



## PlayStations of the cross

By Jonathan Dee

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Story last modified Tue May 03 08:23:00 PDT 2005

**The Rev. Ralph Bagley is on a very 21st-century sort of mission: introducing the word of God into what he calls the "dark Satanic arena" of the video game business. But he has an old-fashioned calling to back it up.**

"I've always just loved video games," he says. "I was one of the guys playing 'Pong.' When I became a Christian in 1992, I still wanted to play, but it was hard when the best-quality games out there were 'Doom,' 'Quake'--Satanic stuff, you know? Stuff that if I went to church on Sunday and came home and wanted to play a video game, I kind of felt a little bit guilty about it. I tried to find other games out there that were Christian, and there were none. Absolutely nothing. I'm the kind of guy that when I see something that's not being done, I want to do it myself."

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Do violent games make kids mean? Some lawmakers think so, and are stepping up efforts to ban sales to kids.

Bagley, an Oregon-based publisher of a Christian tabloid newspaper, had an idea for a game in which persecuted Christians are rescued from the catacombs of ancient Rome; after taking a class in early Christian history for accuracy's sake, he pitched the game to six different investors--Christian and secular alike--and they all turned him down flat.

So Bagley put his project on the proverbial shelf, and there it sat until the shootings at Columbine High School.

"Two of the investors that I had originally contacted--and they didn't know each other--called me back after Columbine," he told me recently, "and said, 'Listen, you know, I've been hearing this stuff on the news'--much of the follow-up coverage focused on the teen killers' devotion to "first-person shooter" video games like 'Doom' and 'Quake'--"and now I kind of feel like maybe I should support this." With almost a million dollars in seed money, Bagley not only developed his ancient-Rome game, "Catechumen"--an early term for a convert--but also founded his own Christian game-development studio, which he named [N'Lightning Software](#).

"We're going to hold the word of God up and illuminate the place," Bagley likes to say. "We're taking the land back from Satan."

It's a mission that's not always popular, either among secular gamers or among his fellow Christians. A great many people of faith believe the video-game business is so irredeemable that the best response is simply to bar the door. And beyond the violence and witchcraft, there are more subtle theological objections having to do with gaming's unprecedented exercise in creative decontrol and free will. As one essay in a Christian publication recently had it, "In a virtual world, what happens when the bad guy wins?"

There are those who honor God by renouncing worldly things, and then there are those to whom the world itself, in all its aspects, is a battleground on which they are unwilling to cede any territory to God's opponents--even the corrupt, disreputable, seemingly unsalvageable territory of the interactive-entertainment business. An evangelical Christian who talks about the demonization of video games is not necessarily employing a metaphor. In a scenario right out of a game itself, in a landscape where all hope of redemption seemed abandoned long ago, the soldiers of God are amassing.

"It didn't seem like a good idea," says Peter Fokos, a longtime game developer who mortgaged his house and liquidated his retirement fund to start his own Christian development studio, [Digital Praise](#). "But if you look at the Bible, a lot of things are like that. Not a good idea, but God wants you to do them anyway."

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Past 30 Days



If the notion of a market in faith-based video games seems unlikely, so too, 15 years ago, did the idea of Christian pop music as a moneymaking enterprise. Christian pop is now responsible for 7 percent of the total pop-music market, with more than 43 million albums sold last year--not a niche but a major element in music-industry demographics. That's the example Christian game developers mean to follow. "I kind of liken it to the westward expansion," Scott Wong, president of a Washington State company called Brethren Entertainment, told me. "Just like you'd have the one pioneer who would go out ahead of the rest and be eaten by bears or killed by Indians or something, 10 or 15 years ago you'd see some music companies that would sprout up and then die off. They might have had something good, but at that point there wasn't any infrastructure to hold it up. Christian video games I think will follow the same track."

Of course, there are differences. As Wong points out, any Christian can pick up a guitar and sing, but to make a decent video game for a PlayStation or an Xbox, you need anywhere from \$3 million to \$6 million. Still, consumers spent \$2.9 billion last year just on software for video consoles. Seven percent of that would be a pretty good market, and Tom Bean, for one, says he thinks that the buyers are out there. Bean, a former mortgage banker and a member of the same church as Fokos, helped found Digital Praise two years ago in California's high-tech corridor with Fokos and Tom's older brother, Bill. Bill Bean, who left a software sales job for this uncertain venture, describes it as his "trip to Nineveh," a reference to the heathen city to which God ordered a reluctant Jonah. Tom prefers the Blues Brothers' credo: "We're on a mission from God."

The challenge for a company like Digital Praise is not just to compete for retail shelf space but to create a retail shelf where none previously existed. The three partners began by obtaining the license for a long-running Christian radio serial called "Adventures in Odyssey," and in March they released their first two games based on it, aimed at players 8 and older. "Odyssey" is the name of an imaginary and ruthlessly idealized Midwestern town in which kids solve mysteries with the help of a kindly old local inventor and ice-cream-shop owner named Whit, who in his spare time is a consultant for the U.S. Department of



Defense. The games are enjoyable but avoid any direct references to God, preferring to concentrate on virtues like "trust."

Can a message be so buried as to be functionally absent? An electrical engineer and game enthusiast named Tim Emmerich started a Christian Game Developers Conference three years ago in Portland; as attendance has tripled to about 100, the debate over how much religion to put in a religious game has grown quite lively.

Some adopt what Emmerich calls the C.S. Lewis approach; others, like Bagley, take a more scriptural tack. N'Lightning's two games (its second release is "Ominous Horizons," wherein a player is transported to 14th-century Germany in order to recover the original Gutenberg Bible, stolen by agents of the Devil) are among the most successful in the genre, with "Catechumen" having sold about 80,000 units to date. "Each game is loaded with scripture," Bagley said. "They're not preachy games, but I believe the word of God gets into men's hearts and minds, and it doesn't return void."

Then there is the question of violence, and its place not only in the gaming experience in general but in Christianity itself. Pat and Mackenzie Ponech, a father and son from Edmonton, Alberta, have built and distributed a game with the portentous title "Eternal War: Shadows of Light." You play "Eternal War" in the role of an angel named Michael, called to Earth to intervene as a despairing teenager named John contemplates suicide.

The intervention takes the form of a rather violent, though gore-free, battle with the demons in John's mind. It looks simultaneously like a homemade project (the on-screen text is riddled with misspellings) and a high-end console game--in large part because the Ponechs, as a way of cutting costs, built "Eternal War" by adding their own characters to the basic framework, or "game engine," of the phenomenally popular "Quake," a perfectly legal act of appropriation. (The original developers of "Quake," in an act of cyberaltruism, declined to copyright the engine itself.) In fact, once you move past the text-only introduction, Eternal War is mostly an orgy of shooting and stabbing just like many secular games--but toward, presumably, a different and better end.

Scott Wong, of Brethren, acknowledges that "the actual act of pulling a trigger and hunting down something--somebody might have a problem with that. I always tell people that if you want good drama, you have to have conflict--without that, you can't make your point."

The proper classification of "Eternal War"--"Christian first-person shooter"-- seems almost comically counterintuitive. But since when do we equate religion with nonviolence? While most faith-based game makers draw the line at realistic gore (humans in one game, as they are dispatched from Earth, literally see the light), you need not go as far back as the Bible to be reminded that Christianity does not shy away from violence if the goal, even in a fantasy context, is a righteous one. "We've talked about the righteous anger, if you want to get into it," Pat Ponech says. "In the Bible, there were battles where, even myself reading through it, I think: Gee whiz, you go in and clean out an entire city, leaving no one alive, not even the animals?"

Bagley told me that N'Lightning "didn't want to create a nonviolent game. That wasn't really my mission or my vision. Spiritual warfare--that's the whole premise in both of our games. Some of these games, you've got Joseph herding some sheep into a little field and how many sheep can you put in the pen, you know? Sorry, that's not going to cut it in today's environment.

Maybe for a 4-year-old, but not for the assistant pastor who wants to go home and play a cool game."

There is, however, one vital element of the "cool" secular-game experience that Christian developers say they will not embrace: the moral relativism embodied in the RPG, or role-playing game. In a game like "[World of Warcraft](#)," the player is given the opportunity to experience the same virtual environment through the perspectives of a variety of different characters, some much less upright than others. The Christian gamers' position is that, while you may fight the Devil and lose, you may not fight as the Devil.

"There's this assumption when you have a Christian game that the developers are responsible for the experience that the player is having," Scott Wong says, "that it's going to be a spiritually safe kind of experience. But getting into the head of the Devil...there would be upheaval, definitely." It's less a theological position than one about games and their slippery relationship to reality. "Everyone heard about that JFK game," Bill Bean says, referring to a game in which you can play as Lee Harvey Oswald, "and now there's a new one, '[Narc](#),' where in order to be more effective within the game you need to take crack...stuff like that. Or there are those racing games where at the end there's the scantily clad bikini gals jumping up and down, hooray for the winner. And then we're surprised when the kids who play these games have problems later on? It's like, let's start programming them for this stuff when they're 9 years old. People say that games don't affect what people do. Oh, really? Isn't marketing all about reintroducing subtle messages over and over again? Doesn't that compel people to do things?"

Whatever else divides them, the Christian gaming community is united in its focus on the next step: getting out of the relatively minor-league realm of the desktop computer and breaking into the high-profile, high-revenue world of console games--PlayStation, Xbox, GameBoy. The obstacles are primarily, though not exclusively, financial. A company called NEI tried and failed to develop a faith-based Xbox game a few years ago; Micro Forte, a games developer based in Australia, has just announced plans to try one itself.



"You've got a development cost of \$2.5 to \$4 million," Bagley estimates, "and then a marketing budget of about 150 percent of that. We've paid a \$500,000 license fee just to use the game engine to develop it on. Right now, there's no one in the Christian developer community, including myself, who can afford to do that."

And so Bagley has turned the effort to develop a console game into a ministry in itself. In January he founded the Christian Game Developers Foundation to raise the seed money for the first high-end faith-based console video game, in connection with which he travels to

megachurches across the country and asks the congregants, in effect, to finance a still-hypothetical Christian game on both ends--first by subsidizing its development and then by buying it whenever it's released.

The response thus far, in donations of \$20 and more, has been "overwhelming," Bagley says. "We were hoping to get 2 out of 10 people to donate; right now we're averaging 8 out of 10, and mainly it's women. Women are just more in tune with what their kids are doing."

And once a game is developed -- then what? "Same hurdles we faced on the PC side," Bagley says. "A lot of retailers, especially your secular retailers like the Software Etc.'s and Wal-Marts

and Kmart and Targets and places like that, they have no idea how to market Christian games. What we need to do is create a Christian game section in all these retailers. You go into Wal-Mart, and there's a Christian music section. That's what I'm fighting for. I've been in discussions with Wal-Mart about that very thing, and I think we're probably going to get it done. Not in the next month or two, but eventually.

"Unfortunately, there's a perception among the Christian development community that these guys are our enemy, but they're not," Bagley went on to say. "They just want to sell units. And once we sit them down, I think they'll understand the numbers, because I know. I've already done it. This is not speculation. I've been out here doing this for five years now."

Bagley claims that, once the financing is in place, the diverse group of Christian developers will allow their talent to be cherry-picked for the purpose of making one high-quality console game ("maybe 'Catechumen 2,'" he says). While this may come as news to some of his peers, it is true that all these companies make a great show of asserting that they are in no way competitive with one another--a principle born not just in fellowship but in good business sense; the greater the number of viable Christian games hitting the market, the less of an anomaly each individual one will be. Bagley gave the nascent Digital Praise his own customer list, while Digital Praise lends expertise and even the use of some of its facilities to Wong's Brethren Entertainment. "We all look at it like we're working for the same conglomerate," Fokos says. "Which is God."

Still, together or separately, they are all diving into a business that's not simply worldly but somewhat ruthless, in which the trend is toward consolidation. Most small, independent-minded developers will most likely either be crushed underfoot or bought up by the big guys. Who, then, are the Christians' competitors? Certainly they do not lack for a sense of cultural opposition; whether it's real or the motivational product of a kind of persecution complex, time will tell. "There seems to be a stigma about Christian content," Wong says. "I think there's this perception in the United States, on the left you heard all these things even during the election--'I don't like this Christian agenda.' And we heard at the conference from some people who used to work at Nintendo, and they said that if a game had some reference to prayer or something like that, Nintendo would edit that out. Yet 'Breath of Fire II,' which is a Nintendo game, says, 'Pray to god,' but that god happens to be a demon. There are these idols that are in there. But those elements are fine, for some reason. In a sense it's puzzling, but in another sense not so much, because these kinds of things happen so often when it comes to Christian issues. It takes a long time to overcome the stereotype." A Nintendo executive replies, "We've chosen not to include any religious imagery in the games we make," while noting that "Breath of Fire II" was developed by a third party, not by Nintendo.

Fokos' view is more straightforward. "Frankly," he says, "Satan is our only competition. He's out to seduce the world. He's out to seduce our children. That's our challenge."

According to Tom Bean, "If we wanted to put out a console game that had a cross in it--not that we do, that's not our goal--that game would not go forward." Is he suggesting that console makers would edit the crosses out? "We don't know that, because we haven't tried it," he maintains. "But that's what we've been told."

"It's amazing," Bill Bean adds, "that you can have anything to do with the occult or any type of witchcraft or whatever in games, and that's cool," he told me. "But if you bring a cross in it and you say, 'Christian,' then immediately it's 'no.' It seems that there's a spiritual battle out there."

The occult is part of Satan's network. And a lot of games today put all of the occult in an extremely positive light. It really seems that the area of games isn't Christ's territory. It's Satan's backyard. And we're trying to take some of that territory back."

Pretty combative talk over what is, in the end, imaginary space; but the notion of the virtual environment as a contested religious space makes perfect sense, all the more so as the complexity of those virtual worlds more and more closely approximates that of our own. Most games contain no instructions and only the simplest prelude: You learn how to play by playing. You are faced with a seemingly opaque environment and a confusing, seemingly infinite range of choices. It's easy to despair. What draws us in is our faith in the unseen designer--the certainty that somewhere within that baffling range of options a path has been laid out for us, and to stay in the game we have to find it.



*Jonathan Dee is a novelist and a contributing writer for the The New York Times Magazine. His last feature article was about the activist Reverend Billy. Entire contents, Copyright © 2005 The New York Times. All rights reserved.*

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