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Profile

Trio offer 'clean' video games

Douglas E. Caldwell

Peter Fokos had been laid off. Tom Bean had retired after selling his business. Bill Bean, Tom's younger brother, was just starting a new job.

Those aren't exactly the classic backgrounds of daring entrepreneurs, but the three men have come together to start Digital Praise Inc (no period after the "c" they say), which in March put its first products, Christian-themed video games for children and families, on store shelves.

Mr. Fokos is a veteran of the video game industry and was one of the creators for the Learning Co. of brands including Carmen Sandiego, Reader Rabbit and Oregon Trail. But he had been laid off and had a hard time finding an opening with a company he liked.

Tom Bean had sold his interest in Bean & Associates, a mortgage banking consulting firm, and was uncomfortable being out of the business mainstream. Bill Bean had finally found a good sales job after a lengthy search.

The three got to know each other while attending the same church, First Assembly of God in Fremont. Mr. Fokos had the idea of "clean" video games after years of working in the video game industry which is often known better for blood splattering explosions, monsters and other violence or questionable characters.

But would G-rated video games sell? Mr. Fokos says there should be a huge market.

"We're starting to see what the potential could be. Christian music, which we use as a benchmark, is 7 percent of all music sales in the United States. If you were to take that over to video games or computer games, which is about a \$10 billion industry, there could be a very sizable market for Christian games," Mr. Fokos says. "Right now it's not zero, but it's very, very small. There really are no other players, so there's a fairly large potential market there. Granted, I don't see this as something I'm doing just to make a lot of money; this was something I was called to do."

The "Adventures in Odyssey" products made by Digital Praise are sold by Christian retailers, and soon, the company hopes, mass retailers. The video games are based on a radio program produced by Focus on the Family, a nonprofit organization located in Colorado Springs, Colo., which promotes conservative Christian values.

"What we've tried to do is weave game play into the story so you not only just hear it like you do on the radio show but you can actually play the story, become part of it," says Mr. Fokos. The video games



Clean games:
They're hoping
Christian-themed
video games will sell.
Photo: Dennis G.
Hendricks

use the radio show's actors for the voice-over work.

"My first reaction was that they were under-appreciating their market opportunity," says Thomas McCoy, a fellow parishioner who is executive vice president and chief administrative officer for Advanced Micro Devices, Inc. The trio asked Mr. McCoy to review their business plan as a favor.

"I don't care what one's spiritual measure may be, but all of us as parents are disgusted with the games entertainment that we currently see in the stores and our children are exposed to. As a person who's very focused on corporate responsibility, I thought they were beginning their company at an ideal time to take advantage of a time when the world has had it with moral ambiguity at best and more perversion at worst," says Mr. McCoy.

As with most new companies putting out a new product, there were unexpected glitches along the way.

"We were looking at doing our own [animated] videos at the time, but to get them within the budget, ours were not up to the quality level we had hoped they'd be," says Mr. Fokos. "Minimal animation. We pretty much told them to draw with their teeth or something."

That resulted in a product the three founders didn't like.

"We were betting the farm," Tom Bean recalls, adding that that's when he told his partners, "I can't hang with this."

But a chance encounter in Burbank put them in touch with new animators who gave them a good price on redoing the videos to make them higher quality.

"They wanted to help us. They blessed us," Mr. Fokos says.

"We were very fortunate. We happened to meet another Christian company (Toonacious, LLC, of Burbank) -- three men just like us, who met at a Bible study, who started a video company doing children's animated videos with a Christian theme," says Tom Bean. "Their main person was Tony Bancroft who was the co-director of Disney's animation movie 'Mulan.' He had worked at Disney as an animator. He did some of the characters in 'Lion King.'"

"We had very similar stories. We encouraged each other, we'd be praying for each other," Mr. Fokos says.

With products being shipped, money will start to come in. Until now, Digital Praise has been entirely self-funded with the three founders getting mortgages on their Bay Area homes -- and then refinancing as values went up -- to put more money into the company, they say.

Their dedication and determination doesn't surprise Mr. McCoy.

"Each of them is very passionate about God. Each of them is uniquely talented -- one is a business leader and executive, one in sales and marketing and one in the creative arts. When you took those three threads and spun them together, that was a very strong foundation on which to found a company," says

Mr. McCoy.

There may be more than games in the company's future, says Bill Bean, vice president of marketing and sales.

"Because we have several brands, one of the things that we want to do is begin identifying 'life lessons learned' with the products we've developed," he says. "It goes beyond one brand ... where we as a developer can provide something that's fun, entertaining and has that subtle 'life lessons learned' message woven into the fabric of the games."

For the future of the company, CEO Tom Bean says there will be more than just pursuit of the bottom line.

"Most times in business you're trying to monopolize as much as you can and squeeze out everybody else," he says. "But ... we want to help others to come along with us. We feel we all work for the same boss and if God wants to use us to help other people, then we will in any way we can."