

# Do Role-Playing Games Promote Crime, Satanism and Suicide among Players as Critics Claim?

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## *Introduction*

Millions of people participate in role-playing games throughout the world. Compared to other kinds of games and other forms of entertainment, games of this kind are unique and relatively new. The first game of this type, *Dungeons & Dragons*, was published in 1973. What began as a hobby interest for innovated-game designers later became a multi-million dollar business venture. Other game designers and entrepreneurs formed many companies throughout the 1970s and 1980s, emulating and expanding how role-playing games could be played. Specialty game and hobby stores thrived. Players formed clubs and organized gaming conventions, instituting role-playing games as an international phenomenon. Thousands of players attend dozens of game conventions throughout the year. Teachers have used these games in gifted and talented programs in public schools. But despite the surge of growth and popularity of these types of games, there are the critics who believe role-playing games are dangerous.

In several towns across the United States, groups of parents have petitioned school boards not to allow students to play role-playing games in their schools. Some parents, with particular religious affiliations, believe some of these games promote devil worship among their players. There also have been cases where game players have killed themselves, and many of the same critics who complain of the games' satanic influences also believe these games influenced the suicides. In a different kind of incident, the United States Secret Service confiscated computers and rule documents from a game company, because investigators believed the game promotes computer crime.

But are these documented cases and complaints valid? Do role-playing games influence players in such a way that they would pursue criminal activities, delve into satanism, or commit suicide? Before attempting to answer this question, it is important first to describe what role-playing games are—including where they come from and the surge of growth into a multi-million dollar business. It is also important to give some examples of what kind of people play these kinds of games.

*The Role-Playing Game*

All role-playing games manifest several universal qualities. A moderator, called the game master, presents a step-by-step, plotted story to the players. These adventures, as they are sometimes called, can take place in many different settings, ranging from a medieval fantasy world to starships in deep space. Each player adopts a character to use to interact with other players' characters as they progress through the scenario. These characters—being individuals in a make-believe world—are unique, possessing qualities, skills and occupations that may be far different from those of the players themselves. The game master also plays the role of all the characters that the players meet in the story. In fact, the game master progresses the players through the plot by using these "non-player characters" in much the same way that a novelist uses characters that the hero meets in a novel. In the role-playing game, the game master gives these non-player characters a purpose, and adjusts their actions according to what the players do with their own characters. The choices that the players make are open-ended but are influenced (or guided) by what the game master says in response to a player's decision. The scenario is usually over when the players have moved their characters through the story in completing their goal, although this may last several sessions of play. The players may use their same characters in other adventures that the game master creates. As they do this, the characters increase their reputation and power in the game master's make-believe world. Traditionally, all action during game-play is presented orally. (See Jackson 6.)

In 1973, Gary Gygax and David Arneson published the first role-playing game, *Dungeons & Dragons*, also referred to as "D&D," which had a medieval fantasy setting. Both Arneson and Gygax played simulation war games like those published by Avalon Hill Game Company, which started publishing war games during the 1950s and continues to do so today (Moramarco 5). Gary Fine theorizes that role-playing games evolved from war games through a "series of transformations," as they became the privately published game, D&D, in 1973 (Dayan 1221 and Smith 138). The sales of the game increased. About 1,000 copies of D&D were sold in 1974, and 4,000 copies in 1975 (Kellman 34). By 1979, TSR, Gygax's game company, grossed \$2 million (DeWitt 16). The profits multiplied the following years, with \$8.5 million in 1980, and an estimated \$20 million in 1981 ("Dungeons and Dollars" 19). Other companies formed during the 1970s and 1980s, designing different kinds of rules and settings for role-playing games. Some of these games were based on fantasy and science fiction worlds as found in novels and movies—such as I.C.E.'s game based on J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, FASA's *Star Trek* game, and West End Games's *Star Wars*.

### *Game Players*

One game designer gave a 1991 estimate that ten million people had been exposed to role-playing games (Stackpole 7). This estimate would seem like a logical progression of the number of players, reflecting the fact that TSR sold 750,000 copies of D&D in 1982 (which is only one game of this kind) (Kellman 34). With this many people who have played, or are current players, there should be a wide variety of players encompassing more than one kind of group or class. One writer feels that gamers are usually unmarried males in their mid 20s, who read science fiction and fantasy, and have a "lively imagination" (Dayan 1221). In 1979, the Bergen County Science Fiction Club met once a month to discuss topics of science fiction and to play role-playing games. The club of about 40 people, including women, consisted of chemists, physicists, and computer programmers (Lynwander 10). In another article, a reporter interviewed two people at a game convention in Milwaukee. About 12,000 people attended this convention in 1985. One player interviewed was a male cook from California and the other was a female writer from New York. The cook said that game playing is "an escapism from reality which allows you to experience different aspects of humanity." The writer mentioned that she gets to "play a fantasy character and run her in a never-ending soap opera every week" ("At a Games Convention" 10). Another player of these games was a physician and an associate professor of neurology at the University of Southern California School of Medicine (Holmes 94). Just from the few examples given here, there seem to be many different kinds of players, representing different genders, age groups, students, teachers, and professional work fields. But not all people share the ideals of game players, and some, including members of the United States government, believe the games may be dangerous.

### *A Secret Service Raid*

On March 1, 1990, the United States Secret Service raided the offices of Steve Jackson Games in Austin, Texas. The designers were working on a sourcebook called *Cyberpunk* for the company's *Generic Universal Role-Playing System* (GURPS), one of the many intricate and realistic role-playing games that have evolved in the market. Part of the rules in this science fiction, cyberpunk setting for this particular sourcebook described how characters in the game world can break into computers. Some of these rules were posted on a computer bulletin board, owned and operated by the company, for review by play-testers, but since these boards are for the public, anyone can view them. In fact, communications posted on the boards are viewed by some people to find any clues to criminal activity, and apparently, some of the sourcebook

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comments were flagged by an observer. The Secret Service investigated further. It turned out that one of the game designers had contacts in the "computer underground," which only seemed to compound the problem. Despite the fact that the sourcebook was designed for a role-playing game, the agents viewed *GURPS Cyberpunk* as "a handbook for [real world] computer crime." The agents took computer equipment and documents from Steve Jackson Games, and the product, which was on a tight publishing schedule, was delayed; the company lost over \$100,000 in sales, causing the company to almost go bankrupt. (Blankenship 5 and Branwyn 48.)

Over a year later, in May 1991, Steve Jackson, the president of the company, filed a law suit against the government on the grounds that "electronic bulletin boards are a new form of communications that should enjoy constitutional protections similar to those given to printing presses and telephones." Further, it was argued, the investigators "didn't meet the narrow legal standards for seizing instruments of speech" (Harlan 7). In this case, Steve Jackson is not necessarily defending his game, directly. The case is focused on information portrayed on computer bulletin boards and whether or not this information is constitutionally protected. According to the same article, a constitutional law professor at Harvard University, Laurence Tribe, stated that "The case presents an opportunity to see just how far courts are willing to extend the protections of the First and Fourth Amendments to information-related material" (Harlan 7).

In March 12, 1993, Judge Sparks of the U.S. District Court in Austin Texas found that the Secret Service's raid broke two laws: the "Privacy Protection Act" and the "Electronic Communications and Transactional Records Act." But the Secret Service did not violate the "Wire and Electronic Communications Interception...Act." However, the court sided towards Steve Jackson Games and awarded the claimants over \$50,000 in economic damages and expenses ("Steve" 433).

### *Satanism and Suicide*

Other critics of role-playing games have complained that the games promote satanism, as well as influencing players to commit suicide.

In Heber City, a small town of about 5,000 people in Utah, the public school district used the game *Dungeons & Dragons* in a gifted and talented program to help "stimulate imagination, creativity, and teamwork among talented children." Some parents brought complaints about the game to the school board, and, in one meeting, 300 people stood in opposition to the game, despite the strong support the game received from players and members of the Parent Teachers Association.

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A minister spoke to one reporter, saying that the game is "very anti-religious. I have studied witchcraft and demonology...These books are filled with things that are not fantasy but are actual in the real demon world, and can be very dangerous for anyone involved in the game because it leaves them so open to satanic spirits." The program was canceled in 1980 (Ivans 8).

It was reported in 1981 that "One group forced the game [D&D] out of the summer recreational program of a Sacramento suburb." The same article reported that "a minister in Hutchinson, Kansas, said he wanted to collect money to buy up and burn every copy he could find of D&D" (Elshop 56). In 1985, a Roman Catholic school system banned the game in Toronto. Referring to this, the Rev. Fred Perna said, "Anybody who plays this game needs some kind of deliverance" (Adler 93). They are not the only critics.

The National Coalition on Television Violence (NCTV) has linked the game *Dungeons & Dragons* to 29 murders and suicides between 1979 and 1985 (Shuster 64). One was a case of suicide by a 13-year-old boy in 1985, which led 490 residents of Putnam, Connecticut, to sign a petition asking the school board not to allow students to play D&D in the public school system. One of the critics felt that the "game influenced [the child's] attitude about suicide," and this same critic, a member of the Christian Information Council, said the game promotes occult religions. He remarked, "The game de-sensitizes people to death, dying, suicide, and murder" (Hamilton 4). One of the parents said that the game, "is another of Satan's ploys to pollute and destroy our children's minds." This time, unlike the case in Utah, the Board of Education ruled in favor of allowing the game to be played in their schools. In response to the board's ruling, the Rev. Robert Bakke felt at the time that the board members "have authorized Russian roulette" (Brooke 1).

One of the more popular examples of critics linking role-playing to suicide was the case of Dallas Egbert of Michigan. Egbert entered college when he was 14 and eventually ran away from home. A private investigator, William Dear, was hired to find Egbert, but a year after the child was brought back home, Egbert killed himself. During a part of Dear's investigation, he discovered that one of the role-playing clubs—of which Egbert was a member—played a live-action version of D&D in the underground steam tunnels at Michigan State University, and some believed this was what influenced Egbert to commit suicide. But the investigation also revealed that Egbert was a member of the gay student organization and a drug user. Dear wrote a book called *The Dungeon Master*, describing his perceptions of the investigation (Hall 1+).

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In another case, which happened in Hanover County, Virginia, in 1984, parents claimed that their 16-year-old son killed himself because of playing D&D. The parents sued TSR Hobbies and two teachers who promoted the game in class, because they felt that TSR was negligent, and that the teachers knew of the "emotional and psychological dangers of the game" ("Parents Sue" 2). It was argued in the lawsuit that the child "killed himself after a 'curse' was placed on him by another player in the...game." The judge dismissed the suit, stating that the game is "protected under free-speech provisions of the First Amendment of the Constitution" and that the child's act was voluntary ("Judge Dismisses" 38).

This case was significant because Patricia Pulling, the mother of the child who killed himself, formed an organization called Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons (BADD). This organization and NCTV are two of the strongest organized groups that criticize D&D. They have stated, with "very strong evidence," that D&D influenced 13 deaths of game players. In response, NCTV has attempted to have the Federal Trade Commission and the Consumer Protection Agency force TSR to put "warnings" on their D&D game (Shuster 64). Dr. Thomas Radecki, a psychiatrist and chairman of NCTV in 1985, said, "The kids [who play these games] start living in the fantasy...and they can't find their way out of the dungeon" (Adler 93).

Carl Raschke seems to echo Radecki's beliefs in his book *Painted Black*. He writes,

Because there is no exit to the dungeon fashioned brick by brick by the mind, the suicide solution frequently seems the only cogent alternative...The game is one's fate. Like a Lear or any other tragic hero, it is not inconceivable that the only conceivable outcome is madness, or death.

Raschke concludes that role-playing games like D&D cause players "...to go off the deep end" and they "are apt to identify with...Satan." He also states, "D&D is really an elementary-level home study kit for 'black magic'" (qtd. by Stackpole 6).

### *Other Viewpoints*

Are these arguments valid? Most of the criticisms made against D&D, in particular, were motivated by those with certain religious backgrounds. One writer concludes that a person cannot argue against their beliefs, for,

The inclusion of the supernatural—magic spells, monsters, and other mythical creatures—makes fantasy role playing games objectionable to those with certain

religious convictions. If you believe that magic is both real and evil, then there can be no reasonable argument for accepting the game. (Caywood 138)

Whether or not these games promote satanism seems to be a matter of opinion based on a person's beliefs. Pulling, who organized BADD because she believed her son killed himself from playing D&D, seems also to have a religious motive against the game. She stated, "If kids can believe a god they can't see then it's very easy for them to believe in occult deities [presented in some games] they can't see" (Adler 93).

If Raschke, Pulling, and other critics are right, then some role-playing games are dangerous. Raschke states in his book that four percent of a given population are "fantasy-prone personalities" who "tend to experience their fantasies as real" (as qtd. by Stackpole 101). If role-playing games truly influence players, especially those who are fantasy-prone, then the games could be seen as dangerous. Following this line of thought, Stackpole (a game designer) believes the estimated 125 people killed from these games, as claimed by NCTV and BADD, should actually be higher. Stackpole explains that with an estimated number of 10 million people who have participated in role-playing games, then 400,000 of these people "are unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality." If Raschke's theory is correct, Stackpole reasons, then there should be more game-related incidents (Stackpole 101).

Despite the critics, some educators believe that the games are actually beneficial to the players' education. In England, the Surrey County Schools inspector for English and Drama, had students compete in a Dungeons & Dragons competition. The report came back: "Their teachers were impressed by all the boys' ability to put a point clearly, to argue, to persuade and to communicate. They were also amazed by the development of language and character analysis...They really played within their adopted characters and developed them" (Nicholson 1). This is in stark contrast to what the games are actually supposed to be causing, if the critics are correct.

### *Statistical Studies*

At this point, rather than determining the dangers of role-playing from opinions based on personal involvement and certain religious convictions, it might be important to describe some of the statistical studies, conducted by psychologists, pertaining to role-playing games' influence on human behavior. One study hypothesized that those who would play the game more "would report more feelings of alienation." The research concluded that players did, in fact, "report more feelings of alienation," but the study also explained:

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Research can explore whether intense playing of Dungeons and Dragons causes players to become alienated or whether intense players were alienated prior to playing and chose to play the game in hopes that it would provide them with a sense of purpose. Perhaps the feelings expressed by the committed players in this study are no different than feelings of other individuals who are intensely committed to other recreational activities. (DeRenard 1221-22)

The researchers summarized: "The present study yields few differences between players of Dungeons and Dragons and nonplayers" (1222).

Another study, in an attempt to determine if there were a "relationship between game use and personality characteristics," concluded that "no differences were found between heavy and light involvement gamers" (Carroll 705).

One of the more important studies was research conducted in 1987, which "investigated the validity of the detractor's claims" (similar to the few examples given earlier) (Simon 329). The study concluded by stating:

Increased exposure to D&D is not positively correlated with emotional instability. Indeed, as a whole group, D&D players obtain a healthy psychological profile...It appears, then, that in those cases wherein the individuals had previously played D&D, the game may have simply been an incidental, irrelevant aspect, rather than an etiological [cause and effect] factor. (332)

Further research, like that described above, seems to be appropriate in determining the effects of game playing on human behavior. In contrast, such criticisms as given by Raschke, for example, try to show conclusively—from the few cases where game players have killed someone, themselves, or are part of a satanic cult—that it is the game playing that causes (or strongly influences) this behavior, rather than some other independent, personal reason of the player. But why do people play these games, and what makes them unique?

### *The Uniqueness of Role-Playing Games*

It can be strongly argued that role-playing games offer a sense of escape, but this is true of most recreational activities, such as watching movies or reading novels, and perhaps, taken to the extreme, some people may abuse these forms of entertainment. Wanting to try different roles, perhaps to overcome a sense of alienation in society, could be a reason that people play these games. One writer states, "The opportunity to assume a wide variety of roles or characters brings out the Thespian aspirations of players who manage to shed their inhibitions" (Nicholson

1). A game player is quoted in one newspaper as saying, "I get to explore things I wouldn't ordinarily get to. It's constant decision-making, a funneling effect of everything you've done before" (DeWitt 16). Active participation in role-playing games seems to be more creative, almost more real, than the illusion of a novel or movie (or real life?), but why would this be so? What causes players to "shed their inhibitions" and allow them to explore things they wouldn't ordinarily do? The answers to these questions reveal the uniqueness of the role-playing-game.

There are three performance frames that exist simultaneously in a role-playing event: the real world, the game rules, and the fantasy world. At the center are the characters who are a part of the unfolding story, the imaginary fantasy world shared by the players; surrounding this, there are players who participate in a game that has rules; and around this is the real world itself. These frames exist simultaneously "feeding" off of each other. Gary Fine, a sociologist, calls these frames "levels of meaning" (186).

The real world is the one we live in. We can easily escape from this real-world frame at any time and jump into an imagination frame—by reading a novel, going to a play, or watching a movie. We can actually feel for the novelist's characters as we read, or be touched by an actor's performance in a play. It is important to note that people's different personalities, attitudes, and histories of the real world will affect how they perceive and participate in the imagination frame, as portrayed by the novelist, or actors, or participants of role-playing games.

In a role-playing game the second frame is the game rules. It gives guidelines for character creation, the written scenario of the game master, conflict resolution (as in combat), and so forth. It all provides a catalyst, or a stimulation for the players to "enter" into the imagination frame of the game world. For a movie the second frame is the film, screen, and theater auditorium, for a novel, it is the words on paper. We usually participate in novels and films on an individual level (although there is an entire group watching a movies, the experience is still largely individual). In a role-playing game this imagination is collectively shared.

The third frame for a role-playing game is the fantasy world jointly portrayed and extrapolated by the game master and the players. The reality, story flow, and player stimulation vary depending on the skill of the game master and the willingness of the players to role-play their characters. When we read a book or see a movie, as audience members we sit back and stay in tune to the unfolding story. People may feel irritated if others talk or interrupt our concentration on the imaginary world, or frame 3. But this is not necessarily true in a role-playing game,

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where the three frames flux, varying in intensity, one dominating the other, from moment to moment.

The decision as to what action would be taken by a character in a given situation in the imaginary world of the game (frame 3), is determined by the character's player living in the real world (frame 1), who usually makes a decision based on what kind of skills or behavior a character has (frame 2). Whether a particular action is successful or not is usually determined by what degree of skills or abilities the player's character has—as determined by the rules (frame 2). The effect of this action in the imaginary world (frame 3) is determined by the game master, who uses reference points from all three frames in determining and describing the result of a player's character's action.

This may seem complicated but it shows how role-playing games are unique. When a person watches TV, he or she needs only to sit back and relax as the full story is told. In the role-playing game, the players and the game master—together—flesh out the imaginary story as structured by the game master's skeletal framework. The ability, through a set of rules, to manipulate an imaginary character in an imaginary world with an outcome determined by the moderator is what allows a participant to play a knight who fights dragons in a medieval world, or where a person can explore an alien world in the deep reaches of space.

The answer to the question of why play these games would be based on the same answer as to why people read books or watch movies. There are many reasons, ranging from just to have fun, or to experience new types of character behaviors. The real reasons are up to individual players. A sociologist gives one view of why people may play these games. Amitai Etzioni, a professor of sociology at Columbia University, theorizes that "There has always been a need for fantasy. But I think the current explosion in fantasy games like D&D comes from the need to escape from the ever-more unpleasant reality" (DeWitt 16). What is this need to escape from reality?

Perhaps game-playing offers a sense of escape or gives people a way to cope with an "unpleasant reality." Alvin Toffler coined the term "future shock" to describe the quick-pace changes that are affecting society, and what happens when people adapt or fail to adapt to these changes. Toffler writes that there is a "roaring current of change, a current so powerful today that it overturns institutions, shifts our values, and shrivels our roots" (Toffler 3). One way to adapt, Toffler observes, is to look at the many different cultures and values, and choose among these to create a life style (268-85). Toffler says,

How we choose a life style, and what it means to us, therefore, looms as one of the central issues of the psychology of tomorrow. For the selection of a life

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style, whether consciously done or not, powerfully shapes the individual's future. It does this by imposing order, a set of principles or criteria on the choices he makes in his daily life. (271)

Although Toffler was talking about the real world, players of role-playing games may welcome a simulated environment, which may be more ordered and adaptable than their fast-changing real world, where their roles in society may not be as clearly defined as their characters in the game world. "Again and again, we shall find ourselves bitter or bored, vaguely dissatisfied with 'the way things are'—upset, in other words, with our present style [of life]" (Toffler 280). Entering new, imaginary environments provided by role-playing games is stimulating. Perhaps players look for a sense of escape from a "boring" life-style through the games, allowing them to bear with their real world life-style. This supports DeRenard's belief in the psychological study presented earlier, which concluded that game playing may "provide [the players] with a sense of purpose" (1222).

On the other hand, players—who are able to play many different kinds of roles in a fast-lived, simulated fantasy world—may be able to cope better in the real world. The games may provide a unique adaptability in the real world by allowing the players to experience the pressures (players' characters do die) of making difficult decisions and values for their characters in an imaginary world. This idea needs further study.

### *Conclusion*

I believe that role-playing games are no more dangerous than movies or novels. In theory, people would not commit suicide, murders, pursue illegal activities, or worship a mythical Satan in the real world—solely because of participating in an imaginary world as structured by a role-playing game. In fact, and more realistically, these particular players may already have an overt problem, and are simply playing a game for their own reasons. Or, they may already have some kind of emotional disturbance previously caused by a real world problem, which may have been latent, but was brought out in game play. I don't believe this problem would come from participating in a role-playing game itself, but rather, the danger may lie in the people with whom a person associates when playing a game. Further study is needed to determine if this is true. Any blame linked to these games is probably scapegoat excuses, the crime being symptom of the real cause of a motive already inherent in a criminal or suicide case. Investigators and critics should not overlook motive as the fundamental cause of crime.

To believe that some role-playing games promote satanism is comparable to believing that one "worships" Satan by reading Dante's

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*Inferno* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*. One must question the validity of arguments made by those who believe demons are real and dangerous in the real world, since there is no concrete evidence to their existence. At least the player knows he or she is exploring a make-believe game world.

Acts to censor role-playing games, on the belief that they are dangerous, is not different from what the Secret Service believed about Steve Jackson Games' *Cyberpunk*: that players of this game—participating in actions resolved in an imaginary world—would become illegal computer hackers in the real world, ready to commit credit fraud, or engage a computer virus into a governmental computer system.

Role-playing games provide a unique form of entertainment, that novels, comic books, sports, movies, television or theater cannot replace or substitute for. These games deserve further study in determining their unique place in our culture. Any kind of censorship is much more dangerous to our society, than permitting a group of friends from participating in a role-playing game. If this kind of censorship continues, then, in the words of Steve Jackson after the Secret Service raided his company, "Maybe the cyberpunk future is closer, and darker, than we think" (Blankenship 5).

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