



Helping children discover the Bible in the digital realm



Maggie Barfield

Maggie Barfield is the Product Developer for Guardians of Ancora, a compelling and unique digital environment for children, with faith formation and Bible engagement at its heart. Maggie is relishing the adventure of creating an innovative and immersive place-and-space where children can meet God through the Bible and prayer.

It's some five years since Scripture Union (SU) started looking at the challenge of how to help children aged 8–11 connect with God, through the Bible, in a new way. It was not an issue that started with digital technology but delving into possible solutions brought the digital realm quickly to the fore. The outcome is *Guardians of Ancora*, a free app designed to give children a compelling interactive experience, in an environment where faith can thrive, by playing a game that has Bible engagement and faith formation at its heart and which matches the quality of successful secular games for children.

The journey from original challenge to outcome, however, has raised many issues and taken us back to first principles, such as and re-examining how to handle the Bible, how faith forms and how the things we might take for granted in a real-life physical world might look in an equally real but virtual digital space. This should be about more than simple story re-telling. SU longs to see children in a relationship with Jesus and supporting children's faith formation is embedded within the game.

The context

When I was 10, I went to church three times on Sunday. We had an afternoon Sunday school – with a bus that drove round the streets and picked children up. My world was a few streets and, maybe three times a year, a coach trip to the seaside. If I was 10 today, what would it be like? I would see myself as a citizen of the world. I would still do that thing where you write your name, address, country, continent, the earth, the solar system, the galaxy, the universe. The difference is that these places would be

real and possible – one day I could go there. It is unlikely that I would be in church. But I would be online.

Many would say the biggest, the most dramatic, change in our lives has been the creation of the World Wide Web.¹ Every day, about 2.5 billion people will use the web for everything from booking a holiday to sending an email, from gambling to donating to charity.

Regular research provides statistics about children's consumption of media, the type of devices they access and the attitudes of parents to media usage. These show that children's media use is increasing, that they tend to use more than one medium at a time, that internet access is high in homes in the UK and the USA, and that the take-up of mobile devices has been rapid and is still growing.

Technology is not only about the devices we use but also about how we operate in the digital realm. Learning designer and futurist Marc Prensky clarified the distinction between 'digital natives' (those born in the last 20 years or so) and 'digital immigrants' (most adults!); 'digital natives ... think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors'. They are "native speakers" of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet.²

Prensky's analysis has been challenged and many now prefer to define users of virtual media as 'digital inhabitants' (those who are 'at home' in the digital world), and 'digital visitors' (those who use digital media to 'do' something but not as a reflex!).³ Digital *inhabitants*, most of today's children, do just that, they *inhabit* digital spaces and places, just as they inhabit physical, geographically solid spaces. The sorts of things

digital inhabitants like are: receiving information really fast; multi-tasking; graphics more than text; hypertext; being networked; instant gratification and frequent rewards; and they prefer games to 'serious' work.

If we're going to meet children where they are, they are in the digital realm – gaming, researching, sharing, watching videos, reading books and communicating.⁴ Digital is not a substitute for face-to-face ministry, but it is an opportunity that only exists because digital media mean we all live in a connected world.⁵ The question is not whether digital technology can be useful to spirituality, so much as how best to harness the possibilities on offer.

Guardians of Ancora: A game

A game is an interactive experience: this is what gives it the potential to be richly engaging and deeply immersive. These qualities of interactivity and immersion are embedded in SU's plans to use a game experience, to create an environment for deep and rich engagement in the stories of the Bible. For the child playing *Guardians of Ancora*, Bible engagement is all about immersiveness: 'people with a story to tell are finding that to tell it, they need not only to entertain their audience but to involve them, invite them in, let them immerse themselves.'⁶

This understanding, as 'people with a story to tell', has informed the planning for *Guardians of Ancora*. Wherever the player is within the online environment, they will be exposed to, and experiencing, biblical values. They may be seeing friends in the virtual city, known as Ancora, where the community values chime with Galatians 5:22,23. They may go on a Bible Quest that takes them through varied adventures to encounter a Bible story, exploring and discovering a key story in the arc of the great story of God and his people, leading them onto rich activities for reflection, worship, response and action. Throughout the experience, the intention is for the game to be contextualising the Bible for these users.

Every element of the experience is designed to have a spiritual and biblical purpose, embedded in such a way to be unobtrusive and 'natural' to the player. This is what gives *Guardians of Ancora* the vital immersive quality, by linking between elements of the game and providing the possibility of the child-player leading their own experience. All the time a child spends with *Guardians of Ancora* will be time spent engaging with biblical concepts, whilst there are specific places and occasions where Bible stories and other content is delivered explicitly.

Using a game as a medium for Bible engagement is, however, not without challenges. In a game the player is an active participant, not a passive observer. This element of choice is not a feature of other media. In a game there is no audience: the 'audience' is interacting and taking part in the experience.

Players explore through their own choices and this is an empowering experience for them. A great game is about having meaningful choice and the will to choose. Players engage with the game to do something, not simply to be told or shown something. This means that the player makes choices and those choices affect both the game

and the narrative. In reality, it is not feasible to give the player free choice: in a narrative game there cannot be endless options, opening up like multiple alternate universes. The story-skill is to let the player feel as though a valid choice has been made and the 'choice' happens in the act of choosing.

These strengths of interaction and choice present creative tensions when we come to explore Bible stories through games. This is not necessarily a negative quality but it does need acknowledging. On the one hand, a game means the player is involved, exploring and interacting with the experience. On the other hand, the Bible story cannot be 'changed' if it is to be handled with integrity and if the game is to have any credibility. It is crucial not to teach things that a child will have to 'unlearn' later. A game delivers information and narrative in gameplay, player role, the environment, visuals, character design, dialogue, mini-movies, and minimally, in words. Games use as little text as possible and expect to tell stories in non-text ways. The games medium, however, lets the player determine and make meaning – a perfect setting for making meaning around Bible stories and faith.

In *Guardians of Ancora*, we want the player's engagement with the actual Bible-story content to be as compelling and immersive as in other aspects of the game. This is where concern about biblical accuracy could become such a constraint that the game loses the very qualities of involvement and interaction that we're striving towards.⁷

Guardians of Ancora: Bible engagement

There is no shortage of evidence⁸ tracking the decline in Bible mini-movies, and minimally, indifference and lack of interest in the Bible⁹ and little awareness of its relevance or a sense of relevance and importance.¹⁰

Amidst the talk of crisis it became evident that one of the 'first principles' to be re-examined was the question of what is meant by the term 'Bible engagement'.

Engagement goes beyond 'reading' and 'literacy'. Rather it involves encountering and exploring its events and words, and meeting and experiencing the God who is revealed through them in such a way that the person engaging is informed about the Bible story and God, and influenced by what they now know. They are also spiritually nurtured and formed as a person of faith, and transformed, personally and socially, in thought, emotions and action.

Engaging with God's story in this way involves: (a) entering actively into the story to see God in action; reflecting on the events, on the characters, on God and his ways; making meaning, by responding intuitively, emotionally and cognitively. And (c) living a new reality that has been shaped by this whole experience.

These forms of engagement, of course, are not limited to technological methods. The world of digital media is, however, a place where all these things can take place in immersive, compelling ways. While some people have shied away from the pervasiveness of the internet, its very ubiquity is an enormous strength. Access is easy

NOTES

1. www.express.co.uk/entertainment/gaming/464140/How-the-invention-of-the-internet-25-years-ago-changed-our-daily-lives-forever.

2. MR Prensky, *From Digital Natives to Digital Immigrants: Hopeful Essays for 21st Century Learning* (London: Sage, 2001).

3. www.oclc.org/research/themes/user-studies/vandr.html

4. Children aged 8–18 have been shown to be using media for 7.38 hours per day, 7 days a week; to be using more than one medium or device at a time; and to be consuming 10.75 hours of media content in those 7.38 hours. *Every day*, Kaiser Family Foundation study, January 2010.

5. 'Younger adults rely on technology to facilitate their search for meaning and connection'. <http://barna.org/media-articles/212-new-research-explores-how-technology-drives-generation-gap>

6. F Rose, *The Art of Immersion: How the Digital Generation is Remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and the Way We Tell Stories* (London/New York: WW Norton & Co., 2011).

7. These questions are not unique to the game context. E.g. is it acceptable to give names to anonymous Bible characters? Is it appropriate to include a description of the weather or the view from the hillside, on that day when Jesus was preaching?

8. <http://barna.org/faith-spirituality/325-barna-studies-the-research-offers-a-year-in-review-perspective>

9. barna.org/faith-spirituality/317-new-research-explores-how-different-generations-view-and-use-the-bible

and people are highly motivated to use their devices for learning, entertainment, information and communication.

The digital environment means it is possible to go directly to the 'consumer', in this case children, whilst following clear rules of compliance for creating children's games. A game can be flexible enough to accommodate and have enough choice and variety for the play and exploration to be child-led and child-controlled. Games can address different learning styles and provide varied activities for auditory, visual and kinaesthetic learners. The possible variety and range of play can connect with children of different and mixed spiritual styles, appealing to those with word, emotion, symbol and action focus in how they express their spirituality.¹²

Guardians of Ancora: Faith formation

A key element of creating the right environment for children is to understand how they view faith, Christianity and the Bible. In 2009 the Children's Society published *A Good Childhood*.¹³ A good childhood, according to the 28,000 children and young people consulted, has these key issues, in this order: safety; care/love; support/help/someone to talk to; freedom; fairness; respect. These were all seen as 'spiritual' and 'moral' values. The inquiry concluded that 'Human beings have always sought ... a spiritual dimension which lights up their inner life ... the feeling of belonging to something bigger than oneself.' For a happy life: 'Children should be helped to develop the spiritual qualities of wonder and inner peace – and the sense of something greater than themselves ... No child is complete without some passionate spiritual engagement of this kind.'

What and how children believe is more involved than simply believing what they are told. Justin Barrett has been looking into how children are 'naturally tuned' to believe in god – maybe not God with a big G, but to have a god-ward awareness. 'Children learn things that their minds are tuned to learn more readily than things that go against that natural tuning.' They are predisposed to the idea of a super creator-god. Barrett's concludes 'children's minds are not a level playing field. They are tilted in the direction of belief.'¹⁴

Running parallel to the games development, SU has invested in an extensive research project, undertaken by Christian Research,¹⁵ into children and faith, to identify signs of that process of informing, forming and transforming. This research indicates that:

- The Bible is not on the radar of most 8–11 year olds. They're not anti, but it never enters their consciousness.
- There is a massive respect for the Bible. It is of utmost importance – but not something to open or use.
- Parents are not likely to initiate any sort of conversation about a child's spiritual life. If the child raises it, they will respond – but they are not going to go there by choice. Parents were scrupulous about being honest with their children – so felt all-at-sea when it came to God-things because they did not know what they thought themselves.

• Religious education, as delivered in schools, is said to be uninspiring – but, at the same time, parents saw school, not the home or even the church, as the place where faith nurturing should take place.

• The more positive finding was that the children have an instinctive and expectant attitude to prayer and talked openly about times when God has answered their prayer.¹⁶

The research shows that children's spiritual formation does not happen by accident or in isolation. Although the Bible may not be read by many children, because it's something that can only be understood by 'religious, scholarly or older people', there are a number of other factors that can contribute to a child's spiritual development. For example, prayer can be a natural and central part of a child's life. They might ponder the great mysteries of life or grapple with the harsh realities of loss and death. Shared experiences and being part of a community, or the longing for someone to trust may also contribute to a child's spiritual development.

Faith formation is about both the 'head' and the 'heart': it is imaginative, experiential, reasoned, emotional, factual and communal. It is about the interweaving of deep spiritual encounters with knowledge and understanding. It is about a shift from 'me, as the centre of my universe' to 'relationship with God'.

All this means we can start to identify the ingredients that feed into faith formation. The next stage, for *Guardians of Ancora*, is to devise ways of noticing those ingredients, gathering them and working out what they mean. Through game metrics, the project will be looking at behaviour, responses and activities; recording attitudes to God, the Bible, and Bible stories; assessing whether spiritual transformation takes place; and identifying self-discovery and God-discovery.

In all of this, we recognise the value of the church, the support networks, crucial friends and for many children their family in bringing people to Christ. It was always important that alongside the storytelling and game play, we give a safe place for children to explore their own faith and reflect on the impact of the stories, and how that may affect them outside of the game. We encourage children to write their own prayers, to be creative designing pictures using stickers and familiar paint tools which they can share with those people known to them. Where children have adults in their lives who are keen to support their spiritual lives, further help and ideas are available through a 'family hub' on the *Guardians of Ancora* website.¹⁷

Christians, through the centuries, have been shrewd in using the latest equipment to promote faith, whether it was writing on a codex instead of a scroll, or adopting the printing press. Digital technology is today's equivalent opportunity. The story of *Guardians of Ancora* is not complete. Month-on-month, more stories and activities are being as SU continues to look at the possibilities and test and experiment with what it means to express faith and spirituality in the digital realm.

10. S Opie, 'Scripture engagement with an emerging generation', January 2010. Report from Worldwide Scripture Engagement Consultation held in Malaysia by the Forum of Bible Agencies International.

11. www.coppa.org

12. http://faithformationlearningexchange.net/uploads/5/2/4/6/5246709/saturation_spirituality-creating_environments_that_nurture_reallchildren_-_csinos.pdf

13. A report authored by R Layard & J Dunn from an independent inquiry, over 18 months, with expert panels and many thousands of contributions, including 7,200 adults and 28,000 children and young people.

14. JI Barrett, *Born Believers: The Science of Children's Religious Belief* (London: Free Press, 2012).

15. An extensive review of academic studies, books, papers, journals; connecting globally with more than 60 top academics and expert practitioners in the areas of children's spirituality and faith formation; hosting focus groups with children aged 8-11ish, parents with children in that age range and adults who work with children in churches.

16. 'There's a little girl at our church now; she's five; when she was a baby, she was going to die, and everyone prayed and she's still alive now' and '[On the theme park ride,] I was upside down and the ride stopped. I was hanging there and I said, "God! Help me!" and the ride started again – and he did.'

17. <http://guardiansofancora.com>