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Ma Nishtana: Why is this Night Different? Photo by Gabriel McCormick.

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Report

The Aetherlight. A Case Study of the Formational Potential of a Game

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Abstract

The Aetherlight (2016) is a point-and-click adventure game designed for 9-12-year olds to entice them to engage with the grand narrative of scripture through an allegorical reimagining in a 3D steampunk world. That is a lot to ask of a game. Conceptualised primarily as an educational game, *The Aetherlight* (2016) also needed to be an excellent game to draw in a generation with high expectations of the game experience. In addition to these two objectives, *The Aetherlight* intended to point players away from the game to real-world interactions with the Bible and to live well as Christians in their own communities. Can a game possibly do all of these things? This article will explore the making of *The Aetherlight* and the tensions between the competing agendas to make an excellent game, to educate, and to direct the players away from the game towards engagement with the Bible and real-world interactions as Christians. Just as the characters in *The Aetherlight* story wrestle with their own humanity, the game team wrestled with each other over philosophy, pedagogy, and ethics at every stage of development. In doing so, the process of making a theologically formational game for tweens became theologically formational for all who worked on it. This case study reveals how diversity of thinking, experience and skills can converge to create an invitational game where side quests, speedrunning, and grinding all form part of the narrative to engage players with the philosophy and ethics of the Christian way of life.

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Keywords: Christian, Formation, Discipleship, Theology, Games, Edugaming, Narrative Mechanics, Allegory, Metaphor, gameenvironments

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Scarlet City Studios was established in 2012 to advance the work of the Postal Sunday School Ministry in Aotearoa New Zealand into the 21st century. Moving what had been in its heyday a vibrant nondenominational Christian ministry delivering Bible lessons to children via the post, to an engaging digital platform. Rather than substituting mailed out lessons for email, the team chose to reimagine what Bible teaching might look like for a digital society.

Two years into development of *The Aetherlight* (2016), I joined this team as the Game Learning Activator. It was my role to ensure that the learning intentions of the game were happening within the gameplay. I was initially seconded for six months from the Christian school where I had been working with the 9-12 age-group that *The Aetherlight* was targeted at. That secondment ended up lasting for two years. With my teaching background I brought expert pedagogical skills in digital learning and was considered progressive in the way I taught, preferring a dynamic partnership with students rather than didactic transmission of information. I had worked in a collaborative teaching team for several years and considered myself a reflexive practitioner able to respond to the needs and interests of students as they emerged. Even with all of these skills and dispositions in my toolbox, I was unprepared for working in a game studio with developers, artists, game designers, narrative designers, and theologians, most of whom did not appear to like or trust teachers. For many of my new colleagues, teachers had often been a barrier to their learning rather than an advocate as they did not fit the traditional banking model of education (Freire 1972). Part of my theological formation in working on the game was in the reshaping of my identity as a teacher and what that meant when thought about alongside Jesus as an example of a teacher. For the developers, artists, game designers, narrative designers, and theologians, part of their formation was in rebuilding trust in the concept of teacher and what that meant when thought about

alongside Jesus as our example.

In addition to the shifting of my identity as teacher, during my time working on *The Aetherlight*, there was a shift in my understanding of the Bible, the grand narrative of scripture, the promises of God, the wrestle and partnership that is expected of humanity by God, and so many more small and large shifts in my theological understanding. There was a theological deconstruction through game construction. This game that we were asking so much of was doing the work in me and other members of the team that we hoped it would inspire those who played.

The Game

Welcome to *The Aetherlight*, a point-and-click episodic adventure game designed to engage tween-agers (9-12-year olds) with the Bible while being a vehicle for discipleship and to inspire real-world actions. Upon entering *The Aetherlight*, you will not find the word Bible, nor any other Sunday school-type words, rather you enter a steampunk world of pipes and cogs that is somewhat chaotic. On initial analysis, you could be forgiven for thinking this was just another fun video game.

After creating your character, the initial cutscene has warned you that you are entering contested territory where there is a fledgling Resistance forming. Your character spawns on the steampunk-inspired Aetherstep, all brass and steam-engine-looking parts, located on top of a rickety wooden platform. Two waterfalls shimmer behind you and there are spotlights focussed on some large contraption that you will soon find out is one of the Great Engines which Lukas is attempting to get started to clear the fog. You are immediately invited into the narrative when Lukas asks you to take a picture of this momentous occasion. Of course, the Great Engine does not

the Bible to verify the story they have just played and perhaps to see what else is in there. What other great stories are there? What else does the Bible have to say? How might this apply in my own life?

In addition to the main game, *The Aetherlight* also has companion engines where mini-games are explicitly tied to the Bible narrative. The companion engines were designed to be a fun way to further help players to make explicit biblical connections while keeping a connection to the main game through reward drops. Initially the Companion Engines were part of the game located in Resistance HQ. However, the design decision was made to develop them as a separate app so that the magic behind the curtain was not revealed unless a player wanted to go looking for it. The Companion Engines are framed as more of the Postman's wonderings and discovery which the player is invited to be part of. Players find the secretive Postman in the Companion Engines and learn more about his journey and are invited to embark on their own personal journey which then leads to the discipleship goal of the game.

Discipleship

In the initial stages of development, there were many discussions around the design table about what discipleship is. At its most simple level, a Christian disciple is a follower of Jesus. However, we were more interested in the verb, to disciple, and the question of whether and how a game could disciple the players. As a team we needed to come up with a shared understanding of what discipleship would look like in action and, for this, we developed a Graduate Profile. It was determined that graduates of *The Aetherlight* would be known for their *faith, hope, and love*. Faith that related to the story of the grand narrative of scripture. Hope that was connected to innovation with a focus on problem solving with in-game and real-world outworking. And love, which was connected to encounters with others in the multiplayer game

Real-World Actions

In engaging with the Bible and these acts of discipleship in the game, players are then encouraged to participate in the real-world context through interaction in the forums and within their own communities. We were hopeful that players would have dusted off their Bible to find if what they had seen in the game was as in the book that The Postman alluded to. Within the game, players are chatting with each other and joining forces to quest and defeat the fog. Through life-cycle messaging and the Companion Engines, *The Aetherlight* encourages those attitudes and behaviours to extend beyond the game into real world actions.

Life-cycle messaging is an important aspect of the player connection. At various points in the game, emails are sent to parents framed as *cheat sheets* to support parents to talk about the game with their children and to support them to make connections in the real world. Parents are provided with a framework of inquiring questions and conversation starters to talk to their children about what they might be thinking about as they play. This not only relates to the gameplay but also the visual and audio storytelling, both powerful aspects of the overall narrative that are expertly crafted. No player can forget their first run up the Old Mount as the snow falls and the music indicates the increasing isolation. The change in the sound of footfalls across the bridge and in the snow. The increasing wind and the sense of distance travelled. It is a lonely run and you do not know what you will face when you get there. Through life-cycle messaging, players can talk to their family and be supported in their discipleship outside of the game.

As the lead on development of the Companion Engines part of the project, the design process was both my greatest joy and one of utter frustration. Designing the Companion Engines was the first interaction I had with the iterative design process. I

Pedagogy, simply defined, is the praxis of the art and science of learning and teaching. It is where the experienced teacher practitioner can draw on learning theories in combination with their knowledge of and relationship with the learners within a social context to enter the dance that is learning (Biesta 2019, 130). A great pedagogue is responsive to the needs of learners and finds the balance between active teaching and the agentic learner. In the world of education, pedagogical frameworks are a contested space with lines often drawn between child-centred and teacher-led frameworks. I would argue that a good pedagogue does not need to choose a side of this debate, but to learn when to artfully employ what is needed (Berryman and Bishop 2016, 180). Building a game which would be responsive to the needs of an unknown learner is a challenge that we took on to ensure that the learning experience was accessibly scaffolded through dialogue trees, audio cues, and visual storytelling. The pedagogical framework was one which was based on the shared understanding that our players were confident and competent (Ministry of Education 2017, 5).

While pedagogy guided us in language that could be used for this age-group and how we might support the needs of the non-readers with alternative forms of information such as important dialogue, audio, and visual storytelling. Game principles guided how that visual storytelling might happen such as the strategic use of cut scenes and glow-sprites to alert players to important inventory items. Pedagogy helped determine when we needed to tell a player something as they were unlikely to have any prior experience of the phenomenon on which to continue learning, and game design principles maintained the agency of the player even when they were railroaded onto that particular thing. As the game development progressed, the pedagogical frameworks and the game design principles levelled up as the players did. Gameplay got harder and the invitation to participate in the

As a game based on an allegorical story, narrative mechanics were foundational but strongly supported by well-balanced battle and crafting mechanics. When I entered the game studio, I had no knowledge of the process of game balance where the goal is to achieve challenge without losing motivation. There are times that players need to grind to achieve an appropriate reward which also leads to a feeling of investment in the game that they want to maintain the character and keep playing. The battle and crafting mechanics form part of the immersive experience for the player which Brown and Cairns (2004, 1300) suggest is necessary for effective learning.

Allegory was used in *The Aetherlight* as a vehicle for both pedagogy and game design. As outlined above, narrative mechanics (which include the use of allegory) are foundational to the game design. As a teaching tool, the use of allegory and storytelling is central to the teaching practices of many cultures (Stewart 2021, 122). The Bible is full of metaphors, allegories, and stories that help to establish a mutual shared understanding of concepts. However, it can be very hard in the modern world to parse those ancient texts without the context of the time. For this reason, *The Aetherlight* developed a fictional context with which to play with the grand narrative of scripture. *The Aetherlight* contextualises Abraham’s struggles and decision to sacrifice Isaac into gameplay which is revealed in more contemporary dilemmas and invites players to consider the messages in their own lives rather than relegating them to the ancient past. This was risky business! Biblically, teachers will be held to account (James 3:1) for what they teach and altering scripture carries with it punishment (Revelation 22:18-19). As a team we were very aware of these two aspects of our work and again made sure that we were not suggesting that *The Aetherlight* was an alternative for the Bible but rather an onramp to the Bible. To this end, *The Aetherlight* companion Bible was developed, which explicitly made the links from the game to the Bible. As teachers, we user-tested, analysed, iterated, and

retested to ensure that, as far as we were able, the game remained faithful to its commitment to disciple players in faith, hope, and love.

The Outcomes

As the community manager, I had an intimate view into the experience of the players through in-game chat, community forums, and support tickets. When *The Aetherlight* launched Episode 1 in 2016, although we had engaged in extensive user testing, I was not sure what to expect. I was charged with monitoring the in-game chat and community forums, as well as triaging the support tickets. As a Children’s Online Privacy Protection Rule (COPPA) certified game we were committed to ensuring a safe community for all users, which included daily chat moderation (in addition to what the chat filters did automatically) and daily forum moderation. My character, Lady Pancake, became well-known in game and on the forums and our relatively small but vibrant online community flourished.

Of course, we saw the expected amount of trying to break the chat filters with various symbols and misspellings (some of which were very inventive!). These players were sent educational emails letting them know that we had seen this and reminding them of our community agreement. It was not often that a player received a suspension, and I never had to ban an account. More often than not, I received a polite and apologetic reply to Lady Pancake. The forums formed part of the self-regulation of the community with friendly reminders posted by players if they had seen anything not aligned with our community in game which often resulted in earnest discussions about treating others as you would want to be treated. Overall, there was not much *management* required of this community. As we entered another round of intensive game development for Episode 2, we hired a community manager who continued to

build the community through the forums with events, fan art competitions, social media announcements, and promotion of community moderators. He also took care of the support tickets – our players were good at finding small bugs and reporting them.

The in-game chat continued to show us that the intentions of the game were being achieved. Players were interacting to help each other with quests, battle, and crafting. With some encouragement and modelling from our community manager, players learnt to support without spoilers for others. They learnt how to give great clues to maintain engagement and immersion. In addition to the in-game chat, the forums provided a window through which we could see the real-world impacts. There were threads started such as “What Would an Aethasian Do?” (Anon. 2017) to discuss social situations. There was another thread of players sharing about community projects inspired by the gameplay. There were also budding game developers and artists who loved to share their ideas and were often rewarded with a response from one of the team.

While there were serious challenges with marketing *The Aetherlight* and making the game commercially viable (this was a very expensive game to produce that attracted several thousand users but really needed hundreds of thousands), my areas of game development and community management were joyous. I had been pushed to deeply engage with theology and consider how our interpretation would impact others, I became a better teacher for becoming aware of and understanding game design, and I was a convert to the iterative design process which kept me immersed in the work.

The Downfall and Fall-Out

It is said that all good things must come to an end, and in July 2017 our time of working on *The Aetherlight* came to an end for the majority of us working at Scarlet City Studios with redundancy notices. Despite securing an additional game contract with a large corporation in the USA, there was not the volume of users needed to continue development of *The Aetherlight*. Up until this point it had been funded by a private philanthropic family who believed in the potential of the game. They had invested an enormous amount of money to get it to the stage where we could release three complete episodes, but the studio needed to secure further funding through sales or investment and were not able to.

Although the team had seen this coming, it was still devastating. The game industry is not big in Aotearoa New Zealand and jobs for game designers and artists are hard to come by. As a teacher I could have returned to classroom teaching, however, I decided to enter academia and enrolled in master’s degree and accepted a lecturing position at a small, private tertiary college. I write this case study five and a half years on from *The Aetherlight* and Scarlet City Studios. Returning to this story has been interesting to consider with some time passed and research experience added to my toolkit. I completed my master’s degree and am well into a doctoral degree with a lecturing position at Massey University for which *The Aetherlight* community and my time working at Scarlet City Studios is directly responsible.

Prior to my time working on *The Aetherlight* there was a certain taken-for-grantedness about my practice as a teacher and my Christian beliefs. What the pastor said on a Sunday morning was accepted and went unquestioned and, even though I was known for innovative pedagogy and student-centred approaches, my teachings were largely unquestioned and unexamined. Just as *The Aetherlight* was designed to

encourage players to ask questions and wrestle with their own theological beliefs which would lead to formation as disciples seen in their lives as faith hope and love, I too learnt how to question and wrestle with my beliefs. My taken-for-granted, tacit understandings of both education and religion were deconstructed and then reconstructed where I can now speak confidently about why I believe the things that I do. Working on *The Aetherlight* made my simple answer to theological questions of “because the Bible says so” not enough. It has helped me to see the partnership offered by God from the very beginning of creation as an invitation that remains in play for all of humanity that just needs to be picked up. I am no longer a passive consumer of religion but an active participant in a community of believers the catalyst of which was being part of the game development team for *The Aetherlight*.

I cannot speak for other members of the team, but observations would indicate that I was not the only one formed through the experience of working on *The Aetherlight*. Each person was part of the whole which included the work but also social occasions, births, deaths, and marriages. Life in all its complexity happened in and around the development of the game which we endeavoured to live out faith, hope, and love in real life.

Conclusion

My thesis at the beginning of this report was that *The Aetherlight* was a game which could not only fulfil its goals of inspiring Bible engagement, discipleship, and real-world actions in players leading to spiritual formation but that this formation would also occur in those who worked on the project. Although this is an autoethnographic case study reliant on memory of experiences, the pedagogical frameworks and game design principles employed would suggest that the intended outcomes were not only

possible, but were probable for those playing and working within *The Aetherlight* ecosystem. In setting up a game which rejected traditional didactic Sunday School-type teaching in favour of exploration in an open world, multiplayer, allegorical game, all participants are invited to ask big questions about faith, with hope, and in love.

Episodes 1-3 are still available online with Episode 1 free to play. I played Episode 1 and visited the forums several times while writing this article and was reminded of the community as players helped me in battle and asked if I needed any other help. The artwork and visual storytelling are stunning, as is the sound engineering, and the dialogue is clever. The sadness and some anger that was present five and a half years ago when it was announced that we could no longer continue with development has softened and I can see the path that *The Aetherlight* helped to place me on and the positive influence it has been in my life. Now, as a teacher educator, this influence reaches out through the teachers who I train and into the lives of many children in Aotearoa New Zealand. There is a hope that children will be met with a teacher who invites children to explore their big questions in community with others. It is not exactly Christian Bible engagement, discipleship, and real-world actions, but it is critical engagement, community, and ethical real-world actions which I think the Scarlet Man would be very pleased with.

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