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## Game Expo-Christian video games - a nascent boom?

Tue May 17, 2005 09:04 AM ET

By Reed Stevenson

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - Will the spiritual and gaming worlds transcend their realms?

Hoping to tap into the same audience that has made Christian Pop music a force in the entertainment industry, some developers are betting that Christian-themed video games can claim a sizeable chunk of the \$10 billion gaming market.

So far, games such as "Spiritual Warfare" and "Exodus: Journey to the Promised Land" have drawn a loyal following by combining biblical themes with mild action. Users can travel through biblical lands, solve puzzles based on scripture and, in some games, slash demonic foes.

Some Christian game developers are betting that Christian games are ready for a boom on the eve of the launch of next-generation gaming machines such as Sony Corp.'s PlayStation and Microsoft Corp.'s Xbox.

"There's a huge appetite for Christian games," said Bill Bean, co-founder of game developer Digital Praise, which already has two "Adventures in Odyssey" games for children 8 and up. In those games, children are taught lessons involving values like truth and honesty.

The company plans to release four games later this year that will move the company toward a higher age bracket and into games with more obvious Christian themes, Bean said.

Bean plans to pitch his ideas for Christian games to Microsoft's Xbox at this week's Electronic Entertainment Expo, or E3, the gaming industry's biggest annual gathering, in Los Angeles.

Micro Forte, an Australian game developer, is also working on a Christian game for the PC and Xbox, which is expected to include a lot more action, similar to the company's "Citizen Zero" combat game.

In an industry often blamed for promoting violence, companies such as Digital Praise, Micro Forte, N'Lightning Software and others are trying to change that image by making games that encourage Christian values.

But to do that, they will have to adopt the economics of the gaming business, where it costs at least \$2 million to develop a game for the Xbox, PlayStation 2 or Nintendo Co. Ltd.'s GameCube.

That's a tough budget for many game developers, who got their start by making educational games. Now the games are evolving to include more action and adventure, in line with the fast-paced, complex games that dominate the industry today.

While many Christian developers will be at E3, most will also be at the Christian Game Developer's Conference in Portland, Oregon, in late July for the industry's eighth annual conference.

Tim Emmerich, organizer of the Christian gaming conference, said he expects about 120 developers to show up.

"The market is actually in its second generation," Emmerich said, saying that Christian games had flourished years ago on older PCs and on older consoles.

Wisdom Tree, another Christian game developer, is long-known for making games based on Bible passages such as "Bible Crossword Studio" and developed games for older consoles such as Sega Corp.'s Genesis and Nintendo Entertainment System.

The other challenge, Digital Praise's Bean said, is to get Christian games onto mainstream store shelves. So far, sales are mainly limited to Christian store and direct sales.

Both Bean and Emmerich have their sights on Wal-Mart Stores Inc., the world's biggest retailer, which sells more than \$1 billion yearly in Christian products.

"We'll be in Wal-Mart," Emmerich said, of future retailing outlets for Christian games.

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