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'Odyssey' games engaging and crafty

By [Lois M. Collins](#)

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"ADVENTURES IN ODYSSEY AND THE TREASURE OF THE INCAS," "ADVENTURES IN ODYSSEY AND THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT," for PC and MAC, by Digital Praise, rated E for everyone, MSRP, \$19.99.

In "Treasure of the Incas," Eugene Meltsner is sound asleep when a rock encased in a note crashes through his window. The note demands that he return something his parents stole or else. Problem is, his parents — renowned archaeologists — disappeared when he was 7. And he has no idea what or where the stolen item might be.

So he turns to his friends, Whit and Connie, for help untangling the mystery.

In "Sword of the Spirit," the trio embarks on another adventure, this time after learning that in 1881, a man named Peter McAllister discovered an ancient battle sword and brought it back to his hometown, Odyssey. There, he hid the treasure and devised a "gauntlet of virtues" for his three children. He created the adventure to test their character and, should they succeed, lead them to the treasure. It never happened, though.

Now Connie, Whit and Eugene find themselves forced to run the gauntlet for a bad guy who wants to claim the treasure — and find a way to outwit him.

These engaging and crafty computer games are based on the popular Christian radio series "Adventures in Odyssey," produced by Focus on the Family. So it's not surprising that they're great for kids, although they're not overtly religious, and they don't push any particular set of beliefs, except in basic goodness. And what a relief in the world of PC and video games not to have to screen them for sex, violence and simple bad taste.

You don't find nicer people — or in this case, cartoons — than teens Connie and Eugene and their older mentor and friend, Whit.

But what's even better in this series (there are others in the works) is the really excellent plotting and the ingenuity of the challenges. In "Treasure" the player has to sort artifacts (I found it totally impossible, but my youngest daughter, Aly, age 7, zipped right through it), find maps and solve puzzles to make it through a South American jungle, decode Eugene's mom's journal, figure out whether to rotate or flip or mirror images to create pictures (I bested Aly handily there) and invent a device that when lifted up by an unsuspecting bad guy will take photos at various intervals and send the image to Whit's computer. Along the way, Connie masters doing research on the Web.

"Spirit" uses entirely different challenges, so there's none of the "been-there-done-that" feeling that you can get with serial games. Challenges include



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figuring out how to catch the updraft in a mine shaft to get where you need to go, a modified pinball-like challenge, a puzzle and more.

The "tests" are all about various virtues, including faithfulness, perseverance, goodness, gentleness and peace. In all, there are nine virtues.

We played the games together, and it worked very well as a group activity.

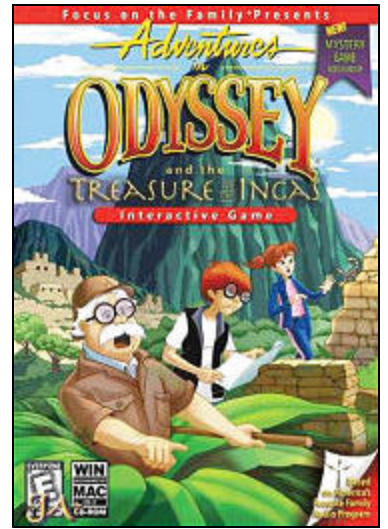
The games bill themselves as rewarding players for making good choices. And the games themselves are good choices if you have children 8 to about 13 years old, although I found them charming and captivating, too.

The engine is FunWare, which claims to "auto-level" — or automatically adjust the difficulty level during game play.

The animation is simple and charming, as well, and the voices are familiar to anyone who has listened to the "Adventures in Odyssey" radio show, which has been going for years now. Will Ryan, Katie Leigh and Paul Herlinger voice the show and the game; Marshal Younger writes both, so it's like interacting with old friends.

System requirements for Windows include XP/ME/2000/98, 300 Mhz Pentium II, 100 MB hard disk space, 64 MB RAM, 8X CD-ROM, 4MB DirectX 8.1 compatible video card, DirectSound 8.1 compatible sound card.

MAC systems must have G3, G4 or G5, Mac OS X v. 10.0 or later, 100 MB available hard disk space, 129 MB RAM, CD-ROM drive, 4 MB video memory and speakers.



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E-mail: lois@desnews.com

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