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Christians Code Heavenly Games By John Gartner

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PORTLAND, Oregon -- Christians looking to provide alternatives to the sex and violence of video games like *Grand Theft Auto* are trying to attract some of the PlayStation generation with more wholesome fare.

Fledgling companies from around the globe showed off new titles focusing on morality and stories from the Old and New Testaments aimed at pre-kindergarten to young adults at the [Christian Game Developers Conference](#) here last week.

The startup companies hope that games with biblical messages can parallel the recent surge in the popularity of Christian music and cinema. But don't look for multiplayer smiting or wrathful vengeance in their offerings: The games that will show up on retail shelves in time for Christmas emphasize narrative stories and learning rather than action.

In adventure game *Timothy and Titus*, from Australian startup [White Knight Games](#), players assume the roles of the two disciples of St. Paul who spread the gospel throughout the ancient Mediterranean.

Instead of the health and weapons points used in other role-playing games, players collect love, hope and faith points to power their missions. When they meet foes, instead of fragging them as in *Halo 2*, the disciples earn their halos by praying for them or using the "finger of God" to convert them.

According to White Knight managing director Laurence Escalante, who came up with the game's premise, future versions may allow players to use force against adversaries. "I would like to see people be able to decide their actions, even if they are wrong," Escalante said, adding that using violence would not help players win the game.

Escalante admits to taking some artistic license in *Timothy and Titus*. In the traditional story line, Timothy was martyred by pagans, but both saints live through all the levels of the PC game, scheduled for release in November.

The Rebel Planet is geared toward teens and young adults and includes some violence, according to [Rebel Planet Creations](#) founder Peter Churness. He uses the time period after creation and before Noah took to the ark as the backdrop for the game, in which players battle dinosaurs, giant spiders and human enemies.

Churness, a Lutheran pastor, isn't sure if the game (due out in summer 2006) will feature humans dying, but the violence will not be gory. Although Adam appears as a character (after Eve dies) and the biblical character Enoch is renamed Orion, no quotes appear from the Bible, according to Churness.

Video games have surpassed movies as the medium most influential on children, Churness said, adding that there's a need for positive messages that spread God's word. "Computer graphics is the best storytelling tool in the world, and what better way to tell the greatest story ever told?"

Churness hopes the Christian games market will follow the same successful path as Christian music (which he says now accounts for 7 percent of music sales) and movies such as *The Passion of the Christ*.

[Digital Praise](#) demonstrated *Dance Praise*, an arcade game in the mold of *Dance Dance Revolution*, in which players follow onscreen instructions and stomp on a dance pad to the beat of music. The game will feature songs from 30 of the leading Christian music artists, according to Bill Bean, Digital Praise's vice president of marketing and sales.

Bean said the game, which has three levels of difficulty that automatically adjust to a player's performance, will be available Oct. 25. The company also demonstrated *Adventures in Odyssey* and *The Great Escape*, based on characters from the nationally distributed radio show.

In *The Great Escape*, players are trapped inside a computer and have to overcome viruses and spam and decode corrupted e-mails to find their way home. [Tony Bancroft](#), who worked on *Mulan* and several other Disney features, is the animator.

Digital Praise's new games, which include two titles based on the *Hermie and Friends* videos and the anime title *Light Rangers: Mending the Maniac Madness*, teach children not to lie, steal or cheat, and are intended for people of all faiths. "People of faith live differently," Bean said.

The company has been selling its PC and Macintosh titles online and through Christian retailers, and recently signed a distribution deal with reseller SOS Network to peddle the games through retailers like Fry's Electronics, Apple stores and Amazon.com.

Competing with vice-filled console games that have multimillion-dollar production budgets will be a challenge for startup companies, according to Jay Horwitz, an analyst with [Jupitermedia](#). Horwitz said getting shelf space at retail outlets is also difficult. "You have to be a pretty big publisher to get on the shelf at Wal-Mart," Horwitz said.

However, Horwitz believes the recent success of Christian-themed media from companies such as Gaylord Entertainment indicates that there is a receptive audience. "I wouldn't underestimate the force of Christian content," Gaylord said.



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