

A CALL FOR JEWISH EDUCATION THROUGH GAMING AND GAME DESIGN

by Owen Gottlieb

What will “Jewish” look like as today’s new media evolves into tomorrow’s new media? Learners are increasingly Gamers, Designers, and Builders (Tinkerers). New media landscapes allow learners to develop and hone their affinities, teach themselves, and mentor their virtual peers. They collaborate in problem-solving online and offline, and their design skills are increasingly important. How does the formation of identity morph as game spaces allow us, through role-play, to try on a variety of new possible selves? What do Jewish educators and leaders need to know as print shifts to digital, the role of teachers increasingly becomes that of guide, and games become a new language of learning?

In the secular world, Games for Learning are receiving a great deal of attention. This interdisciplinary set of pursuits combines the learning sciences, media studies, design, performance studies, linguistics, and other fields. In particular, Games for STEM Learning (STEM refers to Science, Technology Engineering, and Math) have received attention from the White House and funding from MacArthur Foundation, AMD, Microsoft, and others. But Games for Learning reach beyond STEM (now, some add an “A” to STEM to make STEAM – adding “Art” to the mix). Games for Learning are being built to teach civics (Sandra Day OConnor’s iCivics.org), environmental awareness, and social entrepreneurship (GlobalKids.org and its student designers).

The 2010 Education issue of the *New York Times Magazine* featured the cover story “Video Games Win a Beachhead in the Classroom,” which discussed the New York City public school Quest to Learn, dedicated to Game-based curriculum, and New York University’s Games For Learning Institute. Idit Harel Caperton’s organization, Globaloria, has spread digital game design classes through public schools in Texas and West Virginia, teaching computer programming to students. Games for Learning and “Serious” Games are expanding in secular educational settings, as they demonstrate the power to engage and teach.

Games have long been used by the Christian world to educate and entertain their youth. Why are we so far behind?

It is a crucial time for Jewish philanthropy to turn to Games for Learning and teaching Game Design for Learning. Ninety-seven percent of today’s youth are digital gamers, and with the proliferation of the iPhone, Android, iPad, and other tablets, games are becoming ubiquitous among adults as well – on subways of NYC and on tabletops as gamers enjoy more complex board and card games at home and at parties. To date, no Game for Jewish Learning (based on Learning Science principles) is available for the iPhone or iPad. There are those of us who have

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the skills to make these games a reality and want to make them happen – to bring knowledge of the learning sciences to bear on the next generation of Jewish education, but to tailor such games to Jewish subjects and audiences, we need support from the Jewish philanthropic community.

In my presentation at the Jewish Outreach Institute's Judaism2030 Conference, I presented the emerging disciplines of Serious Games and Games for Learning. I drew connections between current Games for Learning endeavors and the potential they can bring to Jewish education, identity formation, and community in the years to come. This is a conversation I hope to spread within the larger Jewish community. Let The Jewish Learning Games Begin!

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