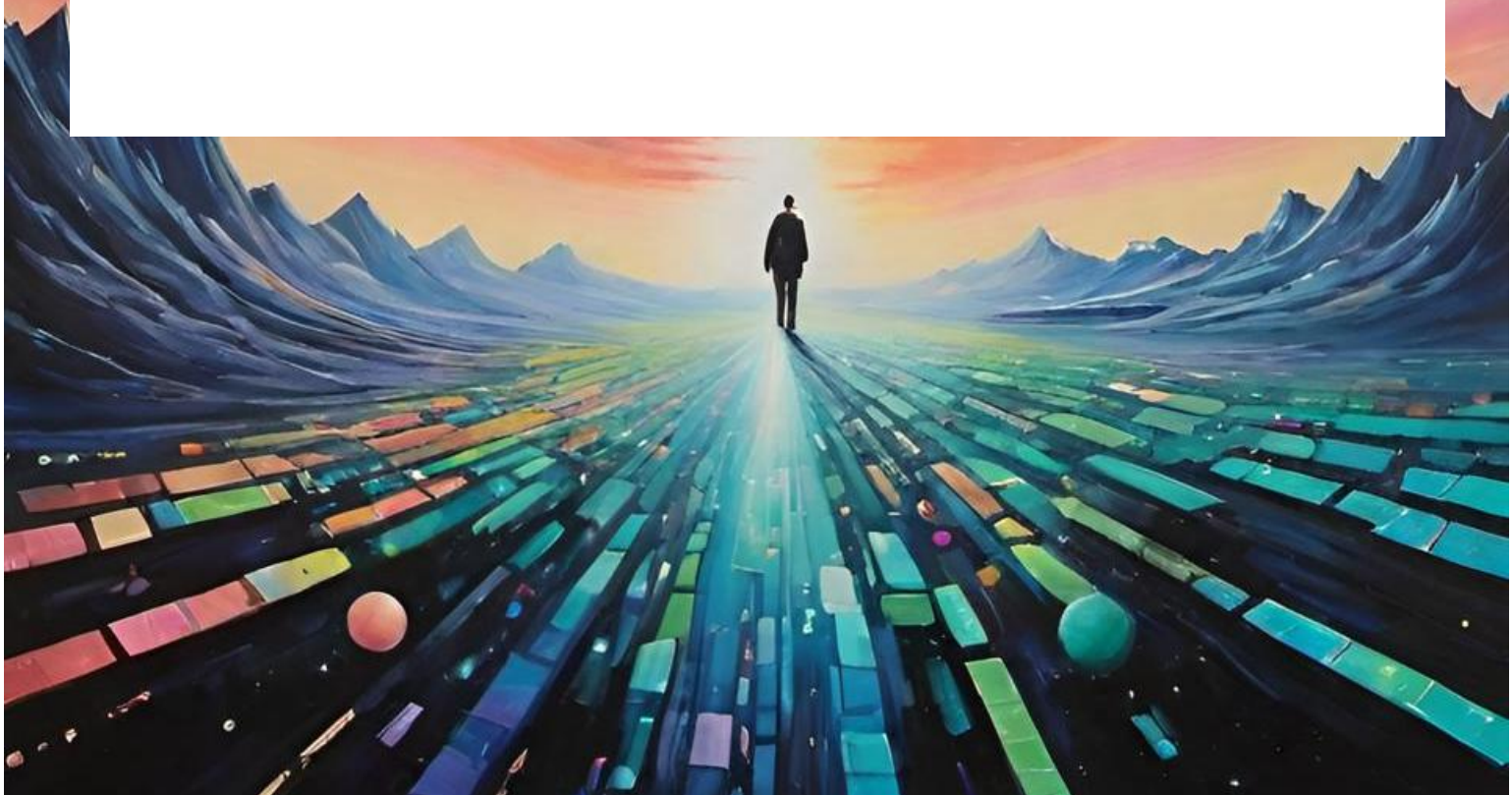




READY, PLAYER ONE!

God as a Game Designer and the Universe as a Video Game

Abstract: By combining game design principles with teachings found in Kabbalistic works, we are able to develop a deeper understanding of why God created the universe, and why he designed the universe in the way that He did. We are also able to better understand the role of suffering, the reason that Godliness is hidden from us, and many other mysteries that have confounded Biblical scholars for centuries.



I. DEEP BIBLICAL MYSTERIES

Despite the tremendous amount of Biblical scholarship that has been conducted over the centuries, there remain several mysteries that confound and captivate scholars.

One of these mysteries is the fundamental reasoning behind Creation – why did God create the universe at all? For what purpose? And why would the universe be filled with such suffering?

Some Kabbalists, like Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, have written works explaining elements of these mysteries¹. Yet, a deep and intuitive understanding of the universe eludes many, and religious leaders often struggle to articulate answers for believers who struggle with these questions.

Perhaps interestingly and unexpectedly, the advent of simulation theory² and the existence of video games provide us with a new way of looking at the mysteries of Creation, and offer us a methodology of understanding elements of God's design.

Indeed, the Kabbalistic works on these matters allude to the universe being a form of *helem*, or concealment, and as a preparation for the afterlife. One of the most prominent Kabbalistic authors in history, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, emphasizes that our world is like a "corridor" where we can act to gain reward in the afterlife³.

This notion of concealment (or simulation), and the concept of reward (or "points"), alludes to the fact that our universe is much closer to a simulation or a video game than many Biblical scholars might realize. And therefore, if we examine what

is known about game design principles, we will be able to appreciate God's design logic and understand some of the greatest Biblical mysteries more deeply.

II. GAME DESIGN AND THEOLOGY

Two decades ago, a game design professor named Randy Pausch was working diligently to educate aspiring game designers in America. A well-liked instructor at Carnegie Mellon University, Professor Pausch was known around campus for his innovative approaches to teaching, and because he challenged his students in the best possible ways.

Sadly, Professor Pausch was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer in 2006, and was told he would be dead within six months. Undeterred by this news, he decided to summarize his life and philosophy in a presentation called "Achieving Your Childhood Dreams", which he delivered his to a packed lecture hall in 2008.

Pausch's inspiring messages about life, death, and dreams reached millions of people, and posthumous coverage of his lecture has since spawned an official book and many unofficial transcripts.

While people might think that Pausch's "Last Lecture" was more influential than his video game work, a deeper look at Pausch's legacy – and his dynasty – reveals he made profound contributions to the field of game design.

Professor Pausch had a student named Jesse Schell. Jesse is not only part of a brilliant educational dynasty, but he then graduated and went on to work as a Disney Imagineer on amusements like the

Pirates of the Caribbean ride. This is a tremendous accomplishment, as being a Disney Imagineer is one of the most coveted positions in the industry, owing partially to the incredible legacy that Walt Disney left with the Imagineers.

After gaining years of experience in the industry, Jesse wrote a book called *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses*, where he uses a unique approach to walk readers through, step-by-step, how to design a good game.

In particular, Schell's approach included the use of "lenses" that encourage designers to view their game's design from specific perspectives. This approach, similar to Marshall McLuhan's practice of probes⁴, allows designers to deconstruct and optimize games of all kinds.

Therefore, in theological or Jewish contexts, these lenses are useful tools which allow us to "reverse-engineer" our developmental simulation and gain insight into why God made the universe the way He did.

Indeed, thinking about God, evil, suffering, and world history from the perspective of a *video game designer* allows even a Minecraft-playing teenager to understand, at a deep and intuitive level, why things are the way they are.

II. THE LENS OF INSPIRATION

The Designer has an Infinite Inspiration

One of the first things Schell covers in *A Book of Lenses* is the problem of inspiration. Where, exactly, does a game

designer find inspiration for their game? And, in the case of our universe, what was God's "inspiration" for its design?

For such questions, there is the *Lens of Infinite Inspiration*, which is designed to get to the essence of a game or experience:

- ⌘ What is an experience I have had that I would want to share with others?
- ⌘ In what small way can I capture the essence of that experience and put it into my game?

One example used in *A Book of Lenses* is a video game where players have snowball fights. For a designer of such a game, they would use the *Lens of Infinite Inspiration* to think about their favorite parts of a snowball fight, the essence of what it feels like to be in a snowball fight, and how those things can be brought into the game's design.

Perhaps interestingly, the Kabbalists teach that God essentially wanted to share Himself with others⁵. Because God is the greatest good that exists, it would make logical sense that he would want to share of *His own essence*.

But what is that essence? In simple terms, God's essence is expressed to us in the character traits contained within the *sefirot*¹. Qualities like *lovingkindness*, *discipline*, and *balance* are found here, bound together with a system of relationships that maps to the human experience⁶.

¹ If you Google "Sefirot Chabad", you'll find several great articles and explanations which are deeper than most things you'll find on YouTube.

Perhaps even more interestingly, our universe seems to have been designed as an expression of *netzach*, or *overcoming*, and is designed specifically to help us build that character trait⁷. All of God's design choices, especially the evil, confusion, and suffering, were therefore made for the purpose of helping us build strength, discipline, and willpower.

From this perspective, the darkness within our world makes a lot more sense. The challenges we face also can be seen as *problem-solving opportunities* and *growth opportunities*, which is, in truth, the entire point of our simulation.

III. THE LENS OF EXPERIENCE

The Designer Creates an Experience

Once a game designer has an inspiration for their game, they need to think about what kind of experience they want to create for their players.

This brings several questions to mind about our universe – what are the qualities of *discipline* that God wants to express and give to us through this simulation? What about the *experience of building discipline*, which is what our world is meant to do?

To explore these ideas, Schell recommends the *Lens of Essential Experience* and the *Lens of Resonance*, which ask design questions like:

- ⌘ What experiences do I want players to have?
- ⌘ How can my game give players the essence of these essential experiences?

- ⌘ What about my game feels powerful and special? What resonates most with players?

As can be seen, questions like this provoke deep thoughts about the nature of a game, the experiences players have within it, and how the designer can *emphasize* or *de-emphasize* elements of the design in order to deliver the ideal experience.

One real-world example of this thinking comes from tabletop gaming. In the 1990s, some game designers started to think about how to capture the experience of *being evil* in a game. The “essence” of this, they discovered, was a slow degeneration of a character's morality over time.

These design insights became the *Humanity System* from the now-famous *World of Darkness* franchise⁸, as well as the hit TTRPG *Vampire: The Masquerade*. Indeed, the simple systems designed around this essential experience gave rise to not only games like *Vampire: The Masquerade*, but a reevaluation of what it meant to portray characters in a tabletop environment.

As far as our universe is concerned, however, we would do well to look at patterns within it to understand what is being emphasized. The fact that we must survive in a difficult world is one hint towards the theme of *overcoming*. Imperfect knowledge, difficult decisions, and the need to be careful is also a discipline-builder when seen from this perspective. Opportunities to be evil are another necessary element of discipline-building, but they are often seen as a mistake in the design.

Indeed, asking ourselves questions about the nature of discipline, and how discipline is built, can help us more deeply appreciate the design of our universe.

IV. THE EXPERIENCE COMES FROM A GAME

Once a game designer has articulated their inspirations, the essences they wish to articulate, and the experiences they want players to have, they can worry about the game itself.

Moving from a conceptual design to a first prototype can be quite challenging. Designers must carefully consider every aspect of their game, how players interact with it, and how different game elements interact with each other. All of these things create an *emergent experience* for the player, which hopefully accomplishes the original goals of the design.

Here, Schell recommends using the lenses of *Problem-Solving, Curiosity, Value, and Fun*, which ask questions like:

- ⌘ What problems do players solve in my game?
- ⌘ Are there hidden problems to solve?
- ⌘ What questions will players have?
- ⌘ What am I doing to make players care about the most important questions in my game?
- ⌘ What parts of my game are fun? Why?
- ⌘ What is valuable to players? Why?

The deeper the thinking that goes into such design work, the stronger and “deeper” the game will be.

Related to these lenses, it is worth noting that the best games are not just “fun”, but they are also deep, thoughtful, and immersive. Good game designers essentially give players problems to solve within the confines of the game, and then help them have fun along the way. Figuring out how to do this within the structure of a game is the difference between an idle distraction and a masterpiece.

From the perspective of God, the designer of our video game, we can see that there are obvious problems for players to solve. Surviving until the next day is one such problem, and the meaning of one’s life is another. Within our world, there is also a need for humans to have relationships with each other, which forces us to engage in all kinds of relational problem-solving.

V. THE EXPERIENCE IS IN THE PLAYER’S MIND

Aside from the kinds of experiences the players have, and the game mechanics used to give them those experiences, something that every game designer must think about is what goes on in the minds of the players as they play the game.

As Schell discusses in *A Book of Lenses*, players have things like goals, motivations, personalities, preferences, and tastes. Different people might play the same game in entirely different ways, and different kinds of fun might be had by those people. Thinking of how to account for all of these things in a game’s design is

quite challenging, but ultimately worth the effort.

Another particularly important element of player psychology is the creation of *flow states*⁹, which are characterized by situations with clear goals, no distractions, direct feedback, and evolving challenges. As one might imagine, video games are essentially flow state programs, designed to lock players in for hours and keep them fully occupied. We can see the same kind of logic with our universe, as our survival and relationship needs cause pain if they are not met. This forces us to engage with the world, whether we like it or not, and also forces us into the constant *flow state* of life.

To assist game designers with developing flow-inducing games, Jesse Schell encourages the use of *The Lens of Flow*:

- ⌘ Does my game have clear goals?
- ⌘ Are the goals of the player what I intended?
- ⌘ Are there distractions in the game?
- ⌘ Does my game offer a steady stream of challenges at an appropriate difficulty level?
- ⌘ Are the player's skills improving at the rate that I had hoped?

When we ask ourselves such questions about our universe, at a surface level we might come to think that it is a "bad game" or "unfun game" with "unclear goals". Yet, when we pause for a moment to reflect,

² See "Top Five Regrets of the Dying" by Bronnie Ware for more information about what happens to people who

we realize that the *meaning of life* is one of the major concerns of every human being, and that it is *discovering the meaning of life* that represents the "goal" to be solved.

However, God has ingeniously introduced distractions to our game on purpose. There are so many things to do, so many places to travel, and so many foods to try that we can forget about the importance of the meaning of life².

Given that our game is designed to build *netzach*, or *overcoming*, we can see these design choices for what they are – clever tricks designed to challenge us at a very deep level. Discovering the meaning of one's life is a difficult task, and building a life that reflects one's highest purpose takes an extraordinary amount of discipline. But that is the point of the game.

VI. THE PLAYER IS DRIVEN BY MOTIVATIONS

Related to the issues of goals, distractions, and challenges is the problem of *motivation*. Good designers ask themselves why players would want to start playing their game, and why they would want to keep playing.

The best games offer lots of motivation, often intrinsic and extrinsic. Some players may enjoy winning and improving their skills in the game, while other players may enjoy the social aspects of the game, exploring hidden aspects of the game

step over this question in their desire to have fun.

world, or even watching other people play and commenting on their performance.

For the issue of player motivations, Schell offers the *Lens of Motivation*, which game designers can use to get inside the heads of their players:

- ⌘ What motivates people to play my game?
- ⌘ What motivates people to keep playing?
- ⌘ How do players seek pleasure and avoid pain?
- ⌘ What motivations conflict with each other?

As one might imagine, our world is designed to have conflicting motivations. Logically, that is rooted in the *discipline* we are attempting to build, as building the strength to choose one thing over another requires conflicting motivations. This is one “essence” of our world that many might mistake for an inconvenience or a design flaw.

VII. THE GAME HAS SECRETS

Finally, we shall discuss the problem of knowledge as it applies to games. Knowledge, as they say, is power, and the more you know about the game, the better you can play it.

Jesse Schell encourages game designers to use the *Lens of Secrets* when thinking about knowledge in their game, and it encourages questions like:

- ⌘ What is known by the game only?
- ⌘ What is known by the Creator only?
- ⌘ What is known by all players?
- ⌘ What is known only by some players?
- ⌘ What will players love discovering? Why?
- ⌘ Would changing who knows what information improve the game in some way?

As one might expect, our world is one of *imperfect information*, at least from the human perspective. Thus, it is a specific kind of game where certain things are known to some players, but not others.

When Jewish and Kabbalistic literature is taken into account, we find that our world is one of *concealment*, and that information is intentionally hidden from us. This is by design. We also find that the Creator sometimes reveals new information, which we call *prophecy*. From the perspective of game design, we can appreciate that prophecy helps “optimize game states” and produce even better outcomes³.

Some information, however, is known to some players. The Torah, given to the Jews at Mount Sinai, remains their treasure and inheritance, and it has been a three-thousand-year process for the rest of the nations to accept this. This means that the Jewish nation was playing a different kind of game than the rest of us all along.

³ Also refer to “End of Days” in the previous section.

But, as every wise human being realizes at some point in their lives, one of the challenges of our world is knowing what questions to ask, while the second challenge lies in finding the answers.

VIII. GOD AS GAME DESIGNER

For many people, living with pain, suffering, evil, and failure is very difficult. Under these conditions, it can be easy to get caught up in grievances against the Creator, and even to question the value of the universe or the value of human life.

But, when we start seeing our world as a kind of game, with a specific purpose and a specific aesthetic, we can come to deeper understandings about the design choices that were made. For example, the suffering we experience is not an accident, as we might have believed it to be, but is actually *part of the design*. And, as we can see, this design choice was made for the express purpose of our growth and development.

Perhaps, with the benefit of time and hindsight, we will learn to not only love our suffering for what it was designed to be, but even find the darkness... fun.

I love him who is ashamed when the dice fall in his favor, and who then asks: "Am I a dishonest player?"--for he is willing to succumb...

I love him whose soul is deep even in the wounding, and may succumb through a small matter: thus goes he willingly over the bridge.

I love all who are like heavy drops falling one by one out of the dark cloud that lowers over

man: they herald the coming of the lightning, and succumb as heralds.

Lo, I am a herald of the lightning, and a heavy drop out of the cloud... the lightning, however, is the [MOSHIACH]."

- Friedrich Nietzsche

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