alternate rituals reflect and extend the meaning of the embodied experience in question. For example, in *Urchatz*, the alternate instructions are: "Everyone, clean something … wipe your eyeglasses, or throw away a piece of trash" (Ma Nishtana 2023). While these rituals diverge from the ones conducted at a traditional Seder, they, too, engage the players on levels beyond the cognitive.

> Bisogno: The alternate ritual in *Rachtzah* asks players to turn off their cameras and silence themselves. In practice, having engaged in near constant conversation for an hour or more at this point of the game, the experience of sudden quiet and the disappearance of the other players' faces is powerful. The 20th century Jewish philosopher Levinas argues that looking at someone's face connects you with their humanity. In his view, seeing another person's face is to be confronted with the prohibition not to kill (Levinas 1985). Soldiers often talk about how it is more difficult to shoot someone after looking them in the eyes. In public executions, the face of the condemned is often obscured. In *Rachtzah*, this sudden change emphasizes the presence of something beyond human, perhaps even beyond comprehension. As the angel passes over the scene, it

cannot be seen, but only heard. And so our cameras are off.

As the above example suggests, *Ma Nishtana* treats the Seder as design material rather than simply reproducing it. This approach is perhaps most visible in the designers' choice to re-order the Seder sections, such as moving *Magid* from the fourth step to the second. This is effective game design: by telling a conventional version of the Passover story before beginning their own version, it gives players a common starting point. Going further, the game empowers players to choose the order of some sections. *Shulchan Orech* (eating dinner) is translated into the game as a safety technique, where players can step away from the drama to eat, sing, or discuss. Players may invoke *Shulchan Orech* at any point during the game, and are even encouraged to use it more than once. Given that Seder literally means *order*, these differences are no small change.

While this remixing may seem radical, it is entirely in line with both the nature of the Seder (Arnow 2006a) and of role-playing game design (Horton and Beard 2021). *Magid*, for example, includes Torah verses, passages from Ezekiel and Psalms, stories from the Mishnah and Talmud, and rabbinical exegeses, woven together in ways that move back and forth through time. The Seder even draws from non-Jewish sources, such as the Greek symposium (Arnow 2006a). Contemporary Haggadot continue to add material, such as including an orange on the Seder plate (Aviv 2008). *Ma Nishtana* enthusiastically participates in this tradition.

> Rabinowitz: One aspect of *Ma Nishtana* that has been impactful for me is the inclusion of alternative Backdrops, written by collaborators from different cultural and religious traditions. When I played the game recently using Kienna Shaw's Backdrop set in a xianxia-inspired Chinese fantasy world I discovered new layers of meaning in the game and the story of Exodus itself. I am thrilled with the variety of voices and frames of reference that are gathered together in this project.

The remixing also provides a necessary and appropriate distance from the Seder itself. Judaism is a closed tradition, which means that outsiders are not welcome to practice our rituals except by invitation. In recent years, the Seder has been a particular target of appropriation by Christians, with "Christian Seders" (Ryan 2022, 63) popping up in multiple denominations. *Ma Nishtana* draws on the Seder ritual, but as the designers explicitly note, is "not for those who wish to conduct a conventional Passover Seder" (Ma Nishtana 2023). This provides a respectful way for non-Jewish players to engage without encroaching on closed Jewish practices, and addresses the concerns of Jews who would not want a game to treat a religious ceremony lightly. At the same time, *Ma Nishtana* provides an alibi for Jews to perform elements of the Seder, even if they are hesitant to delve more deeply into that part of their identity (Stenros and Bowman 2019). It can also be adapted back into a Seder experience by Jews who find it inspiring.

> Bisogno: Personally, I would run *Ma Nishtana* as a Seder in itself. I find myself far more connected to a story when I roleplay a narrative. However, the original four questions young people ask their elders are essential to me, and they are not in the game. If I were to play *Ma Nishtana* at a Seder next year, I would reincorporate them, asking players to answer them in a way that highlights the content of the game we had enjoyed.

Rules: *Ma Nishtana* as Intertextual Learning

In addition to its ritual components, *Ma Nishtana* participates in the long conversation of Jewish textual interpretation. Jews believe that there is no one correct interpretation of our sacred texts. Instead, Jews believe that there are *shivim panim la-torah*, seventy faces to the Torah (Ben-Chaim n.d.). The goal is not to come to a single dominant interpretation, but to discover, dispute, and synthesize many different interpretations, in conversation both with contemporary study partners and

with a long history of Jewish scholars over thousands of years. Explaining, appreciating, and analyzing our texts is a holy act (Pirkei Avot 1:2 n.d.).

To illustrate the textual interpretation process, consider Exodus 4:24-26:

> "At a night encampment on the way, the LORD encountered him and sought to kill him. So Tzipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his legs with it, saying, "You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!" And when He let him alone, she added, "A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision." (The Contemporary Torah, Exodus 4:24-26)

Sefaria, an online compilation of Jewish sources, lists 147 pieces of commentary by 41 different commentators on these three verses alone. Among them, the famous 11th century scholar Rashi explains the surface meaning of the text, and playfully elaborates on textual inconsistencies. The 14th century Riva and the 17th century Siftei Chachamim provide two of many supercommentaries on Rashi, offering insights such as clarifying the inconsistencies that provoked Rashi in the first place. These commentaries are presented side by side with, and often in direct conversation with, other analytic traditions. For example, the 12th century commentator Bekhor Shor provides rational explanations of miraculous biblical events, while the 16th century Alshich emphasizes the moral lessons of the verses.

In this passage, the commentators grapple with why the LORD seeks to kill Moses. What was his sin, and how does Tzipporah's action save him? The difference between Rashi and Rashbam serves as an example of the plurality of Jewish thought. Rashi argues for a relatively straightforward reading of the text. Moses sinned by failing to circumcise his son; Tzipporah saves him by performing the needed circumcision. Rashbam, on the other hand, sees Tzipporah's act as a sacrifice meant to appease the LORD, and not as a direct reparation for sin. He argues that Moses sinned by taking

his family with him on the road, instead of rushing as quickly as possible to carry out his mission. These two interpretations are different, but they are not at odds. They are part of the intergenerational, intertextual conversation known as *parshanut*.

Ma Nishtana contributes to *parshanut* through how it handles its source material. Because characters are the lens through which players experience the game world, this engagement is particularly visible in character design. The designers embody their interpretation of the characters in game moves and character conflicts, which in turn make this knowledge actionable to players. For example, Tzipporah is one of the six playable characters in the game. Based on her bold action in saving Moses's life, the designers define a "SMASH!" move (Ma Nishtana 2023). This move is invoked when someone Tzipporah loves is in danger. When they see an opportunity to deploy the move, the player defines what powerful, decisive action Tzipporah takes, and experiences the consequences. These consequences in turn point back to Tzipporah's core conflict as understood by the game designers, around how family caretaking can both wound and heal.

This design approach allows players to connect to the characters. Tzipporah's conflict – like those of the other characters – is a human conflict. Players can reason about them based on their life experiences, regardless of how much they know about the Exodus story, Jewish life, or the Seder (Hammer and Turkington 2021). The conflict then provides a touchstone for players to link the in-game experience back to their own lives. This type of connection is characteristic of analog role-playing games, but it is also a type of Torah study known as *bibliodrama* (Pitzele 1998). In bibliodrama, participants take the roles of characters from Torah stories and seek to understand them from the inside out. At the Seder, that might mean speaking the thoughts of named characters such as Moses or Pharaoh, unnamed characters such as Pharaoh's

magicians or the enslaved Jews, or even inanimate objects such as Moses's staff. Some *Haggadot* even include instructions for bibliodramatic engagement as an option during *Magid*.

Bibliodrama typically hews close to the Exodus text, focusing on what the characters think and feel. *Ma Nishtana*, however, provides a second mode of interaction with *Yetziat Mitzrayim*. Players improvise what happens during the game and participate in defining the story. This can make players feel powerfully connected to the material they create. However, it also risks players abandoning the Exodus story during play. To address this, the designers adopt insights from the larger interpretive tradition of *midrash*. *Midrash* is a narrative form of interpretation, where entire stories are interpolated into the traditional text in ways that amplify, question, or reimagine it (Mikva 2022). One famous *midrash* wonders why Exodus 38:8 specifies that the copper basin in the *Mishkan* was made from women's mirrors. The mirrors must be unusual in some way, and so the *midrash* imagines them as part of an erotic game that the Hebrew women used to resist Pharaoh's cruel decrees. When their husbands were crushed by hard labor and forbidden to return home, the women would take their mirrors into the field and use them to help their partners see themselves as sexual beings. This in turn ensured the continuity of the Hebrew people (Adelman 2021).

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> Hammer: Contemporary midrash is often used to "brush [Judaism] against the grain," to adapt Benjamin's approach to history (Benjamin 2005). It provides space for the stories of women, queer people, and other groups whose perspectives are not well-represented in mainstream texts. For an excellent collection of contemporary women's midrash, see Biala (2022). If you want a sense of why midrash as an inclusive practice is so important, see Hammer (2019).

Ma Nishtana invites the player to participate in the midrashic tradition by holding a

space for player contributions between recapitulation and irrelevance. As previously described, each scene begins with a structured prompt, such as: "In this scene a cruel decree is handed down to the Hebrew people. We play to find out what harsh order is carried out on the characters in the scene" (Ma Nishtana 2023). The first half of the prompt identifies the core of the scene, putting boundaries on the experience that players will create together. The second half tells them where to point their creativity and explicitly makes a space for their participation, a design technique known as the fruitful void (Baker 2005).

In other words, *Ma Nishtana* provides multiple modes of engagement, each of which links to a different Jewish intellectual tradition. The game text intervenes in *parshanut*, the player's emotional experience becomes bibliodrama, and the resulting narrative is a *midrash*. These differences reflect the many ways that role-playing games can support learning (Hammer et. al. 2018), and the many ways that learning is valued within Jewish tradition.

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Culture: *Ma Nishtana* as Storytelling

In addition to its contributions to Jewish textual interpretation, *Ma Nishtana* transmits Jewish culture. In particular, it captures the complex relationship Jews have to both the heroes and the villains of our stories. The six characters of *Ma Nishtana* include Moses, Aaron and Miriam, who are typically centered in Jewish education, Tzipporah and Bityah, who are minor characters in the Biblical text brought forward by the game, and Pharaoh, the wicked villain who enslaves the Jews and repeatedly refuses to let them go. By comparing how these characters are treated, we can identify how the game transmits specifically Jewish values.

In the Jewish tradition, heroes are not expected to be perfect. Instead, our stories show both their strengths and their weaknesses. Miriam is the wise prophetess who saves her brother's life by disobeying Pharaoh's edicts; she is also punished for disobeying her brother and questioning his authority. Aaron, the peacemaker, serves as his brother's advocate, but fails to stop the people from creating the Golden Calf. Even Moses dies before he reaches the Land of Israel because of his wrongdoing. As Jews, we are expected to learn as much from our heroes' weakness as from their greatness.

The Jewish tradition also recognizes the temptation to elevate our heroes. The compilers of the Haggadah realized that this temptation would be particularly severe around *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, which is central to Jewish identity. For this reason, Moses is never mentioned in the Haggadah. If he appeared, the rabbis reasoned, the Seder could easily become a celebration of an individual rather than a story of collective redemption (Arnow 2006b).

Ma Nishtana, too, recognizes these risks. In response, the designers elevate the human and vulnerable aspects of Moses's story. He was a cultural outsider wherever he went. While raised as an Egyptian prince, he became alienated from that identity; because he was not raised as a Hebrew, he needed to earn their acceptance. Moses's character sheet establishes his alienation from the very first question: "What makes it so difficult for you to communicate with Pharaoh's court? With the Hebrew people?" (Ma Nishtana 2023). The character is explicitly designed to resist centering Moses at the expense of the other characters, using a move called "HOLD YOUR TONGUE" (Ma Nishtana 2023). When he becomes the center of the spotlight, he can redirect the focus of the story to another character, to the past, or even to the word of God.

Additionally, by casting Moses in the context of his siblings Miriam and Aaron, their story becomes the story of a family rather than an individual. Most of their moves involve interaction with others: guiding someone in need through prophecy, ceding space to someone else, or using power to advocate for another. Their strengths are not in acting for themselves, but for the collective needs of their people.

Tzipporah and Bityah capture another important aspect of Jewish culture. Jews believe a person can be fully righteous without being a Jew. To accomplish this, non-Jews must follow the seven Noachide laws, such as refraining from murder and setting up just courts (Stone 1990). They do not have to believe in the Jewish God (or any god), nor must they follow any specifically Jewish traditions. Jews expect non-Jews to create a just society of their own, not to join our people.

Neither Tzipporah nor Bityah are born Jewish, and their stories represent two models of how non-Jews can connect to Judaism. Our traditions tell us that Tzipporah followed Jewish law, including the ritual circumcision of her son (Exodus 4:24-26), and that she broke the idols in her father's house. She can therefore be understood as a convert. Bityah, on the other hand, never participates in Jewish life, but is nonetheless treated as a heroic character. She has a move inspired by the scene in which she rescues a child not her own at the water's edge in Exodus. The move is called "WHEN YOU WISH TO SAVE SOMEONE" and points to the savior aspect of her identity. Like Tzipporah, she is a nurturer. One comes from the center of Egyptian power, one comes from Midia, another land; one participates in the Hebrew community, while one does not. Both, however, are valued by the game's design.

The game's approach to the final character, Pharaoh, asks the player to see him as a human being. It does not soft-pedal his evil deeds, while at the same time showing

that they come from recognizable human impulses (Stenros and Bowman, 2019). Holding this tension aligns with the Jewish approach to Pharaoh's story. The Talmud tells us that when the Egyptians were drowning in the Red Sea, the angels wanted to celebrate. God silenced them, saying, "How dare you sing when my creations are dying?" (b. Megillah 10b). As a reminder of this tragedy, the Seder asks us to spill a drop of wine for each of the Ten Plagues. At the same time, God permits the Hebrews (led by Miriam) to sing and celebrate their deliverance, just as the Seder is a celebration.

> Rabinowitz: I love playing Pharaoh because it gives me an opportunity to exorcize some of the toxic traits I have experienced from those in positions of authority. There is nothing like a compelling villain to give the other characters something to play off of. The Pharaoh of *Ma Nishtana* is driven by fear, insecurity, and doubts – all relatable human instincts.

Teaching and Learning with *Ma Nishtana*

As our analysis demonstrates, *Ma Nishtana* draws on a rich tapestry of Jewish heritage. It uses the forms and rituals of the Seder as design elements; it engages Jewish traditions of intertextuality through *parshanut*, bibliodrama, and *midrash*; and it frames its characters using Jewish values. Explicit knowledge of these elements may enrich one's experience of *Ma Nishtana*, but they are not necessary to play the game. Instead, following the rules and rituals of the game produces a powerful, embodied Jewish experience – just like the Seder itself.

> Bisogno: The common Ashkenazi practice of opening the door for the angel Elijah represents an invitation to the unknown. During a Passover Seder I attended at Gabrielle's house, our meal was interrupted by a knock on the door. Her sister's friends had come over. To me, the formality I had performed at every Seder, of opening the door for an angel, had become realized: Elijah had visited. My takeaway was that the Seder is not an entirely enclosed ritual; it is an

opening, if not to the divine, then to the ideas and impressions of those we invite to the meal. The Seder acts as a translation of past to present, of Hebrew to English, of explaining family traditions to perplexed guests.

As discussed above, simply having an experience is not the ultimate goal of the Seder, nor of *Ma Nishtana*. The Seder experience is meant to be *transformational*, leading to changes in identity, values, and action. To accomplish this transformation, *Ma Nishtana* incorporates techniques from constructivist learning theory through a particularly Jewish lens.

The special move "WAIT WAIT WAIT!" is an example of the game's instructional design. Most of the moves in the game are designed for the active player. In contrast, "WAIT WAIT WAIT!" allows *any* player to ask a question ("Clarify something about gameplay, the scene, or anything else") or make a suggestion ("Take issue with established narrative or add new elements"), even when they are not holding the focus of play *(*Ma Nishtana 2023).

From a learning perspective, this move means that even when a character is not on stage, the player can continue to actively participate – including by choosing *not* to use the "WAIT WAIT WAIT!" move. Listening to other players is no longer a passive activity, but one that is both active and interactive. These types of experiences help players internalize and activate what they learn (Chi and Wiley 2014).

From a Jewish perspective, "WAIT WAIT WAIT!" embodies "cooperative overlapping" (Tannen 2012, 137), a Jewish speech strategy where interruption indicates engagement and interest. As the designers put it, "we wanted to give voice to how our own family speaks at the table: a tug of war between argumentative points and sideways jokes that in cascade carries our attention around the room" (Ma Nishtana

2023). The move also provides ways for players to disagree, and to build on those disagreements, in the spirit of *machloket l'shem shamayim* (holy dissent).

> Rabinowitz: My cousins introduced me to the supplementation of the Seder practices with questions, ideas from outside reading, favorite songs, or lessons from Jewish schooling. My young cousins would proudly share material of this kind, often while shouting "Wait! Wait! Wait!" I always loved how even this highly formal Seder made room for modern interpretations, questioning, and fun. This spirit inspired me when creating *Ma Nishtana* and gave me a way to envision it as a supplement to a Passover Seder experience.

Another game-based learning strategy is reflection, which helps players transfer their knowledge outside the game context (Hammer and Black 2008). *Ma Nishtana* explicitly incorporates a powerful post-play reflection ritual. In *Barech*, the designers adapt the Seder's Four Questions – the titular *Ma Nishtana* – to help players discuss their experience in the game. The original text asks Seder participants to reflect on differences between the Seder night and the rest of the year, such as eating matzah.

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Ma Nishtana uses the same textual structure, but changes the question content to ask about the meaning of the Exodus story, as well as about how this game experience was different from other games they have played. In answering the questions, players build links both to other experiences with the Exodus story, and to other experiences with games. By treating these situations as contrasting cases (Schwartz et. al. 2011), *Ma Nishtana* sets up both future contexts as triggers for re-engagement with the concepts of the game.

Conclusion

In this article, we demonstrate that the analog role-playing game *Ma Nishtana* embodies Jewishness in its design in ways that are independent of any explicitly

Jewish content. This is particularly important because *Ma Nishtana* is designed to be used with what the designers call Backdrops, or alternate settings. If what made the game Jewish was content alone, then removing the Jewish content would also remove the game's Jewishness. Instead, using the game with other settings lets players think – and learn – about them through a Jewish lens.

In the spirit of transformational learning, the designers also offer their game for transformation by other designers. "Ringed in Ritual" (Ma Nishtana 2023) games are recommended for designers who want to explore ritualized ceremonies of storytelling, the reimagination of familiar tales, or exploring relationships among unvoiced characters. Just as *Ma Nishtana* is in conversation with the Seder, these games will exist in conversation with *Ma Nishtana*, and produce new contributions to the intergenerational conversation of Jewish transmission.

Whether you are a designer or a researcher, a reader or a player, may this work inspire you to see Jewish games – and yourself – in a new way.

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