

Sparks of Eternity: A New Approach to Religious Education

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ABSTRACT

Sparks of Eternity is a religious education game that is designed as a new approach to the teaching of Rabbinics curriculum for Jewish high school students.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.3 [Computers and Education]: Miscellaneous

General Terms

Design, Education, Game Development

Keywords

Meaningful Play, Serious Games, Game Design, Education, Religion, Judaism, Rabbinics

1. INTRODUCTION

Sparks of Eternity: Episode 1 – Breakthrough is a custom, collaboratively designed game between the Games for Entertainment and Learning (GEL) Lab at Michigan State University and the Frankel Jewish Academy. The goal of the collaboration is to create a game that motivates students to be more engaged in the Academy's rabbinic curriculum and further make use of the Academy's one-to-one education technology initiative.

2. GAME CONTENT

The purpose of Episode 1 emphasizes the need to preserve the (Jewish) Oral Torah, the Talmud, within the context of an accurate historical depiction of the events of the time. In the

game, Jerusalem teeters on the verge of destruction at the hands of the Roman Empire during the time of the Second Temple.



Figure 1. The Player Traversing the World

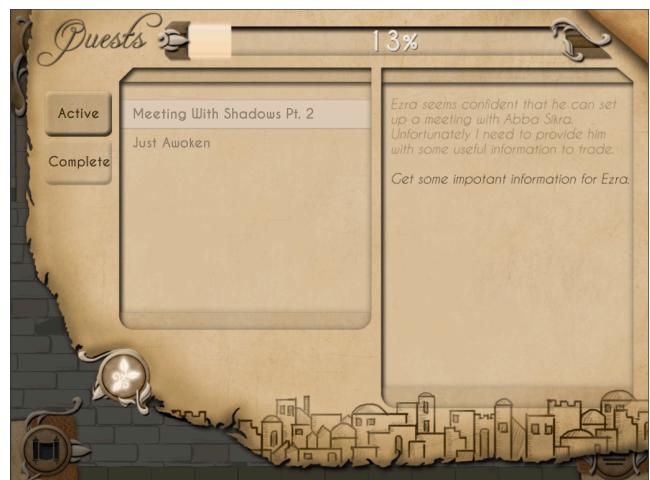


Figure 2. The Quest Log



Figure 3. Glossary



Figure 4. Interactive Character Dialog



Figure 5. Inventory System

At stake is the spiritual and physical future of the Jewish people. Yet, hope prevails in the form of student and teacher. In the game, the player assumes the role of a Talmud (student of the Torah) on a quest to save the oral tradition. The game draws on an "Adventure" style gameplay, where the player traverses Jerusalem

gathering items, stories and information leading up to physical transportation of the Talmud outside the walls of Jerusalem.

The player's quests, both active and completed are visible through an extensive quest tracking system, as well as integrated glossary, which a player can reference either as a stand-alone item or by touching on those words when they are encountered in the game.

Throughout the game, the player must adventure across Jerusalem, exploring not only the city, but also the various factions and religious and political thinking of the time. The game provides a greater level of insight into what Jerusalem was like during the siege, to give the player a sense of the historical context that students have previously encountered in passing.

This information is conveyed to the player in a variety of ways. The bulk of rabbinical history is presented while players converse with non-player characters as they move through the game world solving a variety of quests and puzzles presented to them. These interactive dialog trees were cooperatively developed between the GEL-based team and Frankel Jewish Academy.

3. VISUAL DESIGN

The art design was inspired by historical paintings and illustrations from the period. Effort was made to keep the game as historically and religiously accurate as possible. Due to budget and time limitations, and to keep the interaction easy-to-use for all gamer types, the game visuals were designed as 2D graphics.

4. TECHNICAL DESIGN

The game was developed on top of the Unity3D engine. The primary interaction in the game involves moving the player avatar across various locations in game world (Jerusalem) using a custom touch-based navigation system. The game also includes a detailed dialog system, quest manager, inventory manager, and glossary. All systems were coded in C#, including custom-created designer tools that were engineered to help non-programmers implement the game's content, which was stored in XML files and read in by the game to generate the game world upon playback. The game was designed for the Academy's iPad one-to-one program; therefore the primary target hardware for the game was the Apple iPad 2 or newer.

5. IMPACT

The game presents a unique approach to the engagement with religious content and delivery of religious education. Preliminary playtesting and focus groups have revealed that the game is an effective tool that can be used to enhance traditional rabbinic curriculum. The game brings history to life, brings context to the Rabbinic literature, and provides a vehicle for critical thinking, discussion, and classroom debate.

6. PLAYING THE GAME

The game is still in development. We expect it to be available on the Apple App Store in summer 2014.

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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