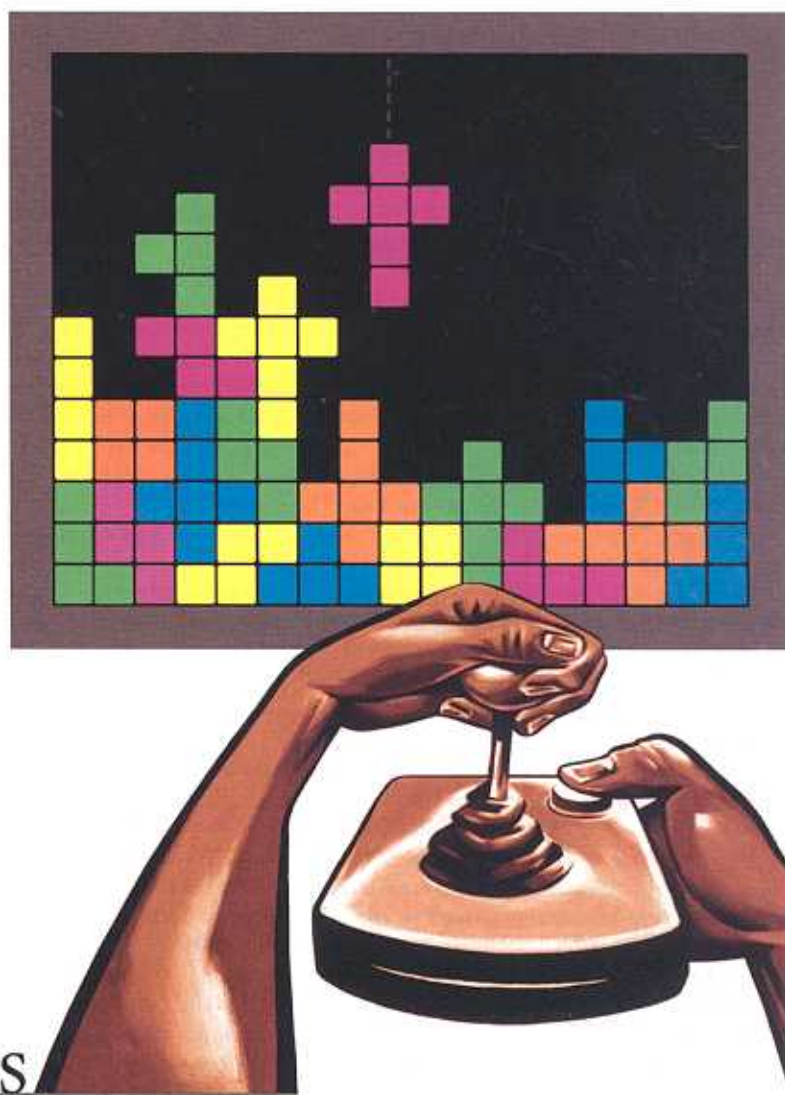


SOUTHWEST AIRLINES SPIRIT®

JANUARY 2006

Tech



Onward Virtual Christian Soldiers

Religion and family-friendly fare are marching into the video game industry **BY JOHN GAUDIOSI**

If you play the top-selling video game *Doom 3*, you're going to hell. That is, if you're good. Good players, you see, can advance to levels that send them into the inferno for bloody battles. For a Doomer, that's a desired outcome. For some video game makers, though, that's just the kind of thing their industry offers too much of today.

As games have gotten more technologically advanced, they've also become increasingly filled with blood, guts, naughty goings-on, and even the netherworld. You probably heard the outcry last year over the racy content in *Grand Theft Auto*. It's

just one of many games with adult themes. Indeed, some 16 percent of all video games released in 2004 were rated "mature." But, now, there may be some salvation from that kind of content. Literally, perhaps.

Christian video game makers are looking to do in games what Mel Gibson did in movies — produce a religious-themed hit. They've already released titles like *Spiritual Warfare*, *The Bible Game*, and *Dance Praise*, all of which weave the Almighty into the action. In one recently released game, *Catechumen*, players race through ancient Rome, converting Roman legions to Chris-

tianity by striking them with a blessed sword. The soldiers shout out "Hallelujah!" in reply.

So far, such games make up a tiny slice of the \$2.9 billion video game software market. But, Christian game makers are convinced that a large audience exists for games that promote "family values" and have religious themes. "More consumers are looking for a variety of games to entertain their children and provide fun for the entire family," says Doug Panter, a brand director for Crave Entertainment, maker of *The Bible Game*, a trivia contest with 1,500 questions about the Old Testament.

Two key words there: "family" and "fun." Christian game makers are focusing their sales efforts on families, specifi-

► Tech

cally on parents. Though some Christians may have shunned video games altogether, game makers suggest that's not the answer. The Christian Game Developers Foundation, a nonprofit consortium charged with marketing Christian games, put out a video this year that closes with the message: "The question isn't if your kids play. The question is what your kids play."

That's where "fun" comes in. The idea for Christian game makers isn't to take video games away from kids, but to offer games that aren't filled with demons, bloodgeonings, and scantily clad action. And therein lies the rub. You can't just stamp a church steeple on the cover of a game and expect kids to want to play it. In a report earlier this year, ABC News assembled a group of 12-year-olds and let them play Christian video games and secular games. The result: "They far preferred *Grand Theft Auto* to *Catechumen*."

Still, Christian game makers are confident that they can compete for kids' attention. "Fifteen years ago, the Christian music world looked like Christian games today," says Ralph Bagley, chief executive officer of N'Lightning Software, developer of *Catechumen*, which has sold some 80,000 copies. "But it wasn't until the Christian music companies came together as a group and focused on quality that they were able to achieve success."

That's what Christian video game makers are doing now. Last July, some 100 Christian video game makers — including companies from Brazil, Switzerland, Australia, and South Korea, as well as the United States and Canada — gathered in Portland, Oregon, for the fourth Christian Game Developers Conference. The attendees' focus was on boosting the technical quality of their games. "The challenge for Christian game developers has always been delivering a quality game experience," Bagley says.

Boosting technical quality is a big challenge for many Christian game makers, several of whom have built their businesses on making educational games for PCs. Strategy and first-person shooter games for console systems like Xbox and PlayStation are more involved and far more expensive to produce. It can cost several million dollars to develop a console game.

That might explain why, even at the most recent Christian Game Developers Conference, most of the games shown were made for the PC. For instance, there was *Dance Praise*, a PC game that lets gamers listen to songs from EMI Christian Music

Group while they pound out steps on an electronic dance mat. And, there was another PC game, *Timothy and Titus*. It asks gamers to roam the world collecting missing scrolls using fast-paced action moves to evade danger, as well as faith, hope, love, and prayer to spread the Christian message along the way.

All of those may sound interesting to Christian gamers. But the fact remains: Few miracles are being performed on your Xbox. To that end, the Christian Game Developers Foundation is pooling developers' resources and soliciting donations from large church congregations around the country. Their aim: raise enough money to create detailed games for the next generation of video game consoles — Xbox 360 and PlayStation3. Bagley says the games under development will have the same visual quality and multiple levels of play as games like *HalfLife 2* and *Doom 3*. The first of the next-generation Christian games could be on sale by fall 2007.

Before that happens, the breadth of the market for Christian games will have already been tested. *Left Behind: Eternal Force*, a real-time strategy game, is expected to hit stores by Easter 2006. The game is based on the 13-volume *Left Behind* book series from Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. The books have sold more than 63 million copies worldwide since 1995. Like the books, the game — one of the most expensive Christian games ever developed — is set during the apocalypse. Players will be able to choose between angelic Tribulation Forces and demonic Global Community Peacekeepers in a multiplayer online mode or a single-player mode. "If only 10 percent of the [*Left Behind*] readership buy our game, it will be a top hit, selling more than 1 million units," says Troy Lyndon, chief executive officer of Left Behind Games.

Lyndon knows something about gaming. He was the first producer of Electronic Arts' bestselling *Madden* football game in 1990. He expects the *Left Behind* games will, like *Madden*, eventually end up on game consoles and thinks that, within the next decade, a Christian console game can sell as many copies as a top mainstream game.

Even so, Lyndon is also wary of his company, or other Christian game makers, putting too many religious messages in their games. "Christian games are going to have to be cutting-edge and superb in storyline, graphics, and game play," Lyndon says. "The hardware companies are looking for games with universal appeal. If games are too overt-

ly Christian in their message, Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo will probably reject them."

Ultimately, that's the question Christian game developers have to answer: How much religion is too much in a game? That's the subject of much discussion when developers gather at their annual conference. The developers are also torn by issues of violence in their games. Is a first-person shooter game appropriate to market to Christians? Are New Testament-themed games going to fly

off the shelves at Toys "R" Us?

No one yet knows the answers to those queries, but Christian game makers do seem to agree on one thing. Their games need to be more fun than your average Sunday school class. Says Bagley, "The last thing we want to do is preach to people." ☺

John Gaudiosi is a freelancer based in North Carolina who writes frequently about video games.