Role-Playing Games

The term "role-playing game" (RPG) can technically refer to any sort of game in which the players pretend to be someone else. This definition would include such childhood games as "cops and robbers" as well as certain forms of simulation used for professional training. However, the term is often used in reference to fantasy RPGs, in which players assume the roles of characters in fantastic scenarios derived from fantasy, science-fiction, or horror genres. Many of these games feature some form of magic and have elaborate rules detailing how magic works within the imaginary world of the game. In the 1980s, the popularity of fantasy RPGs led to a moral panic in which Christian leaders and moral entrepreneurs claimed that these games were indoctrinating children into occult belief systems and Satanism. Although claims made during the panic were discredited, there is a subsection of fantasy role-players who are also interested in esotericism. For these players, fantasy RGPs can provide a mental space in which different models of magic can be imagined and their plausibility evaluated. So while RPGs do not indoctrinate players toward a belief system, there is an indirect relationship between fantasy RPGs and magical beliefs and practices, at least for certain players.

Fantasy RPGs evolved from military simulation games using miniature armies. Beginning in the 1960s, college students began to modify these games, adding magic and other fantastic elements. Instead of two competing armies, students created open-ended scenarios in which players assumed the roles of individual characters, each with different objectives. This change allowed for more players and created a need for an impartial arbiter to moderate the game (the "game master", "dungeon master", or "storyteller").

Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)*,* created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in 1974, is generally considered to be the first commercially published fantasy RPG. D&D was published by Tactical Studies Rules, a company Gygax created in 1973 along with two childhood friends. In 1975, the company was reincorporated as TSR, which was the most influential company in the industry until it was sold to Wizards of the Coast in 1997. D&D featured many supernatural elements, such as magic and demons. Gygax and Arneson were both devout Christians and D&D's magic system drew more from the fantasy novels of Jack Vance than actual esoteric practices. Players could also play "clerics" who could cast religious "spells," many of which were based on Biblical miracles. In 1976 a supplement was produced entitled *Gods, Demigods, and Heroes* with rules for incorporating gods from world mythology into the game. A later version of this book, called *Deities and Demigods* (1980), contained a list of books for further research that included James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*.

In the 1970s, D&D became popular on college campuses and inspired many players to create their own games. Almost immediately some players began creating alternate rule systems for magic inspired by actual systems of esotericism (Fine 1983: 35; Peterson 202: 509). One such player was Isaac Bonewitz, a practicing druid who attended the University of California at Berkeley in the 1960s. Bonewitz enjoyed D&D but found its system of magic unrealistic. So in 1978 he published a book called *Authentic Thaumaturgy: A Professional Occultist on Improving the Realism of Magic Systems in Fantasy Simulating Games.* Soon opponents of fantasy RPGs were citing this book as evidence that RPGs and the occult are inherently linked (Cotter 1980).

The moral panic over RPGs was precipitated by two cases of adolescent suicide. In 1979, student James "Dallas" Egbert disappeared from Michigan State University. William Dear, a detective hired by Egbert's family, suggested that playing D&D had caused Egbert to dissociate from reality. Egbert eventually called his family and returned home, but committed suicide in 1980. Although Egbert's problems were

later attributed to such factors as depression and substance abuse, the media spread a narrative that D&D causes dissociation. The incident became the basis of the novel *Mazes and Monsters* (1981) by Rona Jaffe, and its film adaptation in 1982. In 1984, Dear published his memoir, *The Dungeon Master*, which reiterated that D&D had been a factor in Egbert's disappearance.

In 1982, high-schooler Irving "Bink" Pulling committed suicide. Bink had played D&D as part of his honors English curriculum. Although school authorities estimated he had only ever played the game for a total of nine hours, his parents claimed D&D was the sole cause of his suicide. Bink's mother, Patricia, went on to found an activist group called Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons (B.A.D.D.). B.A.D.D. was highly successful in promoting the idea that RPGs lead to suicide. Pulling's career dovetailed with the broader "Satanic Panic" of the 1980s and she claimed that D&D led to Satanism and criminal activity (Pulling 1989). Despite her lack of training in law enforcement, she was invited to speak at police seminars on the dangers of RPGs, Satanism, and "occult crime".

Conservative Christian leaders joined B.A.D.D. in claiming that D&D was an attempt to indoctrinate children into the occult. In California, a member of the Sacramento school board claimed that D&D clubs in public schools were unconstitutional because D&D promotes the religion of witchcraft. Theologian Carl Raschke (1990: 187) wrote that D&D contained a hidden "pedagogy" that taught children that evil is more powerful than good and that back magic is desirable. In 1984 conservative cartoonist Jack Chick produced a comic, "Dark Dungeons", that portrayed teenage players being slowly lured in witchcraft. "Dark Dungeons" was heavily influenced by the claims of John Todd, a conspiracy theorist who claimed to have been raised by a secret family of witches before converting to Christianity. Todd's claims were debunked in several Christian publications, including *Christianity Today*. William Schnoebelen was another Christian critic of D&D who claimed to have been a witch before converting to Christianity. Schnoebelen alleged that he and his wife were consulted by the creators of D&D who sought their help in order to make the game's

depiction of black magic as authentic as possible. Some Christian critics, such as Rebecca Brown, argued that when players imagine encounters with monsters they are actually having mental encounters with real demons and that continued play results in demonic possession (Laycock 2015).

There continue to be individuals on the fringes of conservative Christian culture who make claims similar to those of Todd and Schnoebelen about the dangers of D&D (Malado 2016). However, the moral panic over RPGs has subsided. In 1988, players formed an advocacy group called the Committee for the Advancement of Role-Playing Games (CAR-PGa) that largely discredited the claims of Pulling and others. B.A.D.D. effectively disbanded when Pulling died in 1992.

TSR had responded to the panic by trying to show that D&D was wholesome and educational. A document produced in 1984 called "The TSR Code of Ethics" stated that, "Evil shall never be portrayed in an attractive light, and shall be used only as a foe to illustrate a moral issue" (Snow 2008, 64). But B.A.D.D.'s decline, along with an older cohort of gamers, created a market for horror and urban fantasy RPGs that offered a more plausible portrayal of magic.

Early RPGs dealing with occult themes included *Call of Cthulhu* (1981), based on the works of H.P. Lovecraft, and *Shadowrun* (1989), set in a future Earth where magic has returned. The Swedish horror RPG *Kult* (1991) drew heavily on Gnosticism and Kabbalah. Outside of D&D, White Wolf became one of the most influential publishers of RPGs. White Wolf's dark urban fantasy games drew heavily on occult themes and their popularity has influenced contemporary occulture. Before helping to found White Wolf, Mark Rein-Hagen created *Ars Magica* (1987) with Jonathan Tweet. This game was set in thirteenth-century Europe and revolved around the Order of Hermes, a society of mages that traces its origins to Hermes Trismegistus. *Ars Magica* drew heavily from hermetic magic and medieval folklore and its magic system even incorporated Medieval Latin. In 1991, Rein-Haigen published *Vampire: The Masquerade* with White Wolf. This game blended history with fiction so

4

seamlessly and gave such a detailed description of vampire culture that some readers failed to understand the game was fiction (Laycock 2009: 62). *Vampire's* popularity became the center of renewed moral panic in 1996 when Rod Ferrell, a sixteen-year-old who claimed to be a vampire, murdered two people in Florida. Once again there were claims that RPGs lead to dissociation from reality and criminal activity.

White Wolf produced other games in which players assumed the role of such magical creatures as werewolves, fairies, mummies, ghosts, and demons. All of these games drew heavily from folklore, world mythology, and esoteric literature. In 1993, White Wolf published *Mage: The Ascension.* Set in the contemporary world, *Mage* presumes that reality does not have an independent existence but is actually the sum-total of what people believe it to be. Magicians are individuals with unusually strong wills who can independently bend reality to their will. Aleister Crowley's definition of magic as "the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity with will" is an obvious influence on this premise and is quoted in the game book.

In many ways, *Mage* invited players to contemplate and discuss contemporary theories of esotericism. Mage incorporated many real-world magical traditions including ecstatic neoshamanism, Judeo-Christian mysticism, contemporary Paganism, and even fringe scientific theories. However, the game assumed that all of these traditions were merely culturally constructed methods of focusing the human will. This theory of magic closely resembled the assumptions of chaos magic. The game also featured an antagonistic organization called The Technocracy that seeks to stabilize reality by hunting down magicians. The Technocracy secretly controls governments and financial systems and employs advanced technology, which itself is actually a form of magic. The idea of a conspiracy seeking to prevent humanity from becoming enlightened or achieving its potential resembles Gnostic myth as well as central ideas in the conspirituality scene, such as those of David Icke.

There is anecdotal evidence that individuals interested in magic and esotericism

often have a shared interest in fantasy RPGs. Tanya Luhrmann's (1989: 106) ethnography of magicians in England was one of the first sources to document this connection. White Wolf's games, in particular, have influenced communities of individuals who claim metaphysical identities as "vampires" and "otherkin". Martin Ramstedt has argued that the magical practices of modern Pagans reflect a "metaphorical turn" in which ritual has increasingly converged with fantasy and play. This convergence does not come about because fantasy RPGs cause players to confuse fantasy with reality, as was claimed in the 1980s. Rather, there is a form of intertextuality for some players, in which games create a mental space to think about magical ideas and assess which ones are more plausible. Some of the conclusions reached through this mental exercise may shape a player's spiritual beliefs and practices, or they may not. Significantly, Christian gamers have argued that fantasy RPGs can serve as a kind of "apologetics to the heart" that reinforces faith by subtly suggesting the possibility of a spiritual reality (Walliss 2012: 217). Still other players are rationalists who regard magic as purely imaginary. In the final analysis, it seems that while fantasy RPGs are not a "catechism of the occult", by inviting players to engage in imaginary thought experiments, they provide players an opportunity to change the way they think about the world.

Joseph P. LAYCOCK

Bibliography

Cotter, James R. 1980. "Dungeons and Dragons Lecture" (September 16). Archived by TheEscapist.com. Url: http://www.theescapist.com/archive-cotter.htm (Accessed October 22, 2016).

Fine, Gary Alan. 1983. *Shared fantasy: role-playing games as social worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Laycock, Joseph. 2009. *Vampires today: the truth about modern vampirism*. Westport, Conn: Praeger.

Laycock, Joseph. 2015. *Dangerous games: what the moral panic over role-playing games says about play, religion, and imagined worlds*. Oakland, Calif: University of California Press.

Luhrmann, Tanya. 1989. *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Malado, Jardine. 2016. "Ex-Satanic wizard says 'Bloody Mary' and 'Dungeons and Dragons' led him to Satanism". *The Christian Times* (October 7). URL: http://www.christiantimes.com/article/ex-satanic-wizard-says-bloody-mary-and-dungeons-and-dragons-led-him-to-satanism/64049.htm (Accessed October 18, 2016).

Peterson, Jon. 2012. *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventure, from Chess to Role-Playing Games*. San Diego, Calif.: Unreason Press.

Pulling, Patricia. 1989. *The Devil's Web: Who is Stalking Your Children for Satan?* Lafayette, La.: Huntington House.

Ramstedt, Martin. 2007. "Metaphor or Invocation? The Convergence of Ritual Between Modern Paganism and Fantasy Fiction". *Journal of Ritual Studies* 21:1: 1-15.

Raschke, Carl A. 1990. *Painted Black*. New York: Harper and Row.

Snow, Carson. 2008. "Dragons in the stacks: an introduction to role-playing games and their value to libraries". *Collection*

Building 27:2: 63-70.

Walliss, John. 2012. "The Road to Hell is Paved with D20s: Evangelical Christianity and Role-Playing Gaming". In A. Possamai (ed.) *The Handbook of Hyperreal Religions*, pp. 207-223. Boston: Brill.