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Christian video games break into market

'Left Behind: Eternal Forces' due out for PC by mid-year

By **GLENN EVANS**

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The makers of a video game based on the apocalyptic "Left Behind" books and movie have faith their graphically gripping toy will win over secular and religious players.

Due on shelves by mid-year, "Left Behind: Eternal Forces" is the first foray into the video game market by a company created to convert the end-of-times books into game format, or platform.

"We intend to create great entertainment that appeals to the mass market as well as the Christian marketplace," Left Behind Games Chief Executive Officer Troy Lyndon said. "Our game is based upon a fictional story, so we can encourage gamers to 'think and talk' about matters of eternal importance while having fun."

The fictional story is an extension of the Biblical interpretation by some Christians that they will be spirited to God, or raptured, before a seven-year conflict called the tribulation. The rest of humanity, the Left Behind, must then decide whether to fight for good or join the Antichrist, (who runs the United Nations).

Gamers playing "Eternal Forces" are New York City residents who were left behind. In a setting where the law of the jungle has taken hold, they must recruit and train workers to feed, shelter and join a resistance fighting the growing army of the Antichrist.

The four years the game was in development pay off in the three-dimensional portrayal of nearly 500 blocks modeled after the real Big Apple neighborhoods.

"Eternal Forces" is one of a new breed of players entering the \$10.5 billion U.S. videogame market, and only the first fruits of a greater harvest Lyndon plans.

Game developer Digital Praise, which is in partnership with the Rev. James Dobson's Focus on the Family advocacy group, released the first two of its Adventures in Odyssey series in March 2005. The New York Times reported last month the company had sold 70,000 units of those two games and five others released during the company's inaugural year.

Adventures in Odyssey games generally quiz players on Biblical principles or test their values before allowing them to advance to higher levels. They have been available since last summer at mainstream retailers including Circuit City and CompUSA.

Another video game with indirect Christian undertones hit shelves with the arrival of the movie, "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe."

In the Narnia game, players can help the true king, the lion Aslan, overthrow the evil witch who cursed the world with an eternal ice age, thus redeeming a marred creation.

"That one's been out (since the movie)," GameStop general manager Josh Beane said of "Narnia," which is produced by Disney and Walden Media. "But it really hasn't been selling too well lately."

Another Christian video game is aimed at children, he added.

"There's one called 'The Bible Game,' which is for younger kids," Beane said. "It's kind of got lessons in it."

Left Behind publicist Beverly Rykerd said her company is riding the crest of a new wave in the gaming industry.

"It is an emerging market, the whole Christian video games market," she said. "This is all new, and everyone has yet to see how people will respond to it."

The new games are designed to match the technical magic of their older, secular brethren, she said.

"The people who play them are used to a high quality of graphics," she said. "So, the standards are quite high."

GameStop, for now, is the only Longview distributor Left Behind Games has slated to sell "Eternal Forces," according to Rykerd.

"We are taking reservations for it," Beane said. "We don't actually have any reservations for it at this point."

The company estimates an Oct. 4 release in Longview for PC format, he said. Lyndon has said in published reports he plans to make the game available for the Microsoft Xbox and Sony PlayStation by 2008.

He also rebuked critics who have accused the games of being overly violent.

"Any claims about our game having too much violence are unfounded and ridiculous," Lyndon told the News-Journal in an e-mail response. "Our new game, 'Left Behind: Eternal Forces,' the PC Game, is a strategy game. It's not a first-person shooter or even a role-playing game. It's just a little more violent than an animated chess game. And in comparison to other strategy games, it's less violent. Both gamers and those eternally minded will love 'Left Behind: Eternal Forces' for the PC."

Rykerd noted that, "Revelation is pretty graphic, and the Old Testament. People die."

That's a point well taken by Pat Mays, a professor of Biblical studies at LeTourneau University, who has not seen the Left Behind videogame.

"If you're depicting certain Biblical stories and there's violence there, you will depict violence," he said, noting Mel Gibson's violently realistic portrayal of Jesus' crucifixion in the movie, "The Passion of the Christ."

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"If the video game is a description of scripture, the same principal would apply."

Lyndon declined to respond to questions asking whether there is a gospel component to the games. Mays doubted that gaining converts to Christ is a motive, at least not a primary one.

"This is just a guess, that perhaps it's not so much for the spread of the Gospel," he said. "I would guess the market would be (people who are) Christians already, who are trying to find an alternative to 'Grand Theft Auto,' where there are things involved in the video that are sometimes going against Christian values — for instance, theft itself."

Lyndon said the Left Behind games are at the beginning of days.

"We'll continue to produce high-quality PC games, which are expected to be announced later this year," he wrote to the News-Journal. "Our initial entry into the marketplace is our primary focus. However, we are carefully watching the emerging next generation platforms."

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