Should a Christian Play Dungeons & Dragons?

by William Schnoebelen

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Believe it or not, it has been nearly 12 years since I wrote the original Straight Talk on Dungeons and Dragons. In that time, I have received hundreds of letters and at least a thousand emails about it. This subject is surprisingly controversial, even among Christians. This astonishes me!

The posting of my article on the web and the arrival of email as a means of mass communication have facilitated the process wherein I can engage in dialog with those who defend D&D and Fantasy Role Playing Games (FRPG) in general. In this context, I am amazed at how many so-proclaimed Christians who defend the game, do so with foul and abusive language. This, I think, speaks volumes about the spiritual impact of the game.

Just a quick survey shows the cultural impact of D&D and its offspring. Just recently, a spectacular movie called Dungeons and Dragons was released. Additionally, the pop culture is virtually drowning in sorcery and occult related topics.

Today shelves in major bookstores literally groan under the weight of various of books on Wicca, for example. Some of these books, like TEEN WITCH, are written for young readers. There is even a DUMMIES GUIDE TO WICCA AND WITCHCRAFT!! When D&D started, you could perhaps find four or five books on Wicca in print.

Now, obviously not all of this can be laid at the door of D&D. But in the 1970's, it was one of the major cultural phenomena that planted the seeds that have sprouted into Harry Potter and all the occult books and movies.

What is Dungeons & Dragons?

For those unfamiliar, it is the grandmother of most (if not all) fantasy role-playing games (FRPG). Now many understand that role-playing originated formally as a psychological tool. Most counselors and psychologists (including this writer) have used role-playing as a powerful way to transform human behavior and thought. Please bear that in mind as we continue.

For example, someone might have a problem with an addiction (from a purely psychological perspective). The counselor might suggest that the addict role-play what might happen if a friend offers him a drug. This is done several times in several ways until the addict begins to develop refusal skills. The same could be done for people with anger problems or anxiety issues. The point to remember is that role-playing is a major and effective way to teach people new ways of thinking and acting.

The FANTASY component is the second part of the equation. In a way, this is the most problematic part. Obviously, changes in behavior can often be positive. However, the fantasy component in D&D and related games is mostly defined as inhabiting a quasi-

medieval (or even Paleolithic) world full of magic and magical-related characters such as wizards, trolls, orcs, etc. It is a world very much like what is seen in the classic "sword and sorcery" genre of fantasy fiction. 1 In this world, magic is seen as a part of every day life, and the ethos of the game usually involves the acquisition of magical power by most characters.

As in any role-playing, the players take on "characters" or roles. The broad categories of these would include:

- Warrior or fighter
- Wizard or Mage
- Priest (or Cleric or Druid)
- Rogue (or Thief or Bard).

In recent years, new permutations on these basic classes of characters have been added, including the Barbarian, the Sorcerer, the Paladin and the Monk (the last character does not appear to be any sort "Catholic monk," but rather a monk from more eastern religions, with high levels of martial arts and occult expertise).2

The astute reader will have noted that already, some genuine magical terms from real witchcraft and occultism have been introduced. Druids and Bards are both part of the priesthood of ancient pre-Christian Britain. Wizards are of course the classic practitioners of magic, both in reality and in fantasy fiction. We will look at these roles more in depth in a moment.

Alignment - Introducing Morality (?)
Once the player has chosen their character, (Warrior, Rogue, etc.) they then need to choose their alignment. In D&D, this is a technical term meaning the crossing of two "scales."

The first is the character's position on the continuum between good and evil, with the choices being available anywhere in between perfect good and appalling evil.

The second is the character's place on the continuum between law and chaos.

Here again, the character could range anywhere from being a perfect, "law-abiding citizen" to being in favor of absolute anarchy.3

We are told in one of the game handbooks: "The character's alignment is a guide to his basic moral and ethical attitudes towards others, society, good and evil, and the forces of the universe in general."4

That sounds straightforward enough. However, you need to realize that quite often, players will pick an alignment that is more evil or chaotic because it is more "intriguing." This is much the same as why many talented actors would rather play villains.

There are actually nine possible combinations of alignment, ranging from Lawful Good (the Crusader) to Chaotic Evil (the Destroyer), with seven other combinations in between.5

One other issue needs to be raised about alignment.

The morality expressed in D&D is fuzzy at best, and is certainly NOT the morality of the Bible.

The same handbook tells us "…that goodness has no absolute values. Although many things are commonly accepted as good (helping those in need, protecting the weak) different cultures impose their own interpretations on what is good and what is evil."6

For example, you can have a "lawful evil" character.

A handbook states that: "A lawful evil villain methodically takes what he wants within the limits of his code of conduct without regard to whom it hurts. He cares about tradition, loyalty and order, but not about freedom, dignity or life."7

Talk about a mish-mash of moral ambiguity. Our young people are having enough trouble getting their values straight without being immersed in this sort of material!

Tool Time!

Finally, to play the game, the person's character needs the tools of their trade. These include such mundane things as food, clothing and tack, with many dozens of items listed.8

Additionally, some 60 different kinds of weapons are listed, such as battleaxes, cross bows and swords.9

Additionally, however, characters may get to choose various magical tools: spells, charms, wands, talismans, potions - plus magical versions of most weapons.

It is important to understand that each of the above magical artifacts exists in "real world" sorcery and witchcraft. They are just as real as swords, saddles or cross bows.

Thus, **role-playing** in this sort of game prepares the player for thinking like a magician. How seriously they take that preparation is something we need to consider.

How is this magic seen in the game? Well, in a guide written by the original author of the game, Gary Gygax, we read:

Magic users draw upon arcane powers in order to exercise their profession … He or she must memorize and prepare for the use of each spell, and its casting makes it

**necessary to reabsorb the incantation by consulting the proper book of spells …
those of magic-users must be spoken or read aloud.10**

This is excellent advice for budding necromancers. When we were high priests and
training witches, we would insist upon no less. This is obviously a game which requires
real initiative and dedication. But look at what the gamers are filling their heads with!

Other than the magic issue, as we have seen, the overall morality of the D&D universe is
pragmatism at best and amoral at worst. "Might makes right" seems to be the rule. You
are to take treasure or magic away from other players using whatever means are
available, including force, magic, intimidation, coercion or negotiation). An "advanced"
D&D master's guide advises: "The best way to avoid taking damage is to beat the foe so
badly he wants to crawl under a rock or, better yet, run away."11

Now isn't that a wonderful "law of the jungle" kind of morality to instill in a young
Christian? Whatever happened to the Beatitudes or gentleness or forgiveness or turning
the other cheek? These things seem entirely absent from D&D. Of course they are, they
are not very worldly or exciting.

Additionally, the games are very violent.

John Eric Holmes, a doctor and editor of the "Dungeons and Dragons Basic Set" believes
that the game can be a healthy outlet for anti-social behavior.

However, he remarks that "The level of violence in this make believe world runs high.
There is hardly a game in which the players do not indulge in murder, arson, torture, rape
or highway robbery."12

Dungeons & Dragons

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To parents
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