

DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS AND FANTASY ROLE PLAYING GAMES

Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs

In the 1980s, "Dungeons & Dragons" (D & D) and other elaborate fantasy role playing (FRP) games became one of the hottest national pastimes, especially for teenagers and college students. Estimated overall sales increased a thousand fold from 150 thousand dollars in 1975 to 150 million dollars in 1982. And sales have risen even higher since.

Dungeons and Dragons began as an offshoot of the war games of the late 1950s and 1960s, such as Bismarck and Gettysburg. These games involved the use of strategy and the playing out of historical battles with miniature soldiers and landscapes. Thus, war-gaming of the recent past was extended into the ancient past along a "swords and sorcery" theme, where the life and battles of various heroes or wizards could be played out.

D & D is an elaborate fantasy game played out primarily in one's mind using creative imagination. There are dice, although no cards or boards; there are no strict rules, only guidelines. There are also no absolutes, no boundaries, and no time limitations, since FRP games are not single experience contests but ongoing adventures or campaigns traversing from one episode to another. In theory, a single game could last a lifetime.

The "dungeon master" or referee, is someone who is very experienced in D & D. He shapes the fantasy milieu with the aid of maps, monster lists, combat tables, and the psychological and geographical terrain the players will travel. This may involve multilevel dungeons, various occult planes of existence, towns, and other worlds or time periods. All of this is mapped out on graph paper, complete with wizards, treasures, monsters, magical objects, traps, potions, demons, and the gods who reside throughout the various regions.

Each player selects a character whose role he assumes, such as a fighter, assassin, monk, druid, magic user, or thief. The thief, apparently, is one of the best characters to emulate (433:31). Characters are assigned strengths or weaknesses on a scale of 3 to 18 and six principle attributes, including intelligence, strength, and wisdom--all determined by a toss of the dice. A racial stock is also selected from among gnomes, humans, dwarfs, and elves. Each player must decide his or her character's alignment, whether good, neutral, or evil.

Major Problems

While the underlying principles of D & D and other FRP games is sound--creative use of the imagination in order to play a game--from a Christian perspective there are several problems with such games.

One problem is that the worldview in which most of these games are conducted is either not Christian or anti-Christian, and although played out in fantasy, it can still have an impact on young or impressionable minds. In the past, similar games at least had a concrete historical setting, often with a moral basis underlying the conflict. Today the games comprise a mixture of fantasy, mythology, and often the occult. Most players participate without ever considering the worldview in which they are role playing. This means that they do not consider how this might be contrary to their own philosophy and beliefs. Because of the excitement involved and the ease in which players may get "hooked" on FRP, players usually may not noticed subtle negative changes that may be occurring in their lives as a result of playing the game. And if they do notice, they may not attribute the changes to the games. If we briefly contrast the general perspective of D & D and related FRP games with a biblical worldview, we can see the possible impact such games may have. The issue is to what extent a "crossover" effect may occur, such that aspects of the role being played in an extended fantasy game are gradually adopted in real life.

For example, most FRP games present no system of absolute morality; morality is for the individual to choose or reject as the player sees fit. Thieves, assassins, sorcerers, and witches may all be role-played and even developed into a kind of "alter ego." In general, FRP games perceive the universe as amoral. Good and evil are presented as equals, opposite poles, and both the characters and the gods are expected to align themselves with one pole or the other.

Although each player brings his own innate moral standards, the game itself provides the player with the potential for laying aside those standards. As one player told us, "In D & D it's better to be evil because you get more advantages--it's easier not to have to worry about doing something wrong." Thus, in many of these games, an immoral use of power, sex, or violence is acceptable. Even activities such as stealing, mutilation, human sacrifice, murder, and rape can be incorporated into games. Only the pragmatism of the overriding situation and the good or evil characters involved determine the best course of action, or what is "right" or "wrong." Obviously, this contrasts with the biblical worldview, in which morality is absolute and grounded in the character and nature of a holy God.

The theology of most FRP games is not Christian. Probably because of the diversity they offer, FRP games generally present a polytheistic rather than monotheistic worldview; that is, they present the belief in many gods rather than one God. As the D & D manual, *Deities and Demigods*, asserts, "No fantasy world would be complete without the gods, mighty deities who influence the fate of men and move mortals about like chess pieces..." (1516:37). This contrasts with the biblical teaching that there is only one true God and that this God is moral, not amoral. Most FRP games also have unbiblical views of creation, man, and life after death (cf. 433:ch. 3).

It can no longer be denied that children, teenagers, or adults are morally influenced by what they see on TV, for example, through sex and violence. When kids watch six hours of TV a day, this should concern parents because its "values" are being communicated. But many kids play D & D six hours a day; and for some kids potentially, it may be an even more powerful medium for communicating values than TV because of the active rather than passive participation required.

Another problem is that FRP games are essentially escape fantasy. While everyone needs to escape from the pressures of modern life in some way, for certain people the escape offered in FRP games can become dangerous. There are three issues here: 1) when excessive time is devoted to the game, taking away from more important activities; 2) when excessive identification with a character exists, so that less control remains over one's emotional state; and 3) when role playing and real life are not fully distinguished, so that fantasy and reality become blurred. As one player said, "I am dungeon master 98% of the time. I am the God of my world, the creator who manipulates the gods and humans... When I am in my world, I control my own world order... The more I play D & D, the more I want to get away from this world. The whole thing is getting very bad" (2629:38).

There is certainly nothing wrong with fantasy per se, which is merely an imaginative departure from the world and from the created order as we know it. But fantasy is not necessarily justified in all cases. A person needs discernment with fantasy just as with any other created thing.

For example, although the fantasy works by J.R.R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and others involve good and evil characters, they are generally considered a positive use of fantasy because they offer the reflection of an essentially Christian worldview. But when one compares the Christian fantasy of Tolkien and Lewis with modern FRP games, significant differences in theological and moral perspectives, and in context and motive, are apparent. In FRP games, good does not triumph over evil; both coexist as equal and opposite impersonal poles, together in such a manner that good is finally no better than evil, just another tool to use in one's adventure and conquest. Because power and pragmatism are necessary for victory, the end justifies the means.

Thus, FRP games present a number of concerns--for example, how their combination of violence, fantasy, and escapism may influence certain persons, or the blurring of fantasy and reality. In a special two-part segment, "Games That Can Kill," Geraldo Rivera on "Entertainment Tonight" (October 12-15, 1987) cited a figure of over 90 deaths that had been linked to FRP games, particularly Dungeons and Dragons. By the mid-1990s, the figure had risen to several hundred, although apparently no direct link could be established.

Evaluation

In *Playing with Fire*, Weldon and Bjornstand pointed out that alleged benefits of fantasy role playing were questionable in light of other concerns, such as the worldview and the anti-Christian theology underlying these games (433:37-45,83-85). The fun and excitement, the educational approaches to creativity and learning, and the fostering of cooperation and logical skills may all come with a high price tag for some or many participants. If, as fantasy role playing game advocates claim, such games as D & D are harmless and a positive contribution to the players, it seems that the burden of proof lies with them, especially if there appears to be evidence to the contrary.

Although no assessment of FRP games would be complete without at least some consideration of positive claims, it should also be noted that no assessment should be limited only to a consideration of those claims. Careful examination and evaluation of FRP games in these areas we discuss here, i.e., the role of fantasy morality, escapism, and the occult, is absolutely necessary if one is going to honestly and objectively assess whether to participate in the games.

Fantasy. We have already noted that the ability to fantasize is God-given. There is a good use of fantasy but also an evil use. Fantasy role playing games in general seem to promote the wrong use of fantasy by presenting character roles that assume an amoral use of power, violence, immorality, and sorcery--all things God hates. This runs contrary to the divine instruction given in Philippians 4:8: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things." Furthermore, such role playing could affect the lives of players, especially preadolescent and adolescent players, who are still in the formative stages of developing their personal philosophy, worldview, moral system, and self-image.

Morality. FRP games in general promote an amoral universe. In fact, the games contain many activities and practices that God forbids and condemns in the Bible. Thus FRP games have the potential to undermine or negate the influence of Christian morality in a player's life.

Escape. Escape, like fantasy, can be used in a wholesome and healthy way or it can be misused. The complexity and ego-involvement in fantasy role playing games in general appears to provide the potential for an unhealthy use of escape, or at least a wasting of valuable time.

Occult Influence

Perhaps our greatest concern is that Dungeons and Dragons and similar FRP games usually introduce players to the occult. Although these games do not offer a direct attempt at occult involvement, as does the Ouija board or similar forms of divination, nevertheless, there is reason for concern.

Dr. Gary North is the scholar and author of an excellent critique on the occult, *Unholy Spirits: Occultism and New Age Humanism*. In unmistakable terms, he warns:

Without any doubt in my own mind, after years of study of the history of occultism, after having researched a book on the topic, and often having consulted with scholars in the field of historical research, I can say with confidence: these games are the most effective, most magnificently

packaged, most profitably marketed, most thoroughly researched introduction to the occult in man's recorded history. Period (1505:8).

Jack Roper, writing in *Moody Monthly* states: "Dungeons and Dragons is a forerunner of a greater acceptance of sorcery in America. It is a socially accepted means of dwelling on mystical, mythological and medieval spiritual forces" (1506:19).

It seems that the authors of the D & D manuals, which discuss the occult, had to have been familiar with occult practices (1515:36-37). The occult powers, practices, and magical spells in the manuals reflect occult practice accurately. Not surprisingly, people have been led into the occult as a result of a newly sparked interest resulting from playing D & D. Even some occultists have utilized these games, either as a means to introduce occult ideas through entertainment, or as a way to encourage people to accept genuine sorcery. In 1980, Philip Bonewitz published *Authentic Thaumaturgy: A Professional Occultist on Improving the Realism of Magic Systems in Fantasy Simulating Games* for just this purpose.

D & D, of course, is not the only FRP game to utilize occultism. Dr. Ronald Enroth, of the Department of Sociology at Westmont College, observes: "The occult connection is even more obvious in the game *Chivalry and Sorcery*... The game details the mechanics of spell casting, enchantment, and mediumship" (1597:36-37).

The problem is that this is not merely an "innocent" introduction to the occult, but that what is played out in the imagination as a game can also be pursued in a serious manner in real life. And the individual player has no guarantee that just because he is "merely" engaged in use of the imagination, the spirit world will not respond when beckoned. In fact, many psychics and mediums recommend the use of the fantasy imagination to help foster psychic development and actual spirit contact (see *Visualization, Intuition, New Age Inner Work*.)

We cannot discuss all the issues involved, but the following is taken from *Playing with Fire*, ("The Occult Connection"; 433: ch. 5), which supplies an overview of the occult potential in these games.

First, occult magic and the casting of spells can be found as an integral part of most games. In *Dungeons and Dragons*, magic is prevalent and can be used in a variety of ways. For example, witch magic can be used for white or black witchcraft (1512:58-59), a delineation that is true in witchcraft today. There is also a preponderance of spells for different characters, levels, categories, and expectations. Some spells are bestowed by the gods; others are not. Most spells have a verbal component, which means they must be spoken to be effective (1513:40). Much of what is presented is similar to what one would find in sorcery or witchcraft. In *Chivalry and Sorcery*, the game manual contains instructions on how to cast spells.

Second, occult forms of protective inscriptions can be found in certain games. The "magic circle, pentagram, and thaumaturgic triangle" have all been incorporated into *Dungeons and Dragons* (1514:112). Players are taught how to use these symbols as forms of protective inscriptions in a fashion similar to the way they are actually used in witchcraft and Satanism. In one account, for example, a spell caster, who has just summoned a demon, is warned that he "must be within a circle of protection (or a thaumaturgic triangle with protection from evil) and the demon confined with a pentagram (circle pentacle) if he or she is to avoid being slain or carried off by the summoned cacodemon" (1513:86-87).

Third, the occult practice of "astral projection," or "soul travel," can be found in a few games. In astral projection, it is believed that the soul can depart from the body and travel to other

dimensions and planes. According to Dungeons and Dragons, this practice is possible by various means, including specific magic spells and "psionic" disciplines. Thus, a cleric can, by "casting a seventh level astral spell, leaving his or her physical body and material possession behind on the Prime Material Plane, (the plane on which the entire universe and all of its parallels have existence)... The cleric then leaves the Astral Plane, forming a body on the plane of existence he or she has chosen to enter" (1513:52).

Fourth, the occult practice of necromancy, e.g., communication with the dead, can be found in many games. In Dungeons and Dragons, necromantic spells not only heal wounds, restore strength, limbs, and life, and resurrect the dead, but they also bring forth the dead for divinational and other purposes, in a matter similar to that in spiritism. If a cleric, for example, needs information, he knows that he may summon the dead with a spell. "Upon casting a speak with the dead spell the cleric is able to ask several questions of a dead creature in a set period of time and receive answers according to the knowledge of the creature" (1513:48).

In Chivalry and Sorcery, an entire section of the game manual is devoted to necromancy. Here, as in spiritism, the necromancer is actually instructed to seek after a "spirit guide." "A Necromancer will acquire a Shadow Guide, a Spirit of the dead who was once a powerful Necromancer and acts as his Mentor....To summon the Shadow guide for advice and to be taught new spells, the Necromancer must perform a solemn ceremony..." (1515:36).

Fifth, the occult practice of conjuration and summoning of demons and devils can also be found in many games. The D & D Monster Manual has a detailed section devoted solely to demons. They are named, described (complete with an artist's sketch), and categorized according to their varying abilities and powers. Players are encouraged to use this information in conjunction with certain spells so summon these beings. Thus, a cleric, for example, using a seventh level gate spell, knows that he "must name the demon, devil, demi-god, god, or similar being he or she desires to make use of the gate and come to the cleric's aid." He is also told that there is "a 100% certainty that something will step through the gate" (1513:53).

Dungeons and Dragons mentions demon possession as a possibility. However, if a player, for example, possesses a "mind bar," it will prevent him "from suffering telepathic influence or possession" by such creatures as demons or devils (1513:155).

Sixth, occult alignment with supernatural powers or deities can be found in some of the games. This is an essential part of such games, as it has been in sorcery and witchcraft throughout the years. In Dungeons and Dragons, the alignment of each character with good (chaotic, lawful, or neutral), neutral (chaotic, lawful, or true), or evil (chaotic, lawful, or neutral), must be determined. The character's class will help in determining this. But beyond this alignment is an alignment with some deity that the character can serve and even worship. Both dungeon masters and players are told, "No fantasy world is complete without the gods, mighty deities who influence the fates of men and move mortals about like chess pieces in their obscure games of power....They [the gods] are one of the Dungeon Master's most important tools in his or her shaping of events. The gods serve an important purpose for the players as well. Serving a deity is a significant part of AD & D [Advanced Dungeons and Dragons], and all player characters should have a patron god. Alignment assumes its full importance when tied up to the worship of a deity" 1516:37).

Seventh, the names of occult, or magic, orders can be found in at least one game. Chivalry and Sorcery mentions such "Magical Orders" as "The Ancient Ones," (druids), "The Kingdom of Wicca," (witchcraft), "The Company of the Dark Brotherhood," and others. Some of these names are reminiscent of real occult groups. The game manual also includes detailed instructions on how players can form their own magic, or occult, order.

In addition to the above, one can find such occult practices as abjuration (the neutralization or negation of magic, spells, or curses), clairaudience and clairvoyance (the ability to hear or see what is happening at a distance), divination (the knowledge of the future by the aid of the "gods"),

summoning of elements (earth, air, water, and fire) and arcane powers, and others. Dungeons and Dragons even includes the primitive occult idea (and practice) of trapping the soul (1513:92).

However, the occult connection does not end with manuals and materials of these games. In Dungeons and Dragons, for example, frequent reference is made to the importance of actual investigation (i.e., library research) of the pagan, Eastern, occult, cultures from which the mythologies and deities are drawn. In fact, some games are "often accompanied by long hours of research into the cultures to be used in the dungeons" (1517).

We are told in Deities and Demigods, "The books listed below constitute some of the references used in compiling this work. They, as well as numerous other works, contain much more detailed accounts of the gods and their divine characteristics than can be included herein. Further research is recommended to the DM [Dungeon Master] who wishes to augment the given information (1516:143).

Two of the books suggested are E. A. Wallis Budge's *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* and James Frazier's *The Golden Bough*. The former is a potential occult volume chronicling ritualistic preparations and instructions for the dead in their postmortem state; the latter, an anthropological compendium on occult practices in primitive societies.

Similarly, *Gods, Demi-gods, and Heroes* states: "Further research and reading is recommended into all the myths presented herein. This is the merest of outlines presented in D & D terms" (1518:Foreword). If "further research and reading is recommended" in the area of mythology and mythology is defined as "dealing with gods, demi-gods, and heroes of a particular people, usually invoking the supernatural" (1518:Foreword), then is this game, not in effect, encouraging its participants to concentrate their investigation on the supernatural and even occult aspects of pagan cultures?

One might raise the question here as to how such research differs from that of a student in an anthropology course. Does he not research the same cultures? Obviously he does, but there are some important differences. First, the scope of research is somewhat different. In Dungeons and Dragons, the primary focus of research appears to be narrow, dealing mostly with the area of the religious or supernatural, even though other aspects of culture may also be included. In an anthropology course, excluding those rare anthropology courses that specifically investigate the occultic aspects of various cultures (1519:39-46), the focus is generally much broader and involves several components, one of which is the religious.

Second, the purpose of research is quite different. In Dungeons and Dragons the main purpose is to obtain information that may be useful in the researcher's fantasy role playing. As one player explained, "You try to think like your characters....I'm running Inca characters now so I'm studying Inca culture" (1517). In most anthropology courses the purpose is primarily for the researcher's understanding of the past and demonstration of his skills. (For some students, such research may be done purely to fulfill course requirements.) Despite these differences, it should also be noted that researching occult activities in pagan societies has led at least some scholarly investigators to personal involvement in the occult (cf. Shamanism).

The world of the occult is by its own definition that which is immaterial, hidden, and esoteric. Webster defines "occult" as "Hidden from the eye or understanding; invisible and mysterious..." or "... not revealed, secret; not easily apprehended or understood; not able to be seen or detected." Since the occult is by nature from the eye and not able to be seen or detected, it would seem necessary for those who want to participate in the occult to use their imagination. Imagination, again, according to Webster, is "the faculty by which we can bring absent objects and perceptions forcibly before the mind." It is "the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality." Imagination is the faculty by which one perceives and interacts with any reality not directly available through the five senses.

It is this potential relationship between the occult and the imagination that is of concern to many, especially in the light of the obvious occult content in FRP games. As one researcher has noted:

The very nature of D & D, and FRP in general, is such that the imagination is being guided into encounters with nonmaterial entities, forces, or spirits. Those entities, we are told, are mere fantasies with no bias in reality. If, however, those entities do actually exist in some form in the spirit world, then the line of demarcation between what is pure fantasy and what is actual contact with the spiritual, demonic forces becomes extremely abstruse if not entirely nonexistent (1520:3-4).

This is hardly to infer that there is no difference between actual participation in occult activities and imagining the same, or that every time someone participates in imaginative occult activity one will come in contact with occult forces. We simply point out that relegating "occult contact" to mere imagination does not guarantee one freedom from demonic influence

Today, classes in psychic and spiritual development use imagination and visualization techniques in their methodology to achieve out-of-body experiences develop occult powers and foster contact with spirits. Many of the most popular books on various occult themes allude to these same techniques. Whether one accepts it or not, simple imagination has been used to establish spirit contact (e.g., when an imaginary "inner advisor" suddenly becomes a real being). There are numerous cases in occultic literature where demons have actively sought out human contacts under the guise of an "imagined" patron god, ascended master, inner counselor, or spirit helper (cf. *New Age Inner Work, Intuition, Dream Work, Visualization*).

Regardless of the difference between reality and imagination, a word of caution, such as the following by Elliot Miller, is to the point:

However real this distinction may be in the minds of the players, though, I feel no assurance that the spirit world will not respond when it is beckoned.

When I was of high-school age I was extremely skeptical about anything reputedly supernatural. I recall engaging in a mock seance with a group of friends. Our lightheartedness was turned to fear when suddenly the "medium," my best friend, began to convulse, his eyes rolled back in his head, and a strange voice emerged from his throat. For the following two years this young Jew was tormented by spirits. Withdrawing from all social contact, he haunted graveyards until he was delivered through the power of Jesus Christ (1521:10). Furthermore, there is always the possibility that a player may, in everyday life, pursue those occultic activities role-played in fantasy. After all, the hope of every dreamer is to live the fantasy.

That some have pursued the occult as a result of their involvement in FRP games is a matter of record. On a major radio network radio talk show a few years ago, one prominent dungeon master admitted to James Bjornstad that he personally knew of several who had gone to become involved in witchcraft and spiritism as a result of playing D & D, but he was quick to point out that he saw no harm or danger in this. Subsequent dialogue revealed that his worldview did not allow for anything supernatural. Thus, from his perspective, if there is no supernatural activity, then all occultic activity must be understood in terms of functions of the natural realm, psychological powers of the mind. Participation in the occult, to him, cannot be (supernaturally) dangerous. To the contrary, we believe the world of demons is real, and that participation in the occult can be very dangerous (278).

One could argue that FRP is permitted because one is dealing purely in fantasy. We know that God forbids involvement in the occult in reality (Deuteronomy 18:10-12), but what about in fantasy? How does God view someone's imaginative involvement in such a realm? If Jesus considered one's lusting after another woman in his heart (i.e., fantasy) tantamount to adultery, what would He say about someone's pursuing the occult in his mind (i.e., fantasy)? Would He approve, or would He say it was wrong? If one's mind is centered upon the "imaginative" use of occult power, is he not at least tolerating the idea of its use? And again, who can guarantee that the demonic will not respond? Some players have reported actual paranormal or supernatural experiences (the movement of objects and other phenomena) while playing these games.

In conclusion, we are admonished in the Bible to "be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8 NASB). We are also told that Satan and his demons are master deceivers: "Satan disguises himself as an angel of light," and "his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness" (2 Corinthians 11:14-15 NASB). Satan can make something look and desirable and provide fun and excitement--he can use a game that encourages fantasy role playing--if it will attract someone to become involved with him. We need to practice discernment continually "in order that no advantage be taken of us by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his schemes" (2 Corinthians 2:11 NASB).