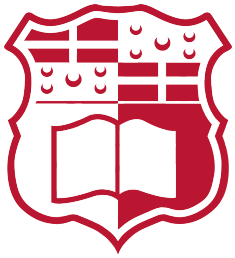

Moralising, not Evangelising

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

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Institute of Digital Games

University of Malta

May, 2025

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

WWW.UM.EDU.MT

First edition, Monday 12th May, 2025

To John Doe

Some more descriptive text.

Acknowledgements

These are the acknowledgements. Hello, here is some text without a meaning. This text should show what a printed text will look like at this place. If you read this text, you will get no information. Really? Is there no information? Is there a difference between this text and some nonsense like “Huardest gefburn”? Kjift – not at all! A blind text like this gives you information about the selected font, how the letters are written and an impression of the look. This text should contain all letters of the alphabet and it should be written in of the original language. There is no need for special content, but the length of words should match the language.

Abstract

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1.2 | Aims and Objectives

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1.3 | Our Approach

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1.4 | Document Structure

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2

Background & Literature Overview

2.1 | What are Christian Games?

Before I start my analysis into Christian video games, it makes sense to first clarify what constitutes a Christian game. As games scholar Kevin Schut states in an interview, currently there is no consensus on what makes a game Christian (Faith Forms, 2024, 8:38). 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 Christian games have had to create definitions for analysis. Schut (2013) derived definitions for three sub-genres of Christian Games based on several interviews he conducted with Christian developers. Explicitly Christian Games (ECGs) "feature Bible stories or passages, very clear presentation of the gospel message, and stories that very openly have a Christian worldview" (ibid, p. 137). *Big Bible Town* (2010), which aims to teach children about Bible stories, is an example of such a game. Meanwhile, Allegorical Christian Games (ACGs) "have stories that are not necessarily openly Christian but have Christian themes or messages underneath them" (ibid, p. 137). Schut also describes Evangelical Christian video games, which aim to evangelise to non-Christian players. Schut describes this as a hypothetical category, since the interviewees did not provide any examples and Schut was unable to think of any.

Although Schut does not include any examples of ACGs, he does note that many interviewees referenced the narratives in C.S. Lewis's Narnia books. Hence, they were likely not referring to games like those in the *Halo* series. While they do include sev-

eral references to Christianity and allusions to themes of resurrection (Paulissen, 2018), these games' narratives do not put much emphasis on these aspects. *Alum* (2015) is more likely a suitable example, since its developers describe it as a "sort of Christian Allegory along the lines of Pilgrims Progress or The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe" (Crashable Studios, 2015). Schut further confirms this interpretation when he comments that most of the participants' views on Christian Games were related to ideas of a Christian market demographic (ibid. p. 140).

ECGs and ACGs are primarily differentiated based on how explicitly they present Christian content. However using *Alum* as an example of ACGs illustrates that they can still be quite explicit. Despite of its self-described Christian Allegorical narrative, several players have criticised its lack of subtlety (Arkane, 2015; baxted, 2015; virotti, 2017), and it is easy to see why. Although the deity which the protagonist interacts with is called the "Unfeigned Altruist" rather than "Jesus Christ", his dialogue with the protagonist makes the connection obvious. For example, during the fourth chapter, the Unfeigned Altruist mentions that he died for the protagonist's wife. In the same conversation, he also mentions the following: "The day is coming when I will be there, in flesh and blood... [...] I *will* come, in the fullness of time... I will come to take every rushlight bearer home, to be with me." (123Pazu, 2015, 10:04). Perhaps the interviewees might still consider *Alum* to be allegorical. However, Schut's definition does not elaborate on what it means for narratives to be "openly Christian", or what makes a display of gospel morals "clear". Furthermore it does not describe what makes a moral display or a narrative "Christian" in the first place.

Gonzalez (2014) studies Evangelical video games through the broader context of "religious games". She begins to define this term by first establishing what "religion" refers to for the purposes of her research. This proves to be difficult since Evangelical video games do not strictly abide to theological doctrines. As such, when games such as *Timothy and Titus* rename quantities which could be called "mana", "lives", and "health" to "faith", "hope", and "love", the developers do not expect players to believe that the qualities mentioned in 1 Corinthians 13:13 function in the same way as in the game, or to take these aspects of the game seriously. Anyone hoping to defend these theological inaccuracies would most likely have to relent that "it's just a game".

Basing her definition on the work by Chidester (2005), Gonzalez locates religion as the negotiations of human ontology in relation non-humans (such as devils, angels or gods) and the exchanges that occur between them. Hence religious video games are digital games which cause these negotiations. This definition does not presume belief

or seriousness, since it only requires the existence of such negotiations and exchanges. In other words, one does not need to believe in religion to acknowledge that it exists. Nevertheless, this definition does not reduce non-human agents to analogies. Gonzalez defines religious organisations as persistent fellowships of humans and non-humans negotiating the boundaries of humanity, and limits the scope of her analysis to games associated with these organisations. If this were not the case, she argues that too many situations could be classified as religious.

Gonzalez identifies religious games predominantly by searching their content for sacra. She adopts this term from the research on rites of passage by Turner (1967) and defines them as materials through which negotiations between humans and non-humans take place. Evangelical video games readapt these sacra from Evangelical organisations and combine them with gameplay in ways that encourage them to recall or explore Evangelical discourse related to that sacra. Specifically, discourse about how the sacra in question (e.g. 1 Corinthians 13:13) determines a Christian's relationship with the Lord.

Not all religious material in games to be sacra according to Gonzalez; when used in fantasy or blasphemy, the materials begin negotiating different borders. In fantasy, non-humans are portrayed as fictional beings rather than agents whose existence shapes our own. So even though *Castlevania* (1986) includes crosses and holy water, neither would be considered sacra since the enemies they are used against are monsters from horror films and literature. Similarly, the reference to John 1:17 in the Halo series would not be considered sacra since the protagonist fights against a fictional alien alliance. Meanwhile, blasphemous games such as *Run, Jesus Run!* (2010) and *Crucify-me! Jesus* (2000) use religious materials to negotiate a border between different human groups, one of which is deemed as idiotic by the other. Consequently, neither fantasy or blasphemous games qualify as religious.

In her analysis, Gonzales does not examine ACGs. However, *Alum* would still qualify as a religious game under her definition. In the games' second chapter, Alum is given a rushlight, an object which allows him to commune with the Unfeigned Altruist. This item also functions as a hint system for the game's point-and-click puzzles; using the rushlight on the environment triggers dialogue from the Unfeigned Altruist, which is occasionally inspired by scripture. For example, using the rushlight on a daylily flower prompts the following reflection: "The daylily. It does not spin, not does it toil… And yet, it's dressed more beautifully than the richest kings and queens.". This remark references part of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount where he speaks about divine providence

Luke 12:27, Matthew 6:28–29[1]. In this way, the game adapts sacra from Christian organisations to engage players with discussions about a Christian's relationship with God.

The definitions by Schut and Gonzalez both include the group of games that prompted this study. However, the definition by Gonzalez is less ambiguous in its interpretation of what classifies as "religious". Hence, for the purposes of this dissertation "Christian digital games" (or "Christian games" for short) shall refer to any digital game which prompts negotiations about what it means to be a human with a relationship to God. Often, these games invite players to engage with pre-existing discussions by readapting sacra from Christian religious organisations. Following Gonzalez's approach, I will not consider material to be sacra if they are used in a context of fantasy or blasphemy. Having defined what Christian games are, in the following section I will provide an overview of other researchers' efforts to study them.

2.2 | Related Work

2.3 | Summary

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[1]The use of the words "spin" and "toil" suggest the developers were likely using either the *English Standard Version Bible* (2001) or the *King James Bible* (1769/2017).

3

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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B

Installation Instructions

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C

User Manual

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