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Saints & sinners

Video games for Christian teens walk the line between
sacred and profane BY JULIO OJEDA-ZAPATA

They are devoutly Christian teenagers with E-mail user names to match, like "soldier4truth" and "saintA2J," short for "addicted to Jesus." Like other high-tech teens, they have no patience for computer games that aren't engrossing and challenging. That goes double with Christian-themed titles — if they're plodding and preachy at the expense of good "game play," they're history.

This is an auspicious time for Christian gamers, then, because a groundbreaking crop of Bible-inspired action titles have appeared within the last year.

Perhaps the most ambitious effort to date, "Catechumen," pits First Century Christians against Roman soldiers in first-person sequences that meld fast-paced combat with campy humor. The recently released "Catechumen" joins games such as "Saints of Virtue" and "The War and Heaven," which also let Christian gamers take up swords in the Lord's cause. "War and Heaven," in a controversial twist, even lets players pick the side of Satan.

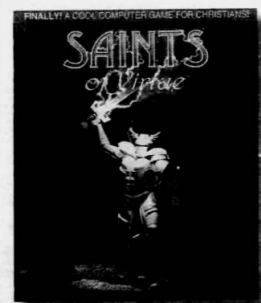
ZAPPING ETHERAL FOES

Christians appear to have an edge over other faiths in the amount of action-game products, although a wide range of PC-entertainment titles for Jews, Muslims and others are available via online storefronts and other Web sites.

None of the aforementioned games can match the visuals and features of best-selling PC titles like "Quake III: Are-

na" and "Unreal Tournament," but many Christians refuse to play those because of graphic gore and demonic themes.

Many prefer the bloodless swordplay and challenging puzzles in, for example, Shine Studios' "Saints of Virtue," which pits players — not against mutants or monsters — but inner demons such as



pride, fear, vanity and self-righteousness.

Such ethereal foes are vanquished with an energy-zapping blade in settings such as the Caves of Loneliness and the Halls of Despair. Traps and mazes stump players at every turn, but Scrolls of Truth provide guidance.

ANGEL OR DEVIL

Rob Anderson of Cactus Games, which distributes "Saints" software, says the title is pitched mainly to Christian bookstores. "We have to satisfy that market first," he notes. "We're not trying very hard to get into [stores like] CompUSA" because kids would routinely pass it up for "the next Tomb Raider, along with the code to make Lara Croft play in the nude."

The 10-month-old "War in Heaven" did get into mainstream outlets, such as Target and CompUSA, but Kmart is the only national chain to carry it this summer. Only about 10,000 copies of "War in Heaven" have sold, partly, publisher ValuSoft believes, because of too-stringent computer-hardware requirements for a \$20 "value" title.

"War in Heaven," a first-person combat game that pits angels against demons in an "epic battle between good and evil," has another strike against it in Christian circles — it lets users play the part of a demon as well as an angel. This, most agree, makes it poisonous for some devout shoppers.

Eternal Warriors co-founder Theodore Beale says he "knew this was a possible objection, but the concept of choice is significant in the Christian religion. Choosing between good and evil is not out of place in a game. It's such a fundamental concept we weren't about to take it out."

Besides, those who take the satanic side in "War" are punished in the end by "a big demon who laughs at you, says that you served its purposes and throws you in a pit of fire," Beale notes.

JUST LIKE BIBLE STUDY

Another game, "Catechumen," is billed as the most technically advanced Christian PC title to date. The game, created by N'Lightning Software Development of Medford, Ore., gets its name from Christians-in-training who race to rescue their imprisoned leader by battling demon-possessed Roman soldiers, winged "low-level devils" and other foes inside a network of catacombs.

As in the other Christian titles, users wield a series of swords but never draw blood. Instead, in a humorous twist, the Sword of the Spirit shoots bursts of energy that send suddenly repentant Romans to their knees, bathed in heavenly light amid a chorus of hallelujahs.

Co-creator Ralph Bagley says he deliberately injected mirth into Catechumen so it wouldn't seem overly solemn or sanctimonious, despite its numerous Bible references. For instance, users solve one of the game's puzzles by zapping a cathedral organ in order to play the first few bars of "Amazing Grace."

Above all, Bagley and his crew of 30 wanted to create a game with the "intensity, realism and immersiveness" of Quake and Unreal, but without "satanic symbols" and "blood, guts and gore." Christian computer games have yet to become hot sellers in Christian bookstores, however. Bible-study software such as Parson Technology's QuickVerse does considerably better at Family Christian Stores, says Renee Kennedy, a software buyer for the chain. Still, she believes that the games represent wonderful opportunities for Christian-oriented retail outlets.

But parents are finding out about the software just the same. Though they may restrict their children's computer playtime to educational software, many make an exception with Saints of Virtue, because it fits in with Bible studies they do at night.

And the kids like it. ♦

— Knight-Ridder Tribune

DIVERSITY RULES

Christian action games aren't the only religion-themed recreational programs for PCs. Here's a sampling of others:

► **Search for your Israeli Cousin I and II** (Davka Corp., www.davka.com). Players search through the Holy Land and around the world for long-lost relatives, solving clues about geography and Jewish life. The two games (sold separately) feature Israeli music and color photos.

► **Purim Rock!** (JeMM Productions, www.davka.com). This clay-animation rock opera on CD-ROM includes games, puzzles and other activities along with an illustrated megillah. Part of JeMM's Interactive Jewish Holiday Series.

► **Arabic Playhouse** (ISL Software Corp., www.netspective.com/web-islsw). Learn to read Koranic Arabic with this fun, family-oriented software package. Arabic Playhouse teaches the entire Arabic alphabet, including vowels, letter shapes, connection sounds, words and 13 Suras from the Koran.

► **Buddha Desktop Pictures** (www.dvdesign.com/Buddha/). An extensive and striking collection of Buddhist-themed wallpaper images from places such as Thailand and Tibet. Images can be downloaded in a variety of resolutions. Buddhist icons in Windows and Macintosh formats also are available.

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