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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reports

interviews

Teaching with Games. Formative Gaming in Religion, Philosophy and Ethics. Introduction to the Special Issue[i]

Tim Hutchings

Abstract
This special issue explores the power of games to shape worldviews, share perspectives, develop religious identities and provoke ethical reflection. Contributors bring together ideas from classrooms of philosophy and religious studies with case studies from religious communities and companies engaged in game design, and reflect on their own experiences as makers, players, teachers and critics of games. This introduction proposes a concept of *formative gaming* to explain this multidisciplinary, multi-context approach. The issue includes four articles, two reports and an interview, and this introduction briefly summarises each contribution before identifying the key themes and shared questions that emerge across the collection.

Keywords: Formative Games, Education, Religious Games, Philosophy, gamevironments

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This special issue returns to the theme of the educational and formative power of games, a topic of regular consideration in the journal *gamevironments*. The concept of *gamevironments* brings together the study of the content and context of a game, taking an actor-centred approach to analyse narrative, gameplay, gamer-created content, gaming experience and cultural environment as part of a holistic vision (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014). As such, the *gamevironments* research approach is ideally suited to exploring relationships of mutual influence between games, gamers and the institutions and cultures around them – including

educational institutions. Recent special issues have included collections on history education – issue #5 guest edited by Derek Fewster and Ylva Grufstedt (2016); teaching and games – issue #15 guest edited by Björn Berg Marklund, Jordan Loewen-Colón and Maria Saridaki (2021); and social justice in games – issue #17 guest edited by Patrick Prax (2022), and contributions to each of these issues can be read alongside the work presented here to explore shared themes and concerns.

This issue focuses on formative games, which we define here as games that have been designed to shift the worldview of their players. Such games may utilise any medium, from videogames to role-playing games, boardgames or simple card games, as long as they share this formational purpose. Formative games might be intended to shape character, develop empathy or promote values. They might be designed to lead the player into a new way of thinking about their own identity, a new attitude to others or a new understanding of their community of relationships. They might challenge a player's assumptions, commitments and implicit expectations. Formative games might aim to develop a new habit or encourage action in the world outside the game. Their intended impact might be vast and life-changing or small and subtle, conscious or entirely unnoticed, but they aim for their players to be different people at the end of the game.

We focus here specifically on formative games designed to shift player worldviews by exploring religious, ethical and philosophical perspectives. This goal includes the work of religious communities, and we will consider Jewish (Jessica Hammer, Gabrielle Rabinowitz and Ben Bisogno's article), Christian (Erin Raffety and Maria Insa-Iglesias' and Philippa Isom's articles) and Muslim (Arwa Hussain's report) examples in this issue. As we shall see, such formative ambitions are also shared by philosophers (Karl Egerton's article), public broadcasters (Owen Gottlieb, Matthew Farber and Paul

Darvasi's roundtable) and teachers of religious and ethical education in schools (Staaby's article). By considering these different motivations alongside one another, we hope to encourage scholarly awareness of the rich resources for the analysis of worldview formation through games that can be shared across the disciplines of education, media studies, philosophy, theology and religious studies.

We hope that this issue will inspire further interdisciplinary exploration and collaboration. The ambition to change worldviews through formative games is shared in other educational contexts as well, for example by those teaching principles of ethics in courses in game design, programming and computer science. Engagement between educators across these and other academic fields could be provocative and mutually enriching.

In a recent article, *gamevironments* scholars Gregory P. Grieve, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler and Xenia Zeiler (2020) call for the study of religion in games to be set aside in favour of the study of value formations. We have used the broader concept of worldview here in our definition of formative games in order to encompass not just values but other kinds of assumption and underlying commitment as well. The work of religious communities and scholars of religion includes but is not limited to questions of value, and the formative potential of games is not limited to the realm of values either. Nonetheless, Grieve, Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler's call for analysis of value formations resonates with and complements our proposal for the study of formative games. Some formative games do aim to reconstruct the value formations of their players, such that new priorities, commitments and perceptions of worth might begin to motivate them.

Formative games are not necessarily developed with a singular worldview shift or value formation outcome in mind. Games can also challenge players to wrestle with moral conundrums that threaten to compromise their values and commitments, forcing them to recognise and reflect on their assumptions without providing an easy answer. For example, in 2023 the University of Nottingham hosted the Trolley Problem Virtual Reality Experience, produced by Matthew Duncombe and Paul Tennent with funding from the Royal Institute of Philosophy (University of Nottingham 2022). The Trolley Problem is a famous philosophical thought experiment that asks thinkers to make decisions in a situation where every choice has a terrible consequence. The purpose of the experiment is to challenge the thinker to explain why one moral decision feels different from another, and thereby to expose their underlying moral assumptions. Visitors to the VR experience donned a headset and found themselves immersed within the experiment, watching tiny figures cavort on a track as a trolley rushed towards them. By shifting the experiment into an immersive game, philosophy educators can challenge students with a new kind of decision. The problem remains unsolvable, but the game allows players to explore new dimensions of the problem by experiencing their choices in a new way.

Religious games, on the other hand, are likely to have a more specific formative goal. Since the 1980s, more than 1,500 religious videogames have been created, as demonstrated by the extraordinary archive produced by Vivian Gonzalez (2022). Scholars of religion and games have shown great interest in games that take a critical approach to religion and ethics, like *The Binding of Isaac* (2011), which forces players to reckon with the consequences of religious hypocrisy and spiritual abuse (Bosman and van Wieringen 2018). In contrast, games created by and for religious communities have usually been treated as a less interesting topic of study.

In part, this may be because scholars have assumed that religious games have limited formative power. Ian Bogost (2007, 289) turned to the Christian games market for an example of inadequate understanding of procedural rhetoric, arguing that "Christian game developers create religious games in the hopes of associating isolated Bible facts with videogame-playing target demographics, rather than simulating interaction with systems of belief." From this perspective, religious games will only be effective at their goal of formation if the mechanics of the religion are themselves adapted into gameplay, such that playing the game opens a new understanding of theology or religious experience separate from the events or texts depicted within the game. The same challenge will apply to the efforts at philosophical and ethical education considered in this special issue: can they embed their proposed worldview into the procedures and rules of the game they create?

More recently, philosopher C. Thi Nguyen (2020, 17) has proposed an understanding of games as "the art of agency." For Nguyen (2020, 1), games challenge us to adopt new goal, using specific abilities to overcome specific obstacles, and thereby invite us to "give ourselves over to different – and focused – ways of inhabiting our own agency." Games are "a unique social technology" (ibid.) for recording and sharing and immersing ourselves in agencies. This approach encompasses any kind of game, and Nguyen's focus on agency is arguably more significant to the experience of gaming that Bogost's emphasis on processes. However, the challenge posed to religious, philosophical and ethical games is the same: do these games use agency as their medium, and exercise their formative potential through the goals and abilities they offer to players?

The case studies considered within this special issue offer an ambiguous response to these challenges. We will see examples of games whose designers claim triumphant

success and others who acknowledge disappointment and failure. The research conducted by our contributors leads in some cases to mixed conclusions, with different outcomes recorded for different audiences. Nonetheless, we argue that formative games like these are an important area of study. As long as games engage and motivate their players, there will be teachers, institutions and communities hoping to use that power for their own formational ends. Formational games are designed to shift the worldview of their players, and as such they can reveal a great deal about how their designers understand the world.

Introducing the Special Issue

Articles

In our first peer-reviewed article, Karl Egerton presents *A Case Study of Teaching Complex Skills in Philosophy through Games: Are You Flourishing?* Egerton is one of several teachers in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Nottingham currently experimenting with games development as a pedagogical method. Egerton teaches a third-year undergraduate module titled Communicating Philosophy, which invites students to apply their philosophical skills to practical workplace challenges posed by guest speakers from different professional domains (Fisher and Tallant 2016).

In order to improve student understanding of the core theoretical concepts involved in this module, namely transformative experience and gamification, Egerton has developed a card game called *Are You Flourishing?* (2022) Inspired by philosophers Laurie Paul and C. Thi Nguyen, Egerton's game requires players to accumulate points towards a secret goal representing personal success according to their assigned value system. Points can be earned and opponents thwarted by playing a sequence of

cards representing everyday life events, but the game also offers the opportunity to take a risk by playing more powerful cards representing transformative experiences. These cards have an unpredictable impact, potentially increasing or decreasing scores, and could mean triumph or disaster for a player's cause. This mechanic invites students to think more deeply about games and about the unforeseen impact that significant life experiences can have on a person's character, values and goals, helping to reinforce the philosophical theories that underpin the module. Egerton's article explains the development of the game and uses student feedback to reflect on its effectiveness as a teaching tool.

Our second article, by Jessica Hammer, Gabrielle Rabinowitz and Ben Bisogno, is titled *Ma Nishtana: What is Jewish about Jewish Games?* Rabinowitz and Bisogno are the designers of *Ma Nishtana*, a role-playing game that offers "to help you better understand Jewishness on *Jewish* terms" (2023, 59). This game invites players to participate in a multi-sensory encounter modelled on the Jewish feast of the Pesach (Passover) Seder, a ritual which is itself designed as a sensory learning experience. By changing the traditional ritual form, *Ma Nishtana* explores the format of the Seder while preserving sufficient distance to avoid perceptions of disrespect, trivialization or cultural appropriation. In this article, the three co-authors draw an analogy between games and Jewishness, comparing the rules, gameplay and culture of games to the formalized Jewish practices of textual analysis, the embodied experience of Jewish rituals and the cultural significance of Jewish storytelling. By considering each of these three categories in turn, the authors explore the ways in which *Ma Nishtana* participates in distinctively Jewish practices, traditions, values and heritage, operating on Jewish design principles as well as conveying Jewish content. The authors argue that the format of their article itself is also distinctively Jewish, preserving minority positions and expressions of dissent within the team and avoiding analytic appeals to

either academic or designer authority. Researchers have long argued that there is a close relationship between religions and games (Wagner 2012, Anthony 2014), and this article contributes to the growing body of literature on distinctively Jewish gamevironments (Gottlieb 2017).

Our third article, by Erin Raffety and Maria Insa-Iglesias, is titled *Re-Imagining Christian Education through Neurodivergent Fellowship, Play and Leadership in Online Videogaming*. Like Hammer, Rabinowitz and Bisogno, this article focuses on a game developed by and for a specific tradition, inspired by the distinctive values of that tradition. This article is the result of a collaboration between a theologian and ethnographer (Raffety) and a developer (Isla-Iglesias) who worked together to build and test a Christian game in *Minecraft* (2011) called *The Spiritual Loop* (2020). This game was designed to support collaborative play for neurodivergent and neurotypical Christian players, and eight research participants joined focus groups before the development stage, tested the new game and provided feedback.

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This focus on disability makes the project an important contribution to literature in Christian theology, games studies and the field of religion and gaming, because neurodivergent experience is marginalised in all of these fields of academic research. The game itself consists of a series of tasks, most of which must be completed collaboratively, and the game prevents players from advancing too far on their own. Completion of the series of tasks earns a reward that simulates the freedom of heaven promised in Christian theology. Observation of gameplay reveals that the game created opportunities for neurodivergent players to exercise leadership, teach, socialise and assist others, and some players reported that these opportunities were superior to their experiences in their own church congregations. In contrast, the research team found that neurotypical players saw little value in fun and fellowship

for their own sake and complained that the game lacked opportunities for structured learning and education. By contrasting these responses, the authors use the experience of *The Spiritual Loop* to throw the prevailing assumptions of Protestant Christian theology and wider American society about the value of work, play and productivity into question.

Our final article, by Tobias Staaby, returns our focus to the philosophy classroom, this time at high school rather than university. In *"This is a Zombie Apocalypse – It's an Entirely Different Situation": Teachers' Deductive and Inductive Framing of Digital Games in Ethics Education*, Staaby explores how teachers in Norway use *The Walking Dead* (2012) in classes in Religion and Ethics, a compulsory subject that forms part of the national curriculum.

Staaby first surveys literature on the use of games in education to show that whole-class play, in which the class watch a single playthrough of a game led by a teacher, can provide an effective learning experience for students. In contrast, students who play a game themselves during class in an unguided way are likely to report being confused about its educational purpose and relevance. Accordingly, Staaby develops a lesson plan using *The Walking Dead* that begins with an introductory lecture on ethics, continues with a playthrough watched by the class, pauses at a key dilemma to divide the class into small groups for discussion, then continues with a class vote on the best course of action to take within the game. This lesson approach continues for around four weeks.

For this article, Staaby analyses class notes and audio and video recordings of seven teachers using this lesson plan to explore how teachers and students connected the game to the ethical theories under discussion. Staaby identifies two alternative

pedagogical strategies used by teachers: a deductive approach, which gradually guides students towards their conclusion, and an inductive approach that invites more open-ended debate. Each approach has strengths and weaknesses: deductive teaching appears to support students in gaining better understanding of the ethical theories under discussion, while inductive teaching invites more class participation and can benefit students who already understand the theoretical material. Staaby's conclusions encourage teachers to combine both approaches, focusing their attention on their pedagogical goal and deploying the game strategically to reach their intended learning outcomes.

Reports and Interviews

The four peer-reviewed articles are followed by two reports. Our first report, by Arwa Hussain, directs our attention for the first time in this issue to the role of the family in education. *Triple Fun! Pedagogy, Play, and Parent Involvement in Religion-Based Board Games* examines the use of boardgames within the Dawoodi Bohra community, a minority Muslim group, reflecting on Hussain's own experience as a parent playing with her children. Hussain explains that games and family-led play are strategies developed by Bohra women to keep religious education engaging for their children, and can be particularly important in contexts where more formal Bohra schooling can only happen online. This report focuses on *Triple Fun* (2021), a game developed by the Bohra company Lil Banoon. *Triple Fun* can be played either as a simple memory game or a more complex strategy game depending on the age of the child, and can be used to teach mathematics, Arabic and the names of the 21 Imams. Hussain's review of this game is mixed: conflicts are experienced between the desire to play the game with children and the need to help them understand the cards, between the playful nature of the game and the educational nature of the content, and between the target age of the game and the experienced educational level of the

child. Hussain concludes with a wider survey of the Bohra game creation ecosystem, describing a network of creators and companies that use social media networks to promote playful learning. Hussain argues that such games can be particularly important for religious minorities faced with discrimination, as ways to reinforce religious and cultural identity within the safe space of the home.

Our second report, by Philippa Isom, is a case study of another game aimed at children. In *The Aetherlight: A Case Study of the Formational Potential of a Game*, Isom discusses her work as part of the development team behind a Christian game created in New Zealand. *The Aetherlight* (2016) offers a point-and-click adventure story with a steampunk theme aimed at 9-12-year-olds, based allegorically on the Bible – although the word *Bible* does not feature within it. Players of *The Aetherlight* are invited into a world of heroic battles and adventures, and may find themselves clearing banks of fog, fighting alongside a Resistance movement or trying out some new costumes. This storyline is designed to invite the most curious players to follow clues towards the Bible, without ever making that connection explicit. The game is also designed to encourage players to grow in character, form community with other players and participate in positive real-world actions. The gamevironments around the game are essential to understanding these ambitions, because the game also emails regular instructions to parents to help them guide their children to find the intended connections and spiritual insights.

An experienced schoolteacher, Isom's role in the team was to evaluate the educational potential of the game and, later, to serve as the first Community Manager. This article reflects on the game development process, but also shares something of the transformation Isom experienced in her own self-understanding as teacher and theologian. Isom reports that *The Aetherlight* failed to build the audience

it needed to become self-sustaining and ceased development in 2017, but the game remains online and available to play as of November 2023.

Our special issue ends with a recorded discussion between Owen Gottlieb, Matthew Farber and Paul Darvasi, titled *Playing to Grow: Roundtable Interview on Games, Education, and Character*. Darvasi acts as moderator for a conversation that takes in religion, media, character education, schooling and, of course, games. The conversation begins with an introduction to the history of social and emotional learning (SEL), character education and religious education in the United States and explores the contribution of television, fiction and gaming to the encouragement of values like compassion, empathy and emotional awareness. The participants ask how games really work as educational tools, using examples – including Gottlieb's own games, *Jewish Time Jump: New York* (2013) and the *Lost & Found* series (2017a, 2017b, 2020) – to explore the value of role-play, moral ambiguity and the experience of failure in emotional development. The conversation concludes with a call for more games to emerge focused on SEL, for more audiences, tackling a wider range of questions and challenges.

Key Themes and Future Directions

This collection of articles, reports and interviews are diverse in almost every way. Our authors draw on experiences from classrooms of philosophy and religious education. Cultural environments for gaming range from the family home to high schools, universities and the competitive stage of e-sports. Jewish, Christian and Muslim experiences are included, alongside non-religious contexts of learning. Authors describe their work building, testing and playing videogames, trivia apps, boardgames, card games and role-playing games.

Nonetheless, we can identify recurring themes, intersections and opportunities across these nine contributions, and I will conclude this introduction by identifying six that seem important, fruitful or suggestive.

The problem of formation is our most recurring theme: in what sense can a game shape its players, and can this formation be designed for, controlled and measured? This challenge is particularly acute for developers working on patterns of formation that they expect their audience to resist. Isom, for example, describes subtle hints of biblical connection hidden within an ostensibly steampunk narrative, designed not to scare away the non-Christian player. Staaby's discussion of educational theory can be read alongside Isom's experiences, highlighting the careful balance needed to create an experience that is engaging and interactive while still guiding the pupil/player to reach the desired insight or understanding. Egerton's exploration of transformative experiences is also significant here, arguing that change is ultimately unpredictable and not subject to control.

Gottlieb, Farber and Darvasi's discussion raises a related issue: what kind of formation can be pursued by games? They describe games that pursue character education and emotional development, but this ambition is not shared by all contributors. Hussain aims for the memorization of religious knowledge, and see this in itself as a goal that forms character and reinforces identity. Staaby and Egerton hope to promote deep understanding of concepts and theories. Hussain, Isom and Raffety and Insa-Iglesias all talk about creating community through play. Hammer, Rabinowitz and Bisogno also create a playing community, but build enough distance into their design to protect players from feeling coerced into or even permitted to assume a Jewish

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identity that they are unprepared to explore. The Christian conversionism of Isom is, unsurprisingly, quite different in its ambitions.

Another common thread across these contributions is the role of games in reinforcing or resisting oppression and prejudice. Hammer, Rabinowitz and Bisogno highlight the importance of protecting Jewish ritual from appropriation by Christians, and Hussain discusses the role of home education as protection from Islamophobia. Farber shares research on *Bury me, my Love* (2017), a game designed to build empathy and compassion in response to the Syrian refugee crisis. Raffety and Insa-Iglesias have developed a game that seeks to address the marginalization of neurodiversity within Christian theology and Christian churches as well as games studies. The results of their work on *The Spiritual Loop* are both valuable and disquieting: the same sources of value identified by neurodiverse players are discredited and downplayed by the neurotypical Christians they were playing with.

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A more pragmatic recurring theme is support. How are these projects funded, why, and for what purpose? Gottlieb describes the careful work of fitting his Jewish games to the demands of the school curriculum to help them appeal to different kinds of teachers. Staaby reflects on the legal requirements of his national education system, which requires a certain level of ethics training. Isom aspires to create a game with a religious message that will be purchased by players outside of that community and reflects honestly on the difficulty of achieving such a goal. For initial funding, Isom relies on the generosity of religious organisations hoping to use the game to achieve their own ambitions. Hussain, in contrast, describes an ecosystem of small independent businesses, supported by families within the community.

My final theme is an encouragement for future work. This issue showcases interdisciplinarity, both within and across our contributions. The collaborative projects presented in this issue include teams of theologians and religious scholars working with games developers, and religious studies experts talking to education specialists. Experts inside and outside the academy are sharing insights and challenging each other. Philosophers and scholars of religion have learned not just to analyze games but to make them. These experiences can be difficult and open to disagreement, as several contributors have reflected. Nonetheless, these partnerships are essential to the health of the intersecting fields of gamevironments, games and education and religion and games. Academic conversations about ethics, games, values and formation can only be improved by making space for better connections.

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