

Not Just Fun and Games

Youngsters today are subjected to hours of violence and occultism through video games. Yet Christians in the gaming industry are bringing the gospel into their dark world.

To any 12-year-old who loves video games, Jamie Brewer has the coolest job on the planet.

He is in charge of hiring artists, programmers and producers for Tiburon, a development studio of Electronic Arts (EA) Inc., the world's largest maker of video games.

Located in Maitland, Florida, near Orlando, Tiburon produces the EA Sports game Madden NFL Football, which has sold more than 28 million copies.

"Without a doubt, I believe I've got the best job in the world," Brewer, 30, an active member of an Orlando-area Assemblies of God church, told Charisma. "I believe this is the job God wanted for me."

Brewer is part of a competitive industry that has exploded in recent years to become the most popular form of entertainment in the country. Video-game sales grossed nearly \$12 billion last year. In comparison, \$9 billion in movie tickets were sold in 2002.

"Once seen as a boy's hobby, electronic games have grown into a \$25 billion global business that many see as a cultural force on a par with movies and books," The Los Angeles Times observed this summer.

According to the Lion and the Lamb Project, a nonprofit, independent organization based in Bethesda, Maryland, more than 145 million Americans—or 50 percent of the population—play video games, including 65 million gamers under 17 and 20 million who are 12 years old or younger.

Video games have evolved from the rudimentary game Pong in the '70s to the cartoonish Pac-Man and Donkey Kong in the '80s to the current Enter the Matrix, the spin-off of the hit movie, and the combat realism of Battlefield 1942.

No longer relegated to arcades, electronic games are now played on fancy hand-held units, cellular phones, the Internet and game consoles such as PlayStation 2, GameCube and Xbox, which have become standard entertainment toys for young people as well as adults.

Despite being wildly popular in today's culture, video games have a checkered reputation.

For example, Acclaim Entertainment Inc. sparked debate last year with a game called BMX XXX, which contained a video showing five seconds of frontal nudity. Major U.S. retailers, including Wal-Mart Stores Inc. and Target Corp., refused to carry the title.

The teen shooters of deadly school rampages in Littleton, Colorado, Paducah, Kentucky, and Pearl, Mississippi, were all avid players of violent video games, including Quake and Doom. The families of the slain victims sued the game companies, but their cases were either dropped or dismissed.

Pro-family groups say sex and violence in video games are at

all-time highs, with Congress and critics urging legislation to protect children from the largely unregulated industry.

Additionally, video games have been criticized for their addictive pull, even among believers. Ministries, Christian video-games producers and Christian parents are also troubled by the apparent proliferation of occult themes in games, which feature satanic imagery and symbols.

Christian electronic-game company owner Ralph Bagley says at least 30 percent to 40 percent of the new games previewed in Los Angeles last May during the Electronic Entertainment Expo—the world's largest video-game trade show—were occult-based.

"I'm not an extreme far-right guy, but it really shocked me because they're taking occult-based characters and making them heroes," says Bagley, 40, founder of Medford, Oregon-based N'Lightning Software. "What does that say to kids? What kind of foundation does it put in them? It's important for parents to know that there's more to the games than just having fun."

Bagley supports legislation on policing video games, but he believes the responsibility is ultimately up to parents.

Al Menconi, founder of a nondenominational parachurch ministry that seeks to educate and equip Christian parents and church leaders in teaching children how to think biblically regarding entertainment, agrees that "the onus is on the parents."

"I know many parents who may not let their children go to R-rated movies, but they'll get them an M-rated video game, which contains mature content," says Menconi, 57, an ordained

minister with the Evangelical Free Church.

"Parents are abdicating their responsibilities to the enemy," adds Menconi, whose ministry Web site features video-game reviews from a Christian perspective. "It's not the responsibility of the government to raise our children. It's up to parents to set up guidelines. Children must prove their entertainment is worthwhile."

Menconi adds that Christians are "in a spiritual war and the entertainment industry is supplying the majority of ammunition aimed at their families in this war."

"We must teach our children how to think in this spiritual war," says Menconi, whose ministry is based in Carlsbad, California, near San Diego. "They're just sitting targets."

Although video games are only a minor part of his ministry, Menconi notes that it strikes a nerve with game aficionados.

"We'll get hundreds of letters from kids all over the world who are angry that we reviewed the sexual, violent, profanity and occult content of their favorite games," he says.

On the upside, Menconi says the strong reaction from irate gamers has created "a unique situation."

"It has opened a new end of my ministry," he says. "I've been able to minister to some young people. I've had three to five who recommitted their lives to Christ. It has opened the door for the gospel."

Brewer and his Christian colleagues see themselves as “salt and light” in the video game industry, working for EA, which has 4,000 workers spread among eight studios worldwide. EA makes one in every five video games sold in the country.

Brewer, who has worked for EA’s Tiburon studio for three years, says working in the industry doesn’t contradict his faith.

“I feel this is a natural place for a Christian to be because Christ said, ‘Go into all the world,’” Brewer told Charisma. “I think that includes the video-game industry. I’m to go as an ambassador of Christ. Jesus came and hung out with the lost. I believe without a doubt that God called me to be here.

“He opened the door wide,” Brewer adds. “In addition to being salt and light here, God granted me the desire of my heart. I like video games. EA pays really well. It’s just a blessing to be here.”

Bonnie Chong, an artist who was hired in January by Brewer, says she prayed before she took the job. A fifth generation South Korean Christian, Chong has worked in the video-game industry for nearly five years.

“EA is a moral company,” says Chong, 33, a member of a large Assemblies of God church in Orlando. “It’s quite clean when compared to other video-game companies.”

Although EA produces some mature-rated games, Brewer says EA’s Tiburon studio only creates relatively tame sports games such as NCAA Football and NASCAR Thunder. Additionally, EA is tolerant and accommodating of its employees’ religions, he

says.

Jackie Schuler, Brewer's assistant whom he hired this spring, appreciates "the blessing" to have impromptu prayer meetings with fellow believers.

"We can pray together and the company doesn't hinder us," says Schuler, 32, who attends an African Methodist Episcopal church in Orlando. "I was brought here for a reason. I try to show God in my life."

Chong says a fellow artist became a Christian through her persistent witness and prayers. She adds that the woman now attends her church.

Gregarious and easygoing, Brewer takes the relational approach to evangelism at Tiburon, where the staff's average age is 25.

"The traditional blue-hair Christian approach doesn't work because the non-Christians just blow that off," he says. "They're interested in you being real, not fluff. They're not as interested in hearing what you believe, as much as they want you to show them what you believe."

Having hired approximately 150 people as Tiburon's "talent scout," Brewer tries to get to know his fellow employees on a personal level. He makes it a point to pray for co-workers' needs and concerns.

"Everyone knows I'm a Christian; it's no secret," says Brewer, who is a head usher and cell-group leader at his church.

Still, he says there are only a handful of believers at Tiburon, which has more than 200 employees.

“Artists, programmers and producers are very smart, talented and intelligent people,” says Brewer, who travels to colleges nationwide several times a year, recruiting new talent. “Unfortunately, many of them are unwilling to acknowledge that there is a God.”

For example, Brewer’s best friend at the studio is “a die-hard atheist.”

“When there’s something going on in his life, I’ll pray for him even if he doesn’t like it,” he says.

Brewer says he feels like Joseph from the Old Testament who was placed in a position of authority.

“I’m not an artist, programmer or producer, but I’m the gatekeeper of this studio,” he says. “I’ve been raised up by God to be an influence with the people I hire. And with the other believers here, I believe we’ll continue to be a positive impact because Jesus said, ‘Where two or three are gathered in My name, there will I be in the midst of them.’”

Reclaiming A DARK Domain

An Oregon-based minister has created video games that feature Roman soldiers and persecuted Christians.

A licensed minister with the Church of God in Christ, Ralph

Bagley launched his Christian gaming company in 1999 after he learned that the shooters of the Columbine High School tragedy were avid players of the violent video games Doom and Quake.

"Parents and game players of all ages need an alternative to the bloody, gory games that are being mass-marketed to our teens," says Bagley, founder of Medford, Oregon-based N'Lightning Software, creator of Catechumen, an adventure game that challenges players to rescue Christians trapped in the catacombs during the Roman persecution. The Bible is the game's weapon of choice.

"We offer the Christian alternative," adds Bagley, noting that Catechumen has sold more than 100,000 copies since its release in 2000, making it the top-selling inspirational computer game.

Around since the 1980s, Christian games are on the rise. In a December front-page story, The Wall Street Journal estimated that the emerging industry's sales reached \$200 million in 2002.

Plans for the video-game version of Left Behind, the best-selling Christian fiction book series, is expected to boost the genre. Left Behind games president Troy Lyndon says the first game is due to hit stores in early 2005 and a new installment will be distributed each subsequent year.

Consumers are reportedly turning to family-friendly alternatives such as Charlie Church Mouse and Saints of Virtue, as an option to increasingly violent, immoral, sex-filled games.

“There definitely is a demand,” says Tim Emerich, 36, founder of the Christian Game Developers (CGD) Conference and creator of Jarod’s Journey, one of the games referenced by the Journal. “I get e-mails from parents asking for games that are nonviolent or don’t use witchcraft and magic.”

Because of this, Bagley and a small, yet growing group of CGD are on a mission to bring the light of the gospel to the industry.

“I don’t consider other Christian game producers as competition,” says Bagley, whose company is considered the leader in Christian gaming. “I view them as fellow ministers going into the dark, satanic arena of video games.

“We’re going to hold the Word of God up and illuminate the place,” adds Bagley, noting that Catechumen and Ominous Horizons, another N’Lightning game, each feature more than 300 Scriptures. “We’re taking the land back from Satan.”

He calls all of his non-preachy video games a “seed-sowing ministry.”

“We get the Word of God into the hearts and minds of the players, and somebody else will harvest them,” explains Bagley, who has nine employees. “We believe you can have a fun, entertaining experience and still get some of the Word.”

Bagley, Lyndon and Emerich say getting Christian games into the hands of more consumers is a challenge.

According to the Journal, small, private companies primarily

write software for personal computers because Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft—who make the large game consoles—refuse to take a chance on faith-based games.

“In many ways, there are similar parallels to the contemporary Christian music genre, when it was in its infancy,” Lyndon, 45, says. “For the first six months of 2003, the Gospel Music Association reported sales of more than 216 million CDs. We are prayerful that the Christian gaming industry can imitate this kind of success to fulfill the Great Commission.”

Video Poison?

Video industry leaders say they have the right to sell their games. But experts warn that youngsters' minds are being warped by on-screen violence.

A top official with the video-game industry's trade group believes violent games get a bad rap.

“We believe the video-game industry has the right to make and sell video games with violent and sexual content,” Carolyn Rauch, senior vice president of Entertainment Software Association (ESA), told Charisma. “Video games are constitutionally protected sources of free speech. They can't be regulated just as books, movies and music can't be censored.”

In June, the ESA won a ruling when an appellate court struck down a St. Louis ordinance that would have banned the sale or rental of violent games to minors. The group is also challenging the enforcement of a Washington state law that would bar the sale of games depicting violence against police

officers to minors.

Rauch says the courts have also “found no basis for lawsuits” against makers of violent games.

She disputes findings of studies by health organizations such as the American Medical Association that link video games and violent behavior in children. Violent games have been blamed for such crimes as the 1999 Columbine High School massacre. But Rauch says guns, bullying and economic issues are the causes for such tragedies.

“Millions of children play video games and lead normal lives,” Rauch, 39, says.

A former West Point psychology professor and author of *On Killing*, which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, retired Army Lt. Col. David Grossman disagrees, saying violent games desensitize young people toward violence in real life.

“Violent video games are not games of fun,” Grossman, 47, who educates police, the military and educators nationwide on the impact of media violence, told *Charisma*. “These are mass-murder simulators. Nine-year-olds are practicing killing people in their homes for hours every day.

“Everyone knows computer flight simulators can teach you how to fly,” adds Grossman, a Southern Baptist and author of the best-selling book *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill*. “These mass-murder simulators teach you how to kill. So when a few kids go out and execute what they’ve been practicing, we should not be surprised.”

Rauch says judging the video-game industry “as if all games contain violence and sex is absolutely, flat-out wrong.”

“Violent games make [up] a very small percentage of all games sold,” she says. “Like other entertainment-based [genres], our industry makes a wide variety of games for a wide variety of people who play them.”

But David Walsh, Ph.D, a child psychologist and president of the National Institute on Media and the Family, believes video games have a greater impact than other forms of entertainment because “a player is not a passive observer.”

“[The player is] an active participant directing the action of the game,” Walsh, 57, a Catholic, told Charisma.

Noting that the military has created America’s Army, a shooter video game designed to train U.S. troops, Christian gaming entrepreneur Ralph Bagley adds: “Games are totally interactive. You participate in the violence and sexual and occult activity. You’re not a passive third party to it. Your level of immersion is so much deeper than watching a movie or listening to music.”

Screen Attraction

Video games may be fun and entertaining, but they can also become highly addictive. Released earlier this year, a study on adolescent video-game addiction by the National Institute on Media and the Family (NIMF) revealed that one in seven teens who play electronic games is addicted.

The survey of 607 Midwestern students found that 14 percent of eighth- and ninth-graders are addicted gamers, playing an average of 21 hours per week. The study also found that 82 percent of adolescent video-game addicts are male.

Adults are not immune from the games' addictive pull. John Brandon, a Minnesota-based freelance writer for game and technology magazines and the Christian market, says EverQuest, a widely popular, online role-playing game is nicknamed "EverCrack" by avid gamers.

He says the fantasy game is so addictive that there are support groups for the spouses of addicted EverQuest players. There are reports of marriages being torn apart because of the amount of time the game consumes, Brandon adds.

Andy Rizz, 23, an active member of Emmanuel Christian Center in Newark, England, says he was hooked for about a year on Quake III, a violent shooter game.

"It became the first thing I did when I got up and the last thing I did before bed," he says. "My time with God was put in the lower priority."

Through prayer and encouragement from other believers in Tribe of Judah, an online Christian gaming community, Rizz was able to give up the game.

"God helped me to alter my perspective of gaming," he says. "It's not about the game you play, but why you play it. Video games aren't bad. It's the love of them over God that is bad."

VIDEO-GAME RESOURCES

Al Menconi Ministries:

N'Lightning Software:

Christian Game Developers:

Retired Army Lt. Col. David Grossman:

Christian Spotlight's Guide to Games:

Christian Computer Game Review:

Tribe of Judah:

Charisma News Service editor Eric Tiansay visited Electronic Arts' Tiburon studio in the Orlando area to file this report.