



Moralising, not Evangelising

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

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of M.Sc. in Digital Games.



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First edition, Thursday 13th February, 2025

To John Doe

Some more descriptive text.

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

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Contents

List of Abbreviations	x
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Motivation	1
1.2 Aims and Objectives	3
1.3 Our Approach	3
1.4 Document Structure	3
2 Background & Literature Overview	4
2.1 Evaluation Criteria	4
2.2 Related Work	4
2.3 Summary	4
3 Materials & Methods	6
3.1 Summary	6
4 Results & Discussion	7
4.1 Summary	7
5 Conclusions	8
5.1 Revisiting the Aims and Objectives	8
5.2 Critique and Limitations	8
5.3 Future Work	9
5.4 Final Remarks	9
Appendix A Media Content	10
Appendix B Installation Instructions	11
Appendix C User Manual	12

Contents

vii

References

13

List of Figures

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

ECG Explicitly Christian Game	1
NES Nintendo Entertainment System	2
SGDQ Summer Games Done Quick	2

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 1980s¹, 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

¹I 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 once² 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 2019 and 2024) 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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²The 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

In this section you need to explain all the theory required to understand your dissertation (i.e. the following chapters). But really in this chapter I am going to show you some examples.

2.1 | Evaluation Criteria

This section should contain information on the metrics and background used to evaluate your work.

2.2 | Related Work

In this section you need to explain (and reference) similar work in literature. Make sure to:

- Give a systematic overview of papers with related/similar work
- Highlight similarities/differences to your work (perhaps in the form of a table)

Note that this section may be sectioned based on the different aspects of your dissertation.

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

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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¹Another footnote example.

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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Media Content

If the dissertation has a DVD or pendrive attached to it, you will need a section which explains what is on the media (structure, files, data, etc.). This could be a table with filename and description.

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Installation Instructions

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User Manual

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