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THIS WEEK ONLY...

Wednesday, November 29, 2006



### 'Left Behind' Now an End-Times Game

I'm sure you've heard the one about the guy who stands up at a funeral and says, "The rumors of my demise have been greatly exaggerated." Well, the PC game *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* has been bearing the brunt of a few "exaggerations" for a while now. Seven months before it arrived in stores, *Newsweek* reported that the T-rated (for teen) Christian game had "a level of violence reminiscent of *Grand Theft Auto*." And with that exclamation, bloggers, pundits and even gamers started pulling at their hair and gasping out "Christian militia" and "global dominionism" while talking of a game that boasted "roving religious death squads."

**RATED T**  
**GENRE**  
 Real-time strategy  
**RELEASED BY**  
 Left Behind Games/Cokem International Ltd.  
**PLATFORM**  
 PC  
**ARTICLE BY**  
 Bob Hoose

The rock-throwers all had one thing in common—none of them had played the game. Now that it's completed and has been released, we have.

#### Movin' on Up *From the East Side*

It all begins with the biblically promised Rapture. Christians ascend into heaven leaving behind a lot of confused people and piles of empty jeans and T's. As usual, the world's scientists know exactly what has happened and blame the mass disappearances on a bizarre magnetic flux.

During the confusion, a powerful leader named Carpathian calms people's fears, gathers the world together under one U.N.-like banner (policed by the Global Community Peacekeepers) and basically ... takes over the world. Of course, there are a few folks left who realize what has happened. They fall to their knees, then start talking to others about their newfound faith in God. Carpathian and his GCP goons, however, aren't happy about the revival.

*Eternal Forces* is a real-time strategy (RTS) resource management game that focuses on a handful of boroughs in New York City. There you're challenged (through 40 lengthy missions) to evangelize the people of the Big Apple, house them, feed them and find ways to stay alive while the enemy does its best to take over the city and crush you underfoot. You start out with a few people (units) in your control, send them out to gather resources (money and real estate) and train them up to become musicians, builders, nurses, pastors, disciples and soldiers, each with his or her own function for the community and impact on the world.

#### Flipping Frowns Upside Down

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Your numbers grow as you recruit (evangelize) neutral units, which is a central function of the game. You have your guys approach wandering units and attempt to raise their spirit levels through praise music, preaching, prayer and one-on-one evangelism in hopes that their spirit meters will rise to the point where they'll join your side. Of course, the enemy has negative counterparts who recruit, swear (you don't hear them), wail on electric guitars (hmmm!) and openly attack people to bring spirits back down.

Your *own* actions (or inaction) can cause your spirits to dip, too. For example, if one of your units goes long enough without praying or if you have him attack someone his spirit will drop. If it falls too low, he goes neutral again and just walks away from the group. In this way, the game is constantly encouraging you to strengthen your abilities, keep spirits up through frequent prayer and find peaceful ways to fulfill missions.

### Turn or Burn?

A pretty significant question remains, though. How do peace and prayer go hand in hand with tanks, attack choppers and street battles? Despite what's been "reported," your *Left Behind* units do not easily form into some kind of roving militia intent on killing non-believers. In fact, there are no missions in the game aimed at causing a war or killing others. You train up soldiers only to defend your people when Carpathian starts sending in the big guns.

Yes, you're offered sniper rifles, gun turrets, even tanks and helicopters. And there are points at which a gun battle is necessary to avoid a massacre. (When this happens, there's no gore. Units fall to the ground and fade away.) But if you go in guns blazing, nine times out of 10 you fail. It quickly becomes clear that the strongest weapons in your arsenal are your top level missionaries and worship leaders. It's easier to convert a group of enemies than it is to shoot them.

Still, post-Rapture warfare *is* integral to the game, as it is in the *Left Behind* books and movies. And it's worth noting that *fighting back* is nowhere described in Scripture. Will Christians really be called to militarize, then? Dr. Tim LaHaye, co-author of the best-selling book series on which the game is based, told *Plugged In Online* that this fictionalized depiction in the books, movies and now video games is a representation "of the self preservation instinct of the much-persecuted saints during the Tribulation." He believes, "When they are converted they will have their humanitarian instinct inspired by the Holy Spirit to be a restraining influence on the Antichrist's minions much as believers are today. We assume Christians will oppose the Antichrist and his forces to convey the gospel when astronomical numbers of souls will come to faith during that chaotic period." He proffered 2 Thessalonians 2:7 and Revelations 7:9-16 as support.

### Of Men and Angels (and Demons)

One overt and unquestionably positive game feature is the clue system at the end of each level. Rather than just clues about conquering levels, you're given a set of clues as to why the



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Commandments  
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Rapture is happening along with information about God's miraculous creation. Text is accompanied by well-known contemporary Christian artists singing of heavenly things. Speaking of which, there's an interesting angel and demon element to the game, too.

If you do particularly well at recruiting or church building in a given level, you earn special scrolls that can call forth angelic intervention in times of need. On the opposite end of the spectrum, if spirit levels in the enemy force drop low enough, little demons will appear and wreak havoc on anybody within range.

### **OK, It's Spiritual. But Is It Any Good?**

That's pretty heady stuff for a game review, so I'll limit my remaining comments to actual game play. Some of the early missions (the ones that teach how things work) can be catch-a- nap-before-dinner slow. And the game mechanics and artificial intelligence can be a little glitchy, too. I had to repeatedly click my disciples to get them to go interact with certain units—even when they were standing right next to them. Something as simple as a light post in the way (or a sidewalk!) would sometimes flummox my guys into inaction.

Switching between and controlling my groups was also a headache, with much of the blame resting on the camera controls. New York has some pretty tall buildings. So when you zoom out to be able to pan across the city, you can't tell who's who among the tiny specks on the street below.

But those little annoyances aside, *Eternal Forces* is the kind of game that Mom and Dad can actually play with Junior—and use to raise some interesting questions along the way. Production company Left Behind Games is pushing it as an evangelism tool for teens, and I can see that, too. You certainly don't have to be an eschatologically minded seminarian to appreciate it. In fact, when you stack *Eternal Forces* up against other RTS games, its foibles don't pull it very far down in the pack. *Wired* went so far as to say, "So the great surprise of *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* is that it actually kind of rocks." Finally, something that's not an exaggeration.

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