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BIBLE AND VIDEO GAMES

AN INQUIRY INTO AN ACADEMIC
TERRA INCOGNITA

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INTRODUCTION

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Video games and Bible are an odd couple to say the least. Not because there is no Bible to be found in games, on the contrary. In *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013) we find a complex reference to the Exodus story, delivered by a blind preacher proclaiming a larger-than-life blend of American exceptionalism and pietist Christianity.¹ In *Metro Exodus* (4A Games 2019), the survivors of a global nuclear war find themselves in a structure called ‘the Ark’.² In *Far Cry 5* (Ubisoft 2018), a Christianity-inspired doomsday sect is preaching from *The Book of Joseph*.³ And in *The Binding of Isaac* (McMillen and Himsl 2011), an avalanche of Old and New Testament references, including to the Aqedah, help build a seemingly simple religion critical game into an emotional criticism on the psychological effects of (violent) divorces on children involved.⁴

1 Wysocki, “Critique with Limits;” Bosman, “A Passover Gone Wrong.”

2 Bosman, “The Art of Playing God.”

3 Green, “Two Broken Messiahs;” Bosman and Van Wieringen, “Reading The Book of Joseph.”

4 Cf. Welton, “Isaac Rebounds;” Bosman and Van Wieringen, “I Have Faith in Thee.”

Again, video games and Bible are an odd couple. Not because there is no religion to be found in video games. A number of monographs and edited volumes prove otherwise.⁵ Craig Detweiler's *Halos and Avatars*, Rachel Wagner's *Godwired*, William Bainbridge's *eGod*, Vit Sisler, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, and Xenia Zeiler's *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion* and a couple of others form a new canon on and of themselves in the still emerging field of religion and video game studies. As far as video games and theology are concerned, the academic field still lies almost barren, with the exception of Benjamin Chicka's and Frank Bosman's works.⁶

The reason for the lack of theological analysis of video games is the same as for the lack of studies regarding Bible and video games. Biblical Studies might be among the oldest of the theological disciplines. It encompasses a vast field of inquiry, ranging from research into the Old and New Testament, the world of the Ancient Near East, the Greco-Roman world, and the Jewish-Rabbinic tradition. The scholarly literature produced by Biblical Studies has grown into what can only be described as a true *mer-à-boire*. By contrast, video games studies is a relatively young, yet rapidly flourishing academic field. And let us not forget, playing a video game is an actual skill one has to master. Virtually everybody can read a novel or watch a movie – with or without biblical references – but not everyone can play video games. And the intersection between people who know their Bible and people who can actually play (and enjoy) video games is a very small one.

Nevertheless, in this edited volume, we have brought together some scholars who bridge the gap between Bible and video games. This edited volume seeks to investigate the relationship between video games and the Bible from a combined perspective, one rooted in both biblical studies and video game studies. Such a dual perspective is rare as indicated above; in fact, this edited volume represents the first significant attempt to present multiple aspects of the intersection between Bible and video games.

5 Detweiler, *Halos and Avatars*; Wagner, *Godwired*; Bainbridge, *eGod*; Campbell and Grieve, *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*; Sisler, Radde-Antweiler, and Zeiler, *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion*; Bosman, *The Sacred and the Digital*.

6 Chicka, *Playing the Others*; Bosman, *Gaming and the Divine*.

The combination of Bible and video games manifests itself in several ways. The most obvious example is that of explicitly Christian ‘Bible video games’. In their contribution, *Frank Bosman and Archibald van Wieringen* analyse the ‘game library’ of the infamous Wisdom Tree game company, known for its stream of low-budget and often low-quality, NES 8, faith-appropriate video games. As in many such cases, these games display a rather superficial appropriation of Scripture, at times marked by elements of fundamentalism and even antisemitism.

Other contributions examine the more subtle ways in which video games incorporate biblical themes. *Brandon Grafius* explores the *Silent Hill* (various developers from 1999–2025) multimedia franchise and its receptions of biblical descriptions and understandings of Jerusalem. *Sehoon Jang* turns to *Metro Exodus* (4A Games 2019) and its engagement with the biblical motif of the ‘new exodus’ of the prophetic literature. The *Mass Effect* series (BioWare 2007–2012) is examined by *Rebekah Van Sant and Frank Bosman* with particular attention to its biblical resonances concerning the themes of exile and homecoming. *Rebekah Welton* researches *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Project Red 2020) in relation to violence and resistance, themes that also recur forcefully throughout the biblical corpus.

Yet the relationship between Bible and video games is not limited to textual analysis of particular titles. Important questions also concern the ways in which game producers themselves engage with these themes. In this context, *Robert Denton Bryant* contributes an interview with developers *Les Pardew and David Todd*.

Moreover, the interface of Bible and digital gaming opens up intriguing possibilities for education. *Richard Bautch* demonstrates how designing a video game can be employed as a teaching method in the academic study of the Old Testament. Assigning students the task of producing a video game as a course project compels them to consider a range of textual dynamics. The medium shift from text to video game obliges students to address narrative gaps and blanks, thereby deepening their understanding of biblical characters and plots.

In conclusion, this introduction provides an overview of the most important scholarly contributions thus far published on the intersection of video games and the Bible, thereby situating this edited volume within an emergent, promising field of study.

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PLAYING THE TREE OF WISDOM

A THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO THE WISDOM
TREE GAME LIBRARY

*Frank G. Bosman and
Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen*

In a 2020 online essay, Don Triezenberg provides some advice for Christian parents who might be concerned about their children's video game consumption.¹ Triezenberg, president of the small Christian-game developing West Creek Studios, asks himself the question: "So what are the options for parents who want their kids to stay focused on uplifting images and a God-centred life?" To this he answers, not without some self-interest:

Many parents have simply turned off video games in their household. This is not a bad choice. But many kids, drawn to the forbidden fruit, will find a way to get their fix elsewhere. A better solution is offering them a Christian alternative. (...) In fact, graphics-intensive, Bible-based video games have been known to impress even non-Christian players.

Notwithstanding West Creek's president's self-confidence, "Christian" games do not enjoy wide-spread acclaim in the video game world. On the contrary, re-

¹ Triezenberg, "Video Game Options" [accessed 19 November 2021].

ally. Self-proclaimed Christian gamer Zachery Oliver identifies four problems with the genre's popularity.² Firstly, games for the faithful have suffered from Wisdom Tree's legendary bad games, riddled with "blatant plagiarism of established game ideas (...) [and] illegal cartridge production/lockout overrides", setting a bad reputation for the whole genre. Secondly, Christian games tend to focus almost exclusively on their narrative dimension at the cost of their ludic quality, often resulting in a ludo-narrative dissonance.³ Thirdly, Christian games appear to "exist purely for the purpose of evangelizing," sacrificing all subtlety in the zealous effort accompanying this. And fourthly, the explicit religious self-identification of Christian games scares away (a sub-set of) their supposed target group, the non-believers.

However bad the reputation of Christian games may be, studying the history of the Christian game genre is very interesting: from its birth in the 1980's with games like *Daniel & the Lion's Den* (BibleByte Software, 1982) on the TRS-80 and *Red Sea Crossing* (Inspirational Video Concepts, 1983) on the Atari 2600 VCS, through the well-known Wisdom Tree games like *Bible Adventures* (1991) on NES and *Super Noah's Ark 3D* (1994) on SNES, to modern interpretations like the *Adam's Venture* series (Vertigo Digital Entertainment, 2009–2016) for PC, PlayStation 3 and 4, Xbox One, and Switch, and *LOGOS Bible Video Game* (TeComprendo, 2020) for PC, macOS, and Linux. It provides knowledge and insight about a rather new stage in the cultural appropriation of the Bible, and the development of (parts of) Christianity that wants to integrate the possibilities of the new medium, while negotiating its (supposedly) problematic characteristics.⁴

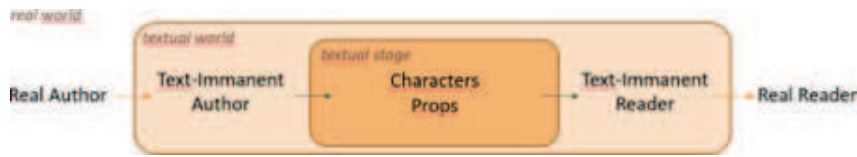
Communication-wise, any inquiry into the history of the Christian game genre could adopt one of the following three communicative levels (see Scheme #1).⁵

2 Oliver, "Christian Games" [accessed 19 November 2021]. See also: Thompson, "When Religion and Games Intersect" [accessed 19 November 2021].

3 Cogburn and Silcox, *Philosophy*, 76–77.

4 Copier, Kooijman, and Vander Stichele, "Close Encounters".

5 Bosman and Van Wieringen, *Video Games as Art*.



Scheme #1

Schematic overview of the levels of communication according to the communication-oriented analysis methodology.

One could, for example, concentrate on the game-external “real author”, the actual developers who made the games, searching for and interpreting their creative intentions and religious motivations (i.e. a historical perspective). Another possibility is to focus on the, equally game-external “real readers” of these games, either the historical ones from the time the game discussed was released, or present-day ones, inquiring in what way the playing of these games has influenced their thoughts, emotions, and opinions of the Bible and/or Christianity (i.e. a social and psychological perspective).

Yet, another possibility is concentrating on the game-immanent communication between the so-called “text-immanent author” and “text-immanent reader”, endeavouring to understand what the game is trying to communicate independent of the developers’ intentions or the actual players’ appreciation of the games in question, while negotiating the characteristics of the multiple intertextual relationships between, for example, the Bible and Bible-inspired games (i.e. a literary perspective).⁶

And last but not least, one could focus on the games’ characters, especially the protagonists, since some characters seems to be more in demand than others: Noah, Moses, Joshua, and Jesus himself are especially very popular as titular characters (i.e. a narrative perspective).

In this contribution, we wish to focus our attention on one of the most well-known, even “notorious” developers of Christian games: Wisdom Tree.⁷ It is

⁶ Kristeva, *Desire in Language*.

⁷ For our first ideas, see Bosman and Van Wieringen, “The Play to Egypt.”

impossible to read or look at any list of “Bible games” without at least one contestant from the Wisdom Tree franchise being mentioned in it.⁸ The American company produced ten such games, on different Nintendo and Sega consoles, over the rather short period of five years (between 1991 and 1996). While this Library does not cover the extent of Christian games by a long stretch, it is nevertheless illustrative of the genre that has been so often neglected in the scholarly research into the history of this relatively new medium. After a presentation of these ten games – including their intertextual relationships with various biblical texts – a theological analysis of the Wisdom Tree Library will be provided.

The Wisdom Tree franchise



Image #1

Wisdom Tree franchise's logo. Copyright: Wisdom Tree.

The history of the company is bizarre but well-documented.⁹ It all started when American game developer Color Dreams succeeded in 1989 in by-passing Nintendo's “lock out” chip, through which the Japanese company could control the international market for their console: only officially licensed third party games could be played on the Nintendo Entertainment Set (NES). Color Dreams' solution was technically reasonably impressive, but in practical terms somewhat disappointing, in the sense that the cartridge was known to

8 See for example: Hill, “5 Baffling Video Games;” Iannone, “The Most Bizarre Religious Video Games Ever;” Angry Video Game Nerd, “Bible Games;” Angry Video Game Nerd, “Bible Games 2;” Angry Video Game Nerd, “Bible Games 3;” Geek History, “History of Christian Video Games;” Monastery Studios, “Evolution of Christian Video Games” [all accessed 20 November 2021].

9 Durham, *Bible Adventures*; Gard and Gard, *Video Games*, 10–12; Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 399–400.

malfunction randomly, and the overall quality of the unlicensed games, like *King Neptune's Adventure* (1990), *Pestertinator* (1989), *Metal Fighter* (1991), *Crystal Mines* (1989), and *Menace Beach* (1990), were suboptimal to say the least.

In 1991, Color Dreams reinvented itself as Wisdom Tree, focussing exclusively on Christianity-related games. This move was partially inspired to circumvent Nintendo's wrath: even though the Japanese company had not sued Color Dreams – partially because such a claim would eventually fail – Nintendo forced its retailers into selling only licensed products. Wisdom Tree was supposed to wriggle the company's unlicensed products into a brand-new market: the Christian (book) stores. This had two advantages: the Christian retailers would not sell official games anyway, and any juridical or public backlash from Nintendo against a Christianity- and Bible-focused publisher would make for very bad publicity indeed. To emphasize its Christian signature Wisdom Tree used, as a logo, a cross from which two branches of green leaves extend (see Image #1), echoing the early Christian identification of the Tree of Life from the Garden in Eden with the cross that Jesus Christ died on.¹⁰

This tactic, motivated by religious and/or commercial motives, resulted in ten commercial releases by Wisdom Tree, the majority being Bible games.

The Wisdom Tree Library

In the overview below, we will discuss the Wisdom Tree games in chronological order.

Bible Adventures (1991)

Bible Adventures (NES, 1991; Genesis, 1995), probably Wisdom Tree's best-known game, is comprised of three smaller ones: *Noah's Ark*, *Baby Moses*, and *David and Goliath*. The games clearly borrow many ludic elements from *Super Mario Bros. 2* (Nintendo, NES, 1988). All games are introduced by means of (parts of) Bible verses, taken from the 1978 New International Version translation, respectively

¹⁰ Dinkler and Dinkler-von Schubert, "Kreuz;" Keble, "Old Testament Types of the Cross; Behr, "The Cross," 631.

Genesis 6:12–14, 17, 19 (Noah), Exodus 1:22; 2:1–3 (Moses), and 1 Samuel 17:32–35 (David). The title music is the first part of Bach’s *Jesus bleibet meine Freude* (in English known as *Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring*).



Image #2

Commercial for Bible Adventures. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1991).

For the release of the game, a commercial was created (see Image #2). We see children playing with a Nintendo. Two women, clearly two mothers, discuss their children’s game behaviour. The first says: “Do you ever worry that they play too much Nintendo?” To which the other replies: “O, not anymore. See, Matt has *Bible Adventures*. They are actually learning Bible stories while they’re playing Nintendo.” One of the children reacts to his friend, supposedly without having followed his mothers’ conversation: “Quick, get that Bible quote!” A voice-over closes the sell: “*Bible Adventure* features three games (...) a must for every family with Nintendo.”¹¹

¹¹ Courtesy to Pat the NES Punk, “Bible Adventures.”