Converting Video Games Into Instruments of God

A title based on the 'Left Behind' books embraces the medium's violent style. It may reach a new audience, but can it impart spiritual values?

By Dawn C. Chmielewski, Times Staff Writer

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Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition.

As the video game industry gathers at the Los Angeles Convention Center this week for the annual Electronic Entertainment Expo, a devout group of publishers is praying for a direct strike on their elusive target: the eternal souls of game players.

One game, "Left Behind: Eternal Forces," which debuts today at the expo, features plenty of biblical smiting, albeit with high-tech weaponry as players battle the forces of the Antichrist in a smoldering world approaching Armageddon.

The creators hope the game packs enough action to appeal to a generation of kids reared on such titles as "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" and subtly coax them to consider their own spirituality.

"Eternal Forces" is part of a new wave of religious games coming out at a time when the mainstream industry faces increasing criticism that its products celebrate misogynistic mayhem.

Another publisher is marketing games based on the "Veggie Tales" series of Christian videos for children. Another is pitching "Bibleman: A Fight for Faith," about a superhero who stands up for the word of God with his sidekicks Cypher and Biblegirl.

Games "will be a new tool to get the two-minute generation to think about matters of eternal importance in a way that isn't religious," said Troy A. Lyndon, one of the "Left Behind" game's creators.

Christian-themed games historically have had limited appeal. Developer Digital Praise has sold a reported 30,000 copies of its most popular product, a Christian title called "Dance Praise." By contrast, "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" has sold 5.1 million copies worldwide.

"Left Behind" has the Antichrist, the end of the world, the apocalypse," said co-creator Jeffrey S. Frichner. "It's got all the Christian stuff, and it's still got all the cool stuff."

That's why industry watchers predict that titles like "Eternal Forces" will find a broader audience in the same way Christian houses of worship like Pastor Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in Lake Forest have attracted followers — in part by not being overly doctrinaire.

"The reason that I think this game has a chance is that it's not particularly preachy," said Michael Pachter, an analyst at Wedbush Morgan Securities. "I will say some of the dialogue is pretty lame — people saying, 'Praise the Lord' after they blow away the bad guys. I think they're redoing it a bit. But the message is OK."

The game is based on the best-selling series of "Left Behind" books, which offer an account of the end times as predicted in the biblical book of Revelation. One of the series’ authors, Tim LaHaye, said the game had the potential to communicate ideas such as salvation to people who might not think of themselves as particularly interested.

"We hope teenagers like the game," LaHaye said. "Our real goal is to have no one left out at a time when the mainstream..."
But critics counter that, in an effort to make Christian games appealing, developers such as Lyndon and Frichner are doing little more than putting a religious veneer on the same violent fare.

"We're going to push this game at Christian kids to let them know there's a cool shooter game out there," said attorney Jack Thompson, an author and outspoken critic of video game violence, "Because of the Christian context, somehow it's OK? It's not OK. The context is irrelevant. It's a mass-killing game."

The game's heroes belong to a group of fighters called the Tribulation Force, people whose husbands, wives or children disappeared in the Rapture. This is the moment referred to in the title when, some Christians believe, God calls the faithful to Heaven, leaving the rest behind to face seven years of tribulation.

The game is set in New York City, where the Tribulation Force clashes with the Antichrist's Global Community Peacekeepers in a tale that makes the United Nations a tool for Satan. Each side attempts to recruit lost souls in the battle for the city. "Eternal Forces" is a so-called real-time strategy game — players act as battlefield generals for their virtual armies, deciding where to place units and when to order attacks or retreats.

In the game, Tribulation squads unleash the usual arsenal against the Antichrist: guns, tanks, helicopters. But soldiers lose some of their spirituality every time they kill an opponent and must be bolstered through prayer. The failure to nurture good guys causes their spirit points to drop, leaving them vulnerable to recruitment by the other side.

The player's choices prompt intervention by angelic forces or unleash demons who feast on the faithful. As players progress through the increasingly difficult levels, they see Scripture passages presented as secret scrolls and hear inspirational music.

In multiplayer games, participants can choose to command the Antichrist's forces.

Unlike many earlier religious games, "Eternal Forces" looks and plays like a big-budget production. That's because 41-year-old Lyndon knows how to develop a game for a broad audience. He was part of the original team that created one of the most bankable sports franchises: Electronic Arts Inc.'s "Madden." In his long career, Lyndon has worked on more than 50 titles.

But Lyndon said he found himself yearning for more spiritual work.

In 1999, he left games and worked with the Jesus Film Project, an organization that distributes around the globe a two-hour docudrama about the life of Christ, and with the Campus Crusade for Christ. Frichner and Lyndon's wife, Robilyn, urged Lyndon to return to his game-making roots to turn the "Left Behind" books into a form of electronic evangelism aimed at teens.

The 14 "Left Behind" books, which LaHaye wrote with Jerry B. Jenkins, have sold about 65 million copies. Lyndon and Frichner recognized that the series had all the elements of a successful game — namely, action and conflict.

It took 18 months to raise enough money to secure the license from Tyndale House, the Christian publisher of "Left Behind," in 2001. They financed the early game development themselves, with Lyndon mortgaging his house twice and Frichner selling his house to raise cash. Some programming is done in Kiev, Ukraine, to limit costs. After the commercial success of Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," the two were able to raise the money to finish the project.

"There's an audience here," said A. Larry Ross, president of a Dallas-based Christian public relations firm that helped to market Gibson's "Passion" and three movie adaptations of the "Left Behind" books.

"In addition to the youth audience — that's the primary target — there are parents who are concerned about what their children are exposed to and are encouraged by products that are biblically based," Ross said. "I would assume, if there is violence, it's the cosmic struggle of good versus evil, not gratuitous violence."

To be sure, religious games make up a tiny piece of the $25-billion global game market. Most are distributed online by publishers or sold in Christian stores, not the big retailers that sell most games. Some analysts estimate that Christian games could rack up $200 million in annual sales within five years.

Ralph Bagley, a spokesman for the Christian Game Developers Foundation in San Diego, said he had seen demand for Christian games grow as parents rejected the escalating violence and explicit sex in mainstream games.

"We're just tired of all that. It's really run its course. The shock value has worn off, and
people see it's not good," Bagley said. "The game industry will deny this — that these
games do end up in the hands of the younger kids. We've got to provide some high-
quality alternatives and hope the parents and grandparents will take the time to walk in
and make the right choice."

Bagley said he saw demand for his games skyrocket during last year's holiday season.
They include "Catechumen," an adventure set in 1st-century Rome in which a young
Christian attempts to rescue his mentor from demonically possessed soldiers without
resorting to violence. That title, released in 1999, ranks as the best-selling Christian PC
game of all time — with 80,000 copies sold.

To generate buzz for "Eternal Forces," Lyndon and Frichner plan to distribute 1 million
sample discs to churches nationwide.

Not surprisingly, Left Behind Games' attempt to make Christianity accessible to
youngsters through the use of lethal firepower has its critics. Thompson, for instance,
said he severed ties with Tyndale House in a dispute over "Eternal Forces."

"It's absurd," the video game critic said. "You can be the Christians blowing away the
infidels, and if that doesn't hit your hot button, you can be the Antichrist blowing away
all the Christians."