Moralising, not Evangelising

An exploration of Explicitly Christian game design, common issues, and potential solutions.

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To John Doe

Some more descriptive text.

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

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Contents

Contents vii

List of Figures

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

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1

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Introduction

In the words of game developer and designer Chris Skaggs: "Every game, whether you like [it] or not, comes with a worldview." (Schut & Schultze, 2013, p. 136). While both analogue and digital game designers may include values inadvertently, they may also design their games to promote specific beliefs (Bogost, 2007; Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014). Schut and Schultze (2013) define one such group of games. Explicitly Christian Games (ECGs) feature an unambiguously Christian point of view through their content; they achieve this through the inclusion of Bible stories or passages, obvious displays of gospel morals, or an in-game narrative with an evidently Christian outlook (p. 137).

Although this definition appears objective, some may disagree on what can be called "Christian". After all, different denominations sometimes advocate for conflicting moral instructions. Hence, to avoid making arbitrary distinctions between which values are truly "Christian" and which are not, I shall use the term to describe anything conforming to the teachings of *any* Christian denomination. Similarly, conspicuousness can also be argued to be subjective, since Christian content is less likely to be evident to someone who lacks familiarity with it. Therefore, I shall assume that the audience in question at least familiar with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the concept of sin, and God's forgiveness of sins.

1.1 | Motivation

While ECGs have existed since the early 1980s[1], games developer Wisdom Tree was the first to popularise the concept within Christian circles. Most of their early titles were re-implementations of secular games, including but not limited to those by their parent company, Color Dreams (Bogost, 2007, p. 287). In terms of gameplay, Bible trivia

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[1]I based this date on the comprehensive list of religious games compiled by Gonzalez (2022). Nevertheless, many early ECGs in the list remain lost media. For a well-documented example, see Red Sea Crossing (1983) (Goldfarb, 2012; Lucky & Mellen, 2023).

sections and bible quotes were the most notable additions. Most mechanics and rules were copied wholesale from their secular counterparts, though some would be modified to better fit the game's narrative. Another significant deviation was their narratives, which adapted Biblical stories or featured Christian protagonists.

Wisdom Tree's games were also known for their low production quality. *Bible Adventures*, one of their more popular titles, was known for its poor programming and audio. Before speedrunning the "Baby Moses" levels during the 2013 Summer Games Done Quick (SGDQ) event, speedrunner Brossentia comments that the "physics are a *little* iffy", before a member of the audience retorts "A *little*?". Bible adventures for the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) also featured level music which could be considered to sound repetitive and thin. All of the game's stages, even ones featuring different Bible stories, loop the same fourteen-second track. Furthermore, many titles in the NES library would typically use multiple channels on the console's audio chip to play multiple notes at once[2] However, the track in question only makes use of the triangle channel.

Wisdom Tree seems to have established a track record for subsequent endeavours. Academics, Christians, and players alike have repeatedly critiqued ECGs for their excessive educational focus, unoriginal gameplay, and inability to engage players of secular games (Bogost, 2007; innocentbystander, 2009; Moon Channel, 2023; Schut & Schultze, 2013). Furthermore, after reviewing lists of recent religious and Christian game releases (Gonzalez, 2022; "List of Christian video games", 2024), it becomes apparent that many ECGs published within the past five years (i.e. between 2024 and 2019) still sideline novel and engaging game experiences in favour of religious instruction.

Innovation in the games industry is hard-fought. However, it is startling to think that after over thirty years, most ECG developers have stuck to the same approach of representing Christian faith. Meanwhile, within the same timeframe, the gaming industry as a whole has found many creative and engaging ways of embedding values in games (Bogost, 2007; Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014). Why don't ECG developers take inspiration from such games? Why have ECGs remained stagnant for so long?

1.2 | Aims and Objectives

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[2]The soundtracks for Castlevania, Megaman, Kirby's Adventure would be good examples.

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1.3 | Our Approach

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1.4 | Document Structure

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Background & Literature Overview

2.1 | Related Work

2.2 | What is a Christian Game?

Before I start my analysis into Christian video games, I believe it makes sense to first clarify what constitutes a Christian game. Looking at online discourse, there seems to be no agreement on the term's definition. For example, Moon Channel (2023) defines a Christian video game as one which promotes Christian morals, references Christianity explicitly in its theming, in-game narrative, or marketing, and is deemed Christian by both its intended (presumably Christian) audience and its developer. Meanwhile, Hartgrove (2022) has a much simpler definition. He describes *Hypnospace Outlaw* (2019) as a Christian game simply because its creator, Jay Tholen, identifies as Christian — regardless of its content.

Lacking an established definition, previous researchers of the subject have outlined their own definitions for the sake of analysis. After conducting several interviews with Christian developers, Schut and Schultze (2013) present four definitions. ECGs feature an unambiguously Christian point of view through their content; they achieve this through the inclusion of Bible stories or passages, obvious displays of gospel morals, or an in-game narrative with an evidently Christian outlook. *Big Bible Town* (2010), which is designed to teach Biblical stories to children, is an example of such a game. Meanwhile, Allegorical Christian Games (ACGs) include narratives leaning towards more implicit depictions of Christian themes and morals, in a similar approach to C.S. Lewis's Narnia books (p. 137).

Although, Schut does not include any examples of ACGs, we can note that he was likely not referring to games like those in the *Halo* series. While they include several

references to Christianity. Allum is more likely a suitable example, since its developers describe it as a " Christian Allegory along the lines of Pilgrims Progress or The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe".

2.3 | Summary

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Materials & Methods

This section should include a recipe of what you did (explain what you have done so if someone wants to reproduce the experiment, they can). Should also include a description of statistical methods used (if any).[1]

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3.1 | Summary

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[1]For more information see: `http://rc.rcjournal.com/content/49/10/1229.short`. Last Accessed: 27th November, 2024.

4

Results & Discussion

Should include a reiteration of the experiments, and their outcome. Together with a description (discussion). Preamble should include a reminder of the aims and objectives together with a list of experiments to achieve these. Should include many charts and other visualization with appropriate descriptions.[1]

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4.1 | Summary

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[1]Another footnote example.

5

Conclusions

This section should have a summary of the whole project. The original aims and objective and whether these have been met should be discussed. It should include a section with a critique and a list of limitations of your proposed solutions. Future work should be described, and this should not be marginal or silly (e.g. add machine learning models). It is always good to end on a positive note (i.e. 'Final Remarks').

5.1 | Revisiting the Aims and Objectives

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5.2 | Critique and Limitations

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5.3 | Future Work

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5.4 | Final Remarks

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A

Media Content

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Installation Instructions

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C

User Manual

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