

“Doing Jewish” with games

By Hannah Davis

For me, “being” Jewish is largely about “doing” Jewish: not just existing as a Jew, but also interacting with the culture and community, studying and learning our history and writings, living my life according to Jewish values. But I don’t want to separate the Jewish parts of my life from the “real world”: I want it all to be a part of me. And I am a gamer! I play video games and tabletop roleplaying games, and also watch people playing them when I don’t have time to play myself. For those who are unfamiliar with the evolution of video games as a medium, they’ve come a long way since Tetris: many video games now place you inside a story that you have control over, like a movie where you’re the main character. I like the interactive and communal nature of the stories: you’re inside them much more than when you watch a movie or TV show. But, while there are many great stories to be found in games, stories of Jews and Jewish culture are few and far between. Sometimes I get lucky (more often than I used to); but many times, I have to make the stories I want to see.

Jew-ish aliens

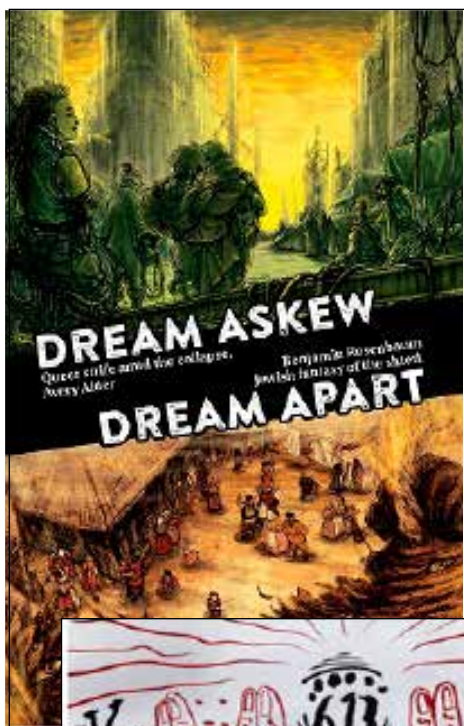
I recently watched while my partner played the Mass Effect video games. It’s a trilogy that follows the adventures of Commander Shepard as they try to save the galaxy against a mysterious alien enemy. The protagonist meets, befriends, fights, and negotiates with many other aliens throughout the game, but the most intriguing ones to me are a race called the Quarians. They are a nomadic race, known for their skill with technology and synthetic intelligence, whose faces we never see, because they always wear environmental suits to protect their weak immune systems.

Over the course of the game, we discover that they are nomadic because they lost their home world. They created rudimentary artificial intelligences called the Geth, for use as manual labor. The Geth gradually became sentient, and the Quarians got scared of their creations and tried to destroy them — but the Geth had become smart enough to defend themselves and won the resulting war, chasing the Quarians from their own planet. Now the Quarians wander the galaxy in a huge flotilla of scavenged ships and hope to one day be able to return to their home planet.

Once I heard that story, I was intrigued. Then we got to a scene where the protagonist attended a large meeting, which opened with the following benediction: “Blessed are the Ancestors who kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this season.” Sound familiar? I about fell out of my chair when I heard it — that’s the shehecheyanu, right in the middle of a video game about aliens! Other details showed up: the home system, named Tikkun; Quarian names being structured as their given name followed by “vas” (sounds like bat!) and the name of their ship (e.g. Hilo’Jaa vas Idenna); the greeting/benediction of “keelah se’lai,” translated as “by the home world I hope to see one day,” which has very “next year in Jerusalem” vibes; and a fringe political movement which advocates for starting over on another planet and abandon-

doning their original home.

This race felt deeply Jewish. But they weren’t just Jews in space!!! — they weren’t human at all (halachically, could they even be Jewish? A question for another day . . .), while still unmistakably pulling from Jewish



experiences, history, diaspora, and language.

Obviously, the parallels aren’t all there — Jews did not create Palestinians and get overthrown by them, the way the Quarians did the Geth. The Quarians are unambiguously at fault for their own exile in the game, which I think was a very wise decision on the part of the game designers not to try to replicate Israel/Palestine in space! But it was such an incredible moment of seeing a video game take inspiration — respectfully! — from Jewish culture and history. I felt seen.

Stuck in the stereotypes

Sometimes the examples are less flattering, or blatantly incorrect, or appropriative: borrowing elements of Jewish aesthetic or belief without context or respect. *Dungeons and Dragons*, a tabletop roleplaying game which has become immensely popular recently, has been guilty of that in the past, and they’re still working to remove the various racist, sexist, or just lazy roots in their content. For example, one of the enemy types you can encounter in the game is a lich: an undead wizard that has put its soul in a special container, often an amulet in the shape of a small box with

special sigils inscribed on it, as part of a ritual to gain immortality. This container is called a phylactery. It’s a rather unfortunate parallel to tefillin (not necessarily a purposeful one! But harm can be done by accident too).

Elements of the races of dwarves and goblins borrow from antisemitic tropes: long noses, or a fascination with gold and money, or a reputation for untrustworthiness. Golems also exist, as monsters for the players to fight. A friend of mine commented, “If the golem is your enemy, then you are in the role of genocidal Christians!” Golems are supposed to be guardians, not brutish killers. There’s



been a push recently to change these inclusions: renaming phylacteries to “soul cages,” reshaping racial designs to not be so stereotypical, etc. But it’s frustrating when the most popular roleplaying game by far only shows negative or caricatured versions of Jewish history and culture.

Recent favorites

I have, happily, recently found several really cool roleplaying games and stories that are explicitly Jewish or play with Jewish themes.

In *Dream Apart*, “you play a Jew of the shtetl, a little mostly-Jewish market town in the Eastern European countryside. In the cities, the industrial revolution has begun. Prussia, Russia, and the Hapsburgs have devoured the small countries between them. Surrounded by an often-hostile Christendom, by wild forests in which anything might creep, and by the invisible creatures of the Unseen World — angels, demons, ghosts, and dybbuks — the Jews of the shtetl try to outwit or outlast those who would do us harm. We feud and reconcile, bargain and gossip, celebrate and mourn, and snatch a little joy and love while we can.

Life in the shtetl is sweet as raisin pastries and bitter as horseradish: may it be the Divine Will that it endures another season . . .”

Another recent favorite, *Dialect*, isn’t explicitly Jewish — but it is about the creation, shift, and loss or assimilation over time of the language of an isolated community, and these themes resonate strongly for me, existing as a member of a minority culture with a long history of struggle against assimilation and loss of group identity.

In “What Have You Seen, My Darling Young One?” a rabbi talks to a golem about the experiences it’s had and emotions it’s felt.

In “On Venus, Have We Got a Rabbi!” a Sholem Aleichem-style narrator tells a story of Jews on Venus debating whether to count a race of aliens as Jews; and in “The Accounts of Getzel Shlomo”, Jews in a small village carry out the last wishes and funeral of an old beggar and discover who he was after he died.

As games in general become a more diverse and welcoming medium, more and more stories from diverse perspectives are being made. I’ve mostly seen Ashkenazi perspectives as of yet, and would love to see stories from other Jewish ethnic groups too.

Be the change

Finally, I’ve been making the stories I want to see for myself. The idea of Jews in Space!!! is one I keep coming back to: I think there are so many interesting ways to interpret our traditions in new and very different contexts. How does a lunar calendar look when a different moon orbits you — or no moon at all? I read a sci-fi series where a group of people had survived a long journey to a distant planet,

had been rescued from peril by strangers, and dedicated themselves to building a welcoming, safe society where everyone’s needs were met. I wanted to imagine a weirdly specific scenario, which I’m still writing: What if there were Jews in this society; and what if they wrote a Passover haggadah? How would people in the far future on a different planet imagine, reimagine, recontextualize the Exodus? Does Egypt have any meaning for them, or do they think of a different Mitzrayim, a different “narrow place,” a different exile, when they say “next year in Jerusalem”?

“Doing Jewish” for me means more than being in Jewish community and observing festivals, though those definitely matter to me. In addition to my religious practice, my Judaism is an intellectual and creative exercise, incorporating faith and culture into my hobbies and play. ■