Role Playing and Religion

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Role Playing at the Melbourne Unitarian Church

In recent months a group of individuals have been meeting at the Melbourne Unitarian Church on Sunday afternoons. To the casual observer their actions may initially seem a little strange. Apparently the participants are engaged in some sort of game that involves strange-looking dice. Spend a little more time and they seem to be engaged in an improvised radio drama, describing the actions of characters that they adopt to a setting and circumstances. These actions do not seem occur automatically however, as they often refer to thick and numerous rule books which provide a simulation model for the proposed activities.

Depending on what week one conducts such an observation, the setting is different. One story is set in the mid-16th century Transylvannia, a place that becomes an independent principality surrounded by powerful hostile forces during great conflicts between Christian and Moslem, Catholic and the various Protestant sects. It was, as many here would know, was also the place and time when a new Unitarian order was founded by Francis David who, amidst the chaos, managed to establish into law for a brief time freedom and toleration of different religions; the first time such an edict existed in Christendom. Arrive on a different week and one will hear about Australian life in 1920s through the eyes of private investigators and researchers sponsored by a local university. A third story in progress is based on a fantasic land called Glorantha, where magic is real and practised by individuals on a daily basis as heroic adventurers quest for runes of power.

The players are involved in different role playing games, where participants adopt characters, that have personalities, motivations and backgrounds different from their own. The origin of such games can be drawn from two directions; firstly the popularity of minature wargames in the late 'sixties, and also with the popularity of fantastic and mythic literature, such as J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings". Combined the two sources proved to be potent mix, and in 1974, Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax released a small brown box containing three booklets which would have a profound effect on popular culture. The box was the rules for a game called "Dungeons and Dragons".

Reasons for the Presentation

My own interest in role playing games was in my early teenaged years, around about the same time I started to take a serious interest in political matters and started to question the religious assumptions I had been brought up to believe. Apparently this is not an unusual experience; upon reaching physical maturity, neurological changes also provide for the capacity to engage in new processes of thinking; young adults question, develop models, draw new conclusions which may differ from or confirm their childhood teachings. This much is well accepted and understood in cognitive and developmental psychology. Perhaps not surprisingly, these interests continue well into adulthood - in my late teenaged years I started a role playing and speculative fiction society at Murdoch University which continues to this day. Several years later an American company published a role playing supplement I wrote which sold some 10,000 copies and apparently has become quite collectable in its own right. These days, I am involved in the development of two new game systems and have recently started a journal on role playing games with Dr. Cameron Jones of Swinburne University.

The reason for todays presentation, apart for the obvious use of describing to members of the congregation what sort of

activities occur in this church after the service, is also however to discuss the influence of role playing games on popular culture and in particular to examine the extraordinary reaction of fundamentalist religions to such games. Following this a description on what the Unitarian-Universalist reaction should be to such games and finally the educational benefits and how role playing games can serve to undermine the vicarious mass deception of the culture industry.

History and Use of Role Playing Games

Following the publication of Dungeons and Dragons a multitude of similar games were published, most with a fantasic or science fiction orientation. For example, "Traveller" was a popular science fiction game, "RuneQuest" a truly exotic and immersive fantasy game, and "Middle Earth Role Playing" was obviously derived from the works of J.R.R. Tolkien. From the works of the pulp horror writer, H.P. Lovecraft, The "Call of Cthulhu" provided a great exploration of the world of supernatural horror. By the late 1980s and 1990s, the "Generic Universal Role Playing System" achieved a great deal of popularity and respect for a attention to historical detail in various supplements - and was equally complemented by a supernatural version of contemporary times by games such as "Vampire: The Maquerade".

Through all this Dungeons and Dragons, is still the best-known and best-selling role playing game. There are, as of 2004, an estimated twenty million regular players worldwide, numerous translations and over $1USD billion in sales. However, it would be a mistake to narrowly define role playing games in reference to the traditional "pencil and paper" variety. The influence on the design of computer games is enormous, both single person and through multi-user domains and most recently, through massive multi-player online roleplaying games such as the extremely popular medieval-fantasy setting "EverQuest". Another expression of role playing games is "live action role playing" or freeforms, where participants act our their character actions, often with elaborate customes and props.

Reaction of Fundamentalist Religions

The reaction from fundamentalist religions to role playing games is quite extreme. One such pamphlet describes role playing games as "The catechism of the New Age" and "The chief weapon in .. the spiritual raid on our children". Part of the concern was generated from a novel and TV movie "Mazes and Monsters" which was loosely based on the investigation into the suicide of a wealthy, genuis-level young university student who was subject to severe domination from his father and incidentally also played Dungeons and Dragons. One religious fundamentalist, Patricia Pulling, generated publicity through a one-person organisation after her son, who also played role playing games, committed suicide apparently after being unable to find a campaign manager for election to the school council. Pulling, a believer in a pre-modern world view where magic spells are real and devils and angels intervene in normal reality (she claimed to have received ESP knowledge of her son's suicide prior body), instead blamed the fact that one of her son's D&D characters was under a curse. Her son was killed by the loaded pistol which Pulling kept in the house.

Pulling was hired as an expert witness on gaming and Satanic cults for murder trails on two occassions, appeared on US national television and numerous radio shows and wrote a book on the subject entitled "The Devil's Web". Pulling linked "teenaged Satanism" with rock concerts, gaming clubs, heavy metal music, occult movies, and of course, role playing games. She also joined forces with one Dr.Thomas Radecki, who would eventually have his license to practice psychiatry suspended. In a crusade against role playing games, Pulling and Radecki fabricated numerous reports on suicides and murders and attempted to link role playing games with Satanic Ritual Abuse cults by using testimonies from those with serious psychological problems. Despite representing herself as in "expert witness", investigation of her writing showed that she knew very little of such games. In a less comprehensive manner, the fanatical Jack Chick also linked the role playing of fantasy stories with spells and magic with actually involvement in working magic his comic strip "Dark Dungeons", which has been endlessly parodied and lampooned by gamers. For the record, Jack Chick also believes that the Pope is the anti-Christ, a direct decendent of Babylonian wizardry, and the Catholic Church was responsible for Islam, World I, Communism, Nazism and World War II.

Also published on the Jack Chick website are a small number of essays by William Schnoeben on role playing games. Schnoeben describes himself as a former Satanic priest who converted to fundamentalist Christianity. Again, the initial claim is made that magic is a real force and that demons and angels are likewise real. Because role playing games, especially fantasy role playing games, derive their descriptions of magic from historical (but usually fictional) sources, therefore "spiritual" damage must inevitably result. Likewise because role playing games often engage in accurate simulation models, the effect of that accuracy must also be a moral endoresement of the results. For example, a number of tracts cite with concern that because a Dungeons and Dragons manual (accurately) describes Adolf Hitler as a person with high Charisma, therefore Dungeons and Dragons endorses Adolf Hitler's moral reasoning. Such a cavalier confusion can only occur if one is truly ignorant or wilfully deceptive.

Perhaps the greatest concern for fundamentalists like Schnoeben is that more open-minded Christians actually play role playing games and, like their predecessors J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, actually use fantasy story telling and pagan mythology to promote what they a liberal Christian ethic. To those who have a particular and absolute interpretation of a sacred text, which allows for no other criticism or intrepretation, even when the claims are contrary to reason and the senses, such "semi-paganism" is clearly disallowed. Schnoeben's worldview matches many fundamentalist Christians; magic is evil but prayer is good and both are functionally real, investigating different faiths necessitates giving up your own because clearly spending time learning about other religions means coversion to that faith as you'll missing out on requisite scriptual indoctrination.

Secular Effects

It would be easy to ignore these writings as the sad and misfortunate rantings of those with small and poisoned minds. However, their activities have real effects on the secular world. As a a result of the deceptive publicity campaign by fundamentalists, in the minds of many there is a correlation between participants in role playing games and suicides and ritual murders. After all, sensationalism is what the mass media makes money from, not truth. Religious fundamentalists of all creeds understand this and that is why, using their non-secular sense of situational ethics, they are prepared to lie to do "God's Work". In reference to the alleged connection between role playing games, suicide and ritual murders, research from the The American Association of Suicidology, the Center for Disease Control, and Health & Welfare (Canada) could discern no link between suicide, ritual murder and role playing. Indeed, what evidence does exist suggests that the correlation is actually significantly lower than the mean. One wishes that the same could be said for exponents of fundamentalist religions regardless of creed.

As can be expected, a campaign of "public health warnings" was recommended by said fundamentalists. The petitioned in the U.S. Trade Commission to require warnings be placed on the covers of all roleplaying books, stating that the games had caused suicided and murders and that they carry a warning message from the Surgeon General to that effect. These requests, which also had their equivalent in Australia, reached the highest levels of government with the U.S. Federal Trade Commission requesting a decision on the matter from the Consumer Products Safety Commission, which fortunately had the common sense to realise that roleplaying games were not a danger to the public.

In Israel however the situation is different. Just this year the Israeli Defense Forces decided that any recruits that play role playing games are "detached from reality and susceptible to influence" and are automatically given a low security clearance. Participants are considered to have "a weak personality" and they are "sent to a professional for evaluation, usually a psychologist". In stark contrast however, the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs, discovering that role playing games were among the most popular leisure activity for youth in that country, investigated the games in depth and concluded that role playing games were a constructive leisure activity that provided the opportunity for cooperation , to acquire complex skills and that criticism was usually a "manifestation of moral panic". Treating role playing games on par with other youth leisure groups meant that SVEROK, the national gamer's federation, was eligible and now receives state funding.

Role Playing and Unitarian-Universalists

Unlike most other religions, Unitarian-Universalists do not have an absolute doctrine on theological matters and accept members of all religions, along with atheists, according to action rather than metaphysics. There are no sacred texts which are considered beyond criticism and evaluation and whose commandments we must follow even when contrary to sense or ethics. We do not debate as a matter of doctrine what exists beyond this universe and consider the entire discussion not only beyond human ken but, except in the case of aesthetic expression, to be somewhat of a digression from the real and practical tasks of raising people out of impoverishment, ending wars, establishing in law the natural rights all reasoning beings and ensuring that there is a planet for our children. How, given these caveats, should we react to role playing games?

In the first instance it serves us well to point out the real failings of many role playing games. The problem does not lie, as the fundamentalists complain, in the interest of pagan beliefs from times past, or the fictional simulation of magic and spells (let alone the science fiction of technological devices), but rather in the distortions that arise from the false realism of popular culture. The games serve an entertainment purpose rather than an aesthetic or educational one, and entertainment without aesthetic or educational leadership merely replicates the prevailing assumptions of sensationalism formed by dominant groups in the entertainment industry.

The results of this is easy to see; masculinist heroicism is invariably built in to the game system not as a narrative device but alongside and simultaneous to more realistic simulation effects. Fantastic circumstances are popularised in preference to insightful potrayals and understanding of "real world" mythologies, times and places. Logically related is the fact that rather than being role playing in the strict sense of the words, quite often such games end up being alter-ego games, where existing personalities, assumptions and prejudices are simply transplanted to a heroic and fantastic level. In such circumstances there is little opportunity to generate a sense of understanding or internal reflection.

Likewise the benefits of role playing games are the reverse of the common failings; the failings are not endemic to the design of such games, but rather arise because of their circumstances within the economic system. Where role playing games excel is when they provide opportunities for participants to take on the views and perspective of others, a requisite skill in the formation of universal moral values and to genuinely understand people from particular historical perspective and circumstances. Where role playing games excel is when they provide opportunities to understand how stories are developed and how to use the literary devices of character and setting, narrative and theme, style and motif. Where role playing games excel is when they provide opportunities to investigate the facts of the natural world and to develop abstract models of reality.

Finally, as highly decentralised communities role playing games perform an extremely subversive challenge to the domination of the culture industry. An intensely "cool" medium (to use Marshal McLuhan's phrase) they demands the active cooperation, social and intellectual involvement among its participants, standing in stark contrast to those passive and mind-numbing modes of entertainment so loved by the mass media whose level of "interactivity" is limited to voting on the vicarious nonsense of "Big Brother" or the contrived nonsense of "reality TV" - with one local exception; SBS and ABC's "The Colony", which provided an accurate setting and narrative of convict Australia.

Ultimately, the cultural and religious challenges that face us today are not dissimilar to those in times past. It is not a clash of civilisations, between "the West" and the "Arab world", or between "Christianity" and "Islam" or anything like that, as much as some would like to make it so for their own interests. It is a clash between secular sanity and theological madness. It is a clash between controlling systems of media and democratic systems of media. It's a clash between those who seek cultural impoverishment and loss of community and those who seek cultural regeneration and community development, between those who deny and wish to destroy otherness and those which embrace and seek to understand it. Indeed, under these circumstances role playing games may provide perhaps one of the best cultural product and avenue to promote the values than Unitarian-Universalists hold dear. Rather than view them as some sort of oddity, vaguely associated with fans of fantasy and science fiction literature and computer nerds, perhaps it is more useful to take advantage of these games.

Gather your character sheets. Bring your strange dice. Gather around. For there is another story to be told, another interpretation to be made, another world to explore, another future to build.