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HERALD-TRIBUNE 5A

Satan meets his match in faith-based video games

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Bryan Cool was feeling guilty about all the time he spent dodging terrorists and blowing his enemies to bits in violent computer games. So he decided to seek salvation, instead.

Earlier this year, Cool, an 18-year-old college freshman at the University of Missouri in St. Louis, took up a new game called *Jared's Journey*.

It features the agnostic son of a Roman centurion and Jewish mother who is told by his dying father to go out and discover Jesus. As he explores cities from Antioch to Nazareth, the character asks questions about Christianity.

Cool and other refugees from violent and seamy electronic games are helping boost a small but growing industry in Christian-themed alternatives. There are games such as *Charlie Church Mouse* (set out 3-D Bible stories with a mouse wearing a cross-embellished T-shirt and red sneakers), *Saints of Virtue* (don the full armor of God to overcome vanity and other enemies hidden deep in your heart) and *Eternal War: Shadows of Light* (blast demons lurking in the mind of a suicidal teen).

Jim Boyle, who began playing videogames when he was 5, bought games such as *Saints of Virtue* and one called *Spiritual Warfare*.

Two years ago, he bought *Catechumen*, an action game where a young student chooses from eight spiritual weapons, including a drill sword, to fight through the Roman catacombs and free his mentor and fellow Christians during the Roman persecution.

The freshman at Cape Cod Community College in West Barnstable, Mass., says he "was getting tired of the market being filled with blood and gore games."

His mother, Cathy Boyle, of East Dennis, Mass., says she wishes Jim played even more games with Christian themes. They are a lot better than the motorcycle game called *Road Rash* that her husband brought home a few years ago for her kids.

"A few minutes in, they were running over runs," she says.

It was the sorcery in fantasy games that bothered Cassie Becker, a mother of five in Hudson, Wis.

"Jesus and magic, they don't go together," says Becker, who bought *Catechumen* and *Ominous Horizons: A Paladin's Calling* for her kids.

Before she handed the games over, she tested them herself. She got hooked, playing as many as four hours every night, she says.

"I thought it would be cool stuff for the kids," she says. "It turned out to be cool stuff for Mom, too."

Christian-themed games have been around since the early 1980s, but earlier games tended to be too bland or too preachy for many players.

The newer offerings are building an audience by soft-peddling the proselytizing.

"Man, this is going to be a lame game," Aaron Daniels recalls thinking when a company called N'Lightning Software Development Inc. asked him to give away its Christian adventure games on KBNJ, the Corpus Christi, Texas, radio station where Daniels is promotions director.

But Daniels found one of the games, *Ominous Horizons*, to be engrossing. The player takes on the role of a 15th-century Christian who, in the quest to retrieve torn pages from the Gutenberg Bible, shoots spiritual energy from a sword at evil forces and renews his life by finding the Scriptures.

Daniels, the music minister at Christ Fellowship by the Bay Church, began pitching the game on the station's Christian programming as a contest prize.

The game is "really, really neat," Daniels says. "You fight demons without any blood or gore or anything."

The game was so peaceful that deflated forces of evil, instead of dying, fell to their knees and prayed. Finishing the game, he says, "you walked away not wanting to kick your cat."

Industry executives estimate sales of Christian games

could reach \$200 million this year. The small, private companies in the business say they write software mainly for personal computers because they can't afford the development costs and licensing fees to make games for the TV-hook-up consoles such as the Sony PlayStation 2, Nintendo GameCube or Microsoft Xbox. They also say they have a hard time getting into national retailers, so they sell on the Web or in specialty bookstores.

Peter MacDougall, an executive vice president at Nintendo Co.'s U.S. unit in Redmond, Wash., says he can't definitively

say whether the company would approve a religious game for the GameCube system. While Nintendo's policy is not to censor, "we wouldn't approve anything that might be just extreme when it comes to any kind of religious content or rhetoric," he says.

Religious game players can be a tough crowd to please. Camel spit was Brenda Huff's problem.

Huff, owner of a software concern named Wisdom Tree, in Tucson, Ariz., sells a game called *King of Kings*, which renders biblical tales such as the Christmas story of the Three Wise Men as a Super-Mar-

io-style game. One scene shows camels spitting to eliminate scorpions and other enemies. She prides herself on the realism of her game, but some customers complained that the camels taught kids to spit.

Her response: "God made camels, and they do spit."

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