

Magi quest (Matthew 2:1-12)

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This story sounds like a video game quest to me.

In video games, particularly role-playing games, players imagine being a character in a story. They may be knights, detectives, or wizards (or “Magi,” a term from which we derive “magician”). The overall goal may be solving a mystery or overcoming an evil villain, but along the way computer-controlled characters give them many other tasks to perform. Players then gain experience in the setting and story of the game in much the same way readers learn as a novel’s protagonist goes to new places and meets new people. The character being played in the game (the magician or whatever) gains experience points and develops new abilities for use in the game. Successfully completing quests makes you stronger.

For many younger Christians, this is a form of literature, perhaps even their primary experience of literature. They are involved in the story as the player-character, interacting with the game’s non-player, computer-controlled characters in much the same way that readers of any work of fiction interact with characters. If you listen to a gamer, they can tell you about characters that they have “met,” much the same way that previous generations could speak about getting to know Odysseus, Hamlet, Anna Karenina, or Gandalf. The quality of the writing may not be that of Homer or Shakespeare, but the fact that player-readers are making decisions about how to respond to quests or other interactions means that these gamers can develop a powerful relationship with other characters and with the story itself.

If this story were indeed a video game quest involving Herod and the Magi, what would happen? A person playing one of the Magi might be challenged to follow the

star from a city in the east. The other two Magi, run by the computer, would be there to assist, provide dialogue, make suggestions, and so on. There might be obstacles along the way—a swollen river to cross, cloudy nights with no visibility for star-following, an attempt to steal the myrrh. (They catch the thief but find out that the theft is motivated by a deep love for a deceased grandfather who needs embalming. What will the player choose to do?)

All of this would be an immersion in the challenges the historical Magi could well have faced. Such an adventure would help a person appreciate the fact that, despite Matthew's silence on the matter, it could well have been an act of devotion for the Magi to make such a long, dangerous journey.

The main choice to make would be what to do after bringing gifts to Jesus. Would the player decide to return to Herod? Perhaps one of the non-player Magi might make a very good case for doing so—not only would they be safely escorted home, but Herod would also reward them handsomely, providing plenty of money that could be used for the food bank granary they had been hoping to establish. The other Magi would remind them that they all had the same dream, the same warning, and that this must mean something very important. What would you, the player character, then decide to do?

Such video game quests give us opportunities to make significant decisions that determine the outcome of the story—unlike novels, and unlike the way we often read the Bible. Thus, they also force us to make decisions, and to accept responsibility for our actions. The Bible challenges us to develop this relationship with its characters and to see ourselves as part of the story. Some prayer traditions emphasize placing ourselves imaginatively (even playfully) in sacred stories, encouraging us to feel the warm sand under our feet or to taste the wine being served.

How many of us have ever thought about what it might have been like to be one of the Magi, or what we might have done in their place? We do face that very same choice regularly—receiving status, power, and safety from the princes of this world or following God's directions regardless of the risk. A video game play-through of the story—or an imaginative reading inspired by the literary style of a game—might help us to face such questions in advance, as a kind of preparation for the real world. To me, learning how to make difficult godly choices sounds like a real-world quest. And I can use all the practice quests I can get.