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Christians converting video games to reflect their beliefs

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"Grand Theft Auto" has been impounded in the Gardner household. So have 1,000 other video games filled with debauchery, decadence and carnage.

Today this family's interactive entertainment is far more divine.

Electronic Bible games loaded with tests and trivia. Digital duels between David and Goliath. Adventures and challenges with pious themes where any violence appears virtuous.

Hallelujah! At last!

"It wasn't easy, but [my children] realize the violence and the things they saw wouldn't help them in life," said Janice Gardner of Lithonia, mother of three boys and two girls ranging in age from 25 to 11. "We're down to Christian games. They're a lot of fun to play."

Video games, long berated for explicit content and nihilistic themes, are gaining popularity in an unexpected arena: the Christian marketplace. A whole new genre of Christian-themed video games are converting many who once viewed such entertainment as corrupting.

Now? It's a cash cow.

While claiming only 1 percent of the video game marketplace, that equates to a \$200 million-a-year industry, according to Ralph Bagley, spokesman for the Oregon-based Christian Game Developers Foundation. Slowly, Christian game titles are appearing at retailers such as Circuit City, Best Buy and CompUSA, in addition to the aisles of Christian bookstores, such as the Family Christian Store chain.

"They're selling pretty well," said Larry Finch, manager of Family Christian Stores in Kennesaw.

And the conversion has only begun.

"In the next five years, it's going to grow and multiply," said Bagley, who also develops games through his company, N'Lightning. "Retailers are recognizing a need for a section of inspirational games. It's just exploding."

The genre could receive a subtle, if significant, boost from the film "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe." C.S. Lewis' "Narnia" tales are not very thinly disguised Christian metaphors, and Buena Vista has released an accompanying video game that has the potential to cross over from Christian to secular gamers.

Video games are just the latest form of media in which Christian themes are stirring interest — and income.

"Word of mouth was instrumental in spreading Christianity and is driving Christians to the cash register in mass quantities," said Pete Snyder, CEO of Arlington, Va.-based New Media Strategies, an online intelligence company that tracks message board and forum response online.

Snyder cited the "Left Behind" books, "The Passion of the Christ" movie and the Christian music scene as successful examples.

This entertainment epiphany is now reaching into the PC and will soon move into consoles such as PlayStation and Xbox. The video game industry has already eclipsed motion pictures dollarwise. In 2004, U.S. box office revenues tallied \$9.4 billion while gaming scored \$9.9 billion.

The Christian entertainment industry is now looking to meld its sensibilities with a recreational form more associated with nihilism than spiritual salvation.

"Christian families are saying, 'What do I want my children to be playing?' " Snyder said.

Let those who believe that Christian games are as dull as a staid Sunday sermon grab a copy of N'Lightning's "Catechumen."

The game works like a traditional first-person shooter, but instead of firing lead and lasers into soldiers or aliens, players use a variety of spiritual weapons, such as balls of holy energy, to slay Satan's minions and free possessed members of a Christian flock in ancient Rome. Instead of "fragging" — video game lexicon for a kill — a player basically smites.

The game's Web site offers the challenge: "Show them nothing can overcome the power of the Holy Spirit."

No, this isn't a "Family Guy" sendup. It's real. And it has sold a respectable 85,000 copies, the most of any Christian video game.

"You're battling for God," said Tim Emmerich, president of Oregon-based GraceWorks Interactive.

Emmerich has been hawking his spiritually centered video games for two years and organizes the annual Christian Game Developers Conference in Portland, Ore., which this year attracted attendees from Germany, Sweden and England.

Christian video games, he said, have evolved from reconfigured Nintendo games in the 1980s and computer solitaire in which the ace and queen cards are replaced with Scriptures.

Still, balance is a challenge.

The goal isn't to proselytize with a heavy hand but incorporate spiritual messages and teachings, all the while creating an intricate puzzle that visually dazzles and provides animated excitement, Bagley said.

"Design in any game is a tough job," he said. "Incorporating the Bible and teachings of Jesus while keeping it fun is difficult."

Which brings up a question: Are Christian video games truly less violent, or just light on the gore and entrails? Slaying demons is slaying, right?

In context, perhaps it's appropriate.

"The Bible is one of the most violent books imaginable," said Ian Bogost, who teaches video game theory and design at Georgia Tech. "The notion that violence is bad and should always be opposed doesn't seem consistent with religious discourse."

Nonetheless, some Christians aren't convinced — and likely never will be. There are those who think all video games are somewhat sinister, Emmerich said. But even the titles with high action levels aim to enlighten.

"Being able to take a wholesome message and weave it into the fabric of game play is what we do," said Bill Bean, co-founder of Digital Praise Inc., a Christian video game production house in Freemont, Calif. "Don't lie, don't cheat, take responsibility for your actions, which is something every parent on Planet Earth wants for their kids."

Some within the ranks wonder if the message is bold enough.

"We've had some Christians scratch their heads and wonder why we aren't being more preachy," Bagley said. "These are games. First and foremost, it should be a fun experience."

Many developers compare the state of Christian video games to the Christian music scene a decade ago: evolving into a flavor that's palatable to more than the faithful.

As happened with purveyors of Christian music, long accused of lacking daring and originality, Bogost wonders if game designers will be inspired to create innovative products or just fill this new niche with derivative entertainment.

If one feels the need to slay a hellspawn, well, they can play "Doom" for that.

"What I'd love to see are games that try to explain the rhetoric of religion. What are these beliefs? What is the history? How does your life change in behaving in accordance?" he said. "My great fear is that people get in this business and not do something unique for faith through games."

Thus far, Josiah Gardner, 17, is content with his electronic Scripture trivia challenges.

"It teaches you stuff about what's in the Bible," he said. "You don't kill anyone."


Still, does he ever just itch for a little "Grand Theft Auto" debauchery?

He pauses.

"Kinda."

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