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Fremont video game makers find inspiration in religion

DIGITAL PRAISE FOUNDERS SEEK PROFIT IN CHRISTIAN MARKET

By Mike Cassidy
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It takes about two seconds to figure out that Digital Praise is not your typical Silicon Valley start-up.

The sign in the gaming company's lobby is a hint: ``Glorifying God through Interactive Media."

Praise the Lord and pass the joystick.

Other clues? When was the last time you heard the Lord's name used by a founder telling his company's story? (In vain doesn't count.)

But there was Peter Fokos talking about whether the company's overtly Christian culture might be a turnoff to some potential investors and customers.

``I'm not here to basically tell people what they want to hear," he says. ``I'm here to obey Christ."

It's a tricky mix, business and religion. Put religion right out there and you risk alienating those who don't share your views. Not to mention scaring off prospective employees. (The company says it has workers and contractors of many faiths and no faith.)

But the founders say religion is the rock upon which they've built their business.

The three -- Fokos and brothers Tom and Bill Bean -- met in Bible study at the First Assembly of God Church in Fremont. Fokos, 45, had lost his job at the Learning Company when an acquiring company moved jobs. He wanted back in the gaming game.

``I really didn't want to be making the next skateboard, killer kind of thing," he says.

Instead, Fokos negotiated with Focus on the Family to license the characters in the conservative Christian group's ``Adventures in Odyssey" radio dramas and videos.

You may remember the flap when Focus in the Family's James Dobson said a children's cartoon video was part of a ``pro-homosexual" campaign. For their part, the Digital Praise guys aren't going down the SpongeBob SquarePants road -- politically or as a game title.

Tom Bean, 41, with six kids, and Bill Bean, 42, who has four, both liked what Fokos (one child) was trying to do.

Tom was an entrepreneur between gigs. Bill was a commercial software guy getting back on his feet after a layoff.

The men launched the self-financed company in 2003, and in March they released two Adventures in Odyssey titles, which are being distributed through a division of EMI. So far, Bill Bean says, Digital Praise, www.digitalpraise.com, has shipped more than 28,000 games.

The games, which are aimed at kids from about 8 to 12, are not overtly religious. (``There's no virtual Jesus," Tom Bean jokes.) But they do provide moral lessons -- telling the truth is good, the test of character is what you do when no one's looking. One game features ``a gauntlet of virtues," including kindness, faithfulness, self-control.

It's no ``Grand Theft Auto" and that's the point.

``I guess I just want to make sure there is good stuff out there for the kids, an alternative," Fokos says.

The men have big plans. They're working on more titles and a dance-pad game featuring Christian music.

In fact, they find inspiration in Christian music. The message and the market. Bill Bean puts it this way: Christian music is 7 percent of the U.S. music market. Gaming is a \$10 billion business. If the model holds, that's a \$700 million market for Christian games.

David Cole, whose DFC Intelligence follows the game industry, says the men might be on to something.

``There is a huge audience out there," he says.

Think of the success of movies like ``The Passion of The Christ" and the large number of Christian bookstores.

``I'd classify it as a niche market," Cole says, ``but it's a very large niche."

It's a large niche that Digital Praise is going after with great hope.

And a prayer.

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