

Mining for Treasure

written by Guest Contributor | March 13, 2015



The following essay by Gabe Durham is excerpted from Bible Adventures from [Boss Fight Books](#), coming March 30.

One time, Jesus was heading for Jerusalem and a rich guy allegedly asked Jesus what he, the rich guy, ought to do if he wanted to live forever. Jesus mentioned the commandments about honesty, peacefulness, and honoring parents. *Right, but what else?* the rich guy wanted to know. Jesus suggested the guy sell everything he had, give it to the poor, then join the crowd of people who had lately been following Jesus around. The rich guy didn't want to and left.

My guess is this encounter bummed out everyone present: the rich guy, Jesus' cohort, and of course Jesus himself, the type of leader whose eyes glazed over whenever conversation got too legalistic or transactional. Sick of questions like "How many good deeds + prayers + sins avoided + conversions = fun-filled eternity?" Jesus always seemed to want to be asked, "Teacher, what's an awesome thing I could spend my time doing?"

For this reason, the alliance between Christianity and commerce has always been fragile.

At the Council of Clermont in 1095, Pope Urban II kicked off the Church's first Muslim-killing Crusade with the good news that all crusaders who'd confessed their sins would get a free pass to the afterlife.

In the 1500s, the Catholic Church schemed up the concept of indulgences, where you could pay the Church and they'd officially take time off your cleansing stay in the fires of Purgatory. You still had to go to confession to keep yourself out of Hell, but if you had the cash, indulgences were a great way to FastPass yourself through Heaven's waiting room.

However, it was hard to tell what the rules were and who was authorizing them. Documents got forged; dudes faked piety. Professional fundraisers called pardoners used indulgences to kickstart church projects and got carried away with their promises about what kind of rewards a high-tier backer could expect. More recently, the Church has been offering indulgences for community volunteering, participation in World Youth Day, and following Pope Francis on Twitter. (His English-language account is at 5.48 million followers, last I checked—decent, though no Rihanna.)

The practice was market-driven enough that in 1517, Martin Luther suspected that the Church had taken a couple of steps away from God's best interests, and he eventually wrote a 95-point disputation all about it, posting his manuscript on the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg. A lot of people

got on board with Luther after the printing pressers disseminated his writings, and the Protestant Church became Pepsi to the Catholic Church's Coke.

In the late 20th century, Protestants began to dream of a Christian culture apart from all the secular abortions and violent orgies, and they sought to bring about a separatist Christian culture—chiefly through commerce. Christians kept singing that popular '60s hymn, "They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love," but they knew in their hearts that a bumper sticker was both easier and more direct, broadcasting faith from the parking lot while practitioners strolled Target in peace.

And so there appeared Christian apocalypse novels, Christian detective thrillers, Christian sci-fi and fantasy, Christian stuffed animals, Christian vegetable cartoons, Christian cookbooks, Christian Bible-based diets, Christian death metal, Christian ska/punk (of which thirteen-year-old Gabe Durham was a big, big fan), Christian skateboarding videos, DVDs about a family of backcountry Christian duck hunters, Christian films starring Kirk Cameron, Christian manicure sets, Christian hand and body cream, Christian rings symbolizing sexual self-denial that churches asked young women (but never young men) to wear at all times, Christian Bible verse t-shirts whose designs riffed on the marketing campaigns of global brands, and—it was only a matter of when—Christian video games.

Several fundamentalist Muslims flew planes into three American buildings. We asked "Why?" and were told it was because they hated our faith and freedoms. We asked how we could help, and we were told to shop.

In Ken Beckett's 1989 Color Dreams game, *Crystal Mines*, you control a cute little WALL*E-like robot as he digs deep beneath a planet for crystals, avoiding and sometimes murdering the "alien" natives who get in his way. It is foretold that if you can collect and kill your way through 100 levels, you'll hit "the elusive mother lode of crystals which will make you a multi-quadrillionaire."

In many parts of the internet, *Crystal Mines* is offered the damning honor of "the Color Dreams game that's actually fun." Even Dan Lawton, Color Dreams' founder and toughest critic, acknowledges a grudging respect for the game: "*Crystal Mines* was probably the best gameplay. It certainly got the best letters from buyers."

So when it was time to start making Bible games, Lawton and company got to work adapting their cave crawler for the Christian bookstore set. The only problem was: There aren't any classic Bible stories about digging through caves and searching for treasure. So the team got creative.

Wisdom Tree followed its hit, *Bible Adventures*, with a game called *Exodus* (1991), which pretends to tell the Biblical story of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.

But in the actual gameplay, the Israelites are strangely absent, and you instead guide Moses through what appears to be an underground cave. That's because *Exodus* is the same game as *Crystal Mines*, reskinned and with new levels but with identical core mechanics.

Here, the energy bursts become Ws that stand for "the Word of God," which you use to "stop the murmurings of the Israelites," represented in the game by square clods of dirt; to fight "doubting God," which is like the clods of dirt but is green and takes an extra hit to destroy; and to fight "obstacles to faith," which appear to be boulders. But don't worry, you also get to use your Word of God to kill plenty of soldiers, taskmasters, magicians, and sorcerers. The crystals are now replaced with manna, but here you also must locate all five of the question mark squares, which represent the Bible questions you'll be asked between the levels.

I'm belaboring the item descriptions in this game simply to marvel at the game's metaphysical looseness, at how comfortably *Exodus* vacillates between the spiritual/metaphorical and the physical. To review: I'm guiding an actual Moses through an actual wilderness, foraging for actual manna, but to traverse the actual wilderness, I must shoot the Word of God to quiet the Murmurings of Israel, which is both a metaphor and a real, physical block of dirt that must be shot through. And I must kill actual evil sorcerers.

But to the gamer who wisely ignores all these temporal shifts in favor of having fun, *Exodus* is simply a game where you go around collecting stuff to the tune of the popular Sunday school song, "Father Abraham," which speeds up, Mario-like, as the timer approaches zero. The only other Biblical aspects of *Exodus* are the quiz questions and the little illustrated Bible scenes between levels.

The next *Crystal Mines* clone was the one I'd played as a kid, *Joshua & the Battle of Jericho*, which Wisdom Tree released in 1992 as a pseudo-sequel to *Exodus*.

But once again, the gameplay in *Joshua* has nothing to do with the story of Jericho. The story from the Book of Joshua goes like this: God speaks to Joshua, telling him to march the Ark of the Covenant around the city of Jericho once a day for six days. And then on the seventh day, the Israelite priests blow their horns and the walls of Jericho come crumbling down. Yay for the good guys! Once the walls are down, the Israelites mercilessly butcher every man, woman, child, and animal in the city, sparing only the family of Rahab, a cool lady who did the Israelites a solid by helping them kill everyone she knew.

There's no wall-circling, no Rahab-sparing, no baby-butcherling. You're just another robed bro wandering through mazes, shooting musical notes at Hittites and picking up gold coins. Like a lot of actual religious crusaders, your motivations are much more economic than jihadist.

Crystal Mines is the Rosetta Stone that allows us to make sense of the

existence of *Exodus* and *Joshua*. (Or perhaps more accurately, *Crystal Mines* is the Babylonian flood myth to the Bible's own Noah's Ark myth.) Why do you feel less like Old Testament heroes battling for your lives and more like solitary men mining for treasure in elaborate caves? Because *Exodus* and *Joshua* are based on a game about a robot mining for treasure in elaborate caves. The relief of going back and playing *Crystal Mines* is the absence of labored abstract concepts—the monsters are simply monsters. The bombs are simply bombs.

The fact that Lawton's decision to make Bible games was based on money and not faith is more the rule than the exception in retail.

Many of the biggest sellers of Christian stuff are actually the Christian-targeted arms of their flexi-theistic parent companies. Capitol Christian Music Group (home of TobyMac, Michael W. Smith, and Amy Grant) are part of Capitol Records, Zondervan and Thomas Nelson are the Christian imprints of HarperCollins (which is itself the book arm of News Corp), and the dating site ChristianMingle is run by Spark Network, which also runs JDate for Jews and LDSMingle for Mormons.

The cynical way of putting it is that these companies are squeezing dollars out of people who think that buying Christian merch is in some way supporting Christianity itself. The generous way of putting it is that the companies are offering inspirational goods to a Christian public who demand products that "get it right."

The truth, I suspect, lies somewhere in between and depends on the integrity of both the product itself and the product's handlers. The messy thing about the collision of faith and capitalism is that an atheist game designer can turn over a finished Bible game to a Christian sales rep, who sells it to an agnostic purchaser for a Christian bookstore, where the game is shelved beside a book about how Christians must help Israel defeat Palestine to hasten the End Times, and is eventually sold by a Buddhistically-inclined teenage cashier to a non-denominational aunt who worries because her nephew's religiously apathetic parents only take him to Church on Easter and Christmas.

Expecting every link on the chain to be authentically "Christian" is like expecting every company who delivered your kale to the market to be authentically "organic." Even in high school, I understood that the powers behind the Hot Topic where I bought my Swingin' Utters album didn't have the punk cred I demanded of the band itself.

This discussion is further complicated by the fact that unlike in the Jewish faith, a person's "Christian" designation is based not on culture but on a belief in the divinity of Jesus that could reverse on a dime. "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it / Prone to leave the God I love," wrote Robert Robinson in 1757 when he was just 22, understanding the aspect of belief that is not itself a choice. I can say for myself that when I admitted the possibility that Jesus was not God, it felt not like a decision to proclaim

but like a jellyfish that had washed up on the beach. I was free to pretend the jellyfish wasn't there, of course—nobody was calling me out on it—but it was. Skepticism had been traveling to me for years and now it was here. And it could always wash away again.

But even in a simpler scenario—a fervent Christian carves her own decorative crosses from wood and sells them at local craft fairs—our believer's business is not a Christian business because (with apologies to the Supreme Court) a business is not a person. While it's fair to criticize Lawton for pretending to be a Christian company and for cramming irreligious games into Christian packaging, it's also true that there's no such thing as a Christian company. Or, for that matter, a Christian game.