Excerpts from Joseph P. Laycock, <u>Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds</u> (2015), pp. 218-219, 220-221, 239-240

As [Brandon] Cooke points out, any model or symbolic order by which one might make sense of the world – including language – begins with the imagination. There can be no mental concept of evil unless it is first imagined. This is a problem for authors like Larson, Brown, and Schnoebele whose theology and politics are firmly located in "the religion of fear." Religious literature attacking role-playing games is often festooned with pentagrams and descriptions of human sacrifice. By the theology these critics employ, the artist who created the comic strip *Dark Dungeons* was actively engaged in Satanic occultism. An artist could draw the evil Ms. Frost – the teacher, dungeon master, and priestess of Diana – only if he encountered a demonic force in the spiritual realm, visualizing it well enough to give it material form through his art.

For this reason, more mainstream Christian critics of D&D concede that it is acceptable to imagine evil in at least some circumstances. In a more nuanced Christian critique of D&D, Presbyterian theologians Peter Leithart and George Grant ask whether a Christian actor can play Iago or Mephistopheles. Much like Plato, they conclude that mimicking evil is acceptable for educational purposes, but discourage fictional narratives that appear to celebrate corruption. This leads to a more sensible discussion of what kinds of fantastic narratives might be acceptable. Most, but not all, Christians who oppose fantasy role-playing games approve of Lewis, Tolkien, and even traditional fairy tales. The original version of Jack Chick's tract *Dark Dungeons* contained a footnote to the text in which the preacher urges the congregation to go home and burn D&D books and any other occult books. The footnote read: "Including C.S. Lewis and Tolkien, both of which can be found in occult bookstores." However, current versions of the tract contain no such reference. It is easy to see how a conservative evangelical like Jack Chick would assume that if D&D is Satanic, then Lewis and Tolkien must be Satanic as well. And yet most anti-D&D crusaders praise these writers. Leithart and Grant urge their readers to fill their homes with Lewis and Tolkien as well as Shakespeare, Milton and Chaucer. The arguments of moderates, who advocate Tolkien and Lewis while condemning fantasy role playing games, are more revealing than those of religious critics who condemn all fantasy as demonic. Moderate religious critics struggle to articulate why wizards, magic and demonic antagonist are acceptable in some fantasy narratives but not in others. The reasons they cite are inconsistent, suggesting the presence of hidden fears and desires underlying their suspicion of the imagination.

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The erotics of fear are apparent in these critiques. Leithart and Grant as well as Abanes clearly *enjoy* fantasy. In fact, all of these critics must be drawn to fantasy at some level or they would direct their energy toward other issues. And yet fantasy is somehow inherently threatening. The real threat of fantasy is not that it depicts evil as triumphant or that slight variations in the portrayal of magic will lure audiences into demonic occultism. Fantasy is threatening because it provides a means of "beyonding." The imaginary worlds of fantasy novels and role playing games allow audiences to mentally step outside their own worldview and look back on it. Not only does this kind of agency threaten the power of hegemonic movements; it also inspires doubts in the moral entrepreneurs themselves. As Jason Bivins wrote, "The religion of fear's most pressing concern is that the monster may lurk within as well as without." For these reasons, the door to fantasy can be safely opened only if it is certain that the other side is still thoroughly Christian. However, to simply state that fantasy is dangerous because it leads to critical thinking would reveal the presence of hegemony and thereby undermine it. The arguments presented by Ankerberg, Weldon, Leithart, Grant, and Abanes serve as cover to conceal the mechanisms of hegemony as well as their own doubts about how indulging in their love of fantasy might challenge their faith.

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To truly prevent the beyonding effect of fiction, it is necessary to claim that the imaginary worlds are not, in fact, imaginary but another part of reality. The moral panic over role-playing games employed a hermeneutic of fantasy that framed imaginary worlds not only as real but as part of a demonic threat. This a hermeneutic has a long genealogy in the West dating back to at least the Puritans.

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Christian critics have sometimes taken the position that the imagination is inherently heretical because "reality" is an expression of God's will, and therefore imagining any alternative reality is an attempt to rebel against God's plan. In the 1980s, moral entrepreneurs were fond of quoting "John," the gamer interviewed for an article in *New West*. John was quoted as saying: "The more I play D&D, the more I want to get away from this world. The whole thing is getting very bad." Leithart and Grant commented on this quote: "In a very dramatic way, D&D reinforced John's hatred for life as ordered and given by God." This is a peculiar comment for Christian theologians to make. Longing for a better world is arguably the essence of Christianity. Traditionally, Christianity has regarded the world as fallen to sin and fundamentally flawed. What is really at stake here is not proper reverence for God but control. Or rather, submission to the hegemony has become synonymous with submission to god.

Leithart and Grant go on to write:

> In summary, Scripture encourages leisure, play and even role-playing though always within the limits of moral Law. In the context of these standards, however, our imaginations find true freedom. Like the sheep to which the Scripture so often compares us, our freest play is within the fold. Outside, there is only bondage of fear that allows for no real leisure.

For all of their condemnation of modernity, the claim that reality is ipso facto God's plan for us is a modernist theology. It has far more in common with the Enlightenment philosophy of Gottfried Leibniz, who argued that this must be the "best of all possible worlds," than with the theodicy of Augustine, who believed that evil exists because while God is incorruptible, his creation is not. The strange theology suggested here appears to be simply a means of attacking the autonomy that role-playing provides. Here role-playing is condemned precisely because it entails a kind of freedom that Leithart and Grant regard as heretical. Anyone who has read George Orwell's *1984* will recognized their claim that freedom is actually bondage. Hegemonic rhetoric often presents propositions that are logical contradictions.

Others who have analyzed the panic over role-playing games have reached similar conclusions. Daniel Mackay, drawing on the work of Roland Barthes, notes that role-playing games are potentially threatening to the social order:

> Perhaps this is why much of the hostility and aggression against role-playing games in the United States has come from the religious right, which accuses role-playing games of being avenues to satanic worship and occult practices. The religious right is really at war with an alternative social world in which "men give meaning to things."

Isaac Bonewitz in the preface to *Authentic Thaumaturgy*, his book on realistic occultism in fantasy role-playing games, identifies role-playing as a dire threat to hegemony and the religious right:

> Obviously, a hobby that teaches young people how "reality" is a socially constructed concept, that many people have had different religious and magical ideas over millennia, that one faith's demons are another faith's deities, and that anyone can easily invent their own religion (complete with "infallible" scriptures), is going to be a direct threat to wealthy and powerful men who would rather not let such "dangerous" knowledge spread.

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The preacher's kids and their friends will, of course, continue to read and play fantasy games whenever their parents aren't looking. Perhaps when enough young people have learned the tolerance, flexibility and creativity that becoming a good game player requires, the Greyfaces who've built their empires of anger, hatred and fear, will finally fall – and the real Illuminati will be able to rejoice!

Bonewitz' tone is gleeful and almost messianic. However, his advocacy of playing role-playing games as a form of resistance to hegemony is not very different from Gramsci's advocacy of learning Latin.

As the font of new possibilities, the imagination is inherently threatening to those who seek to preserve order and the status quo – whether they are kindergarten teachers, Victorian pedagogues, the religious right, or a Fascist government. However, maintaining order by closing off the secondary worlds of fiction and fantasy comes at a terrible price. Cognitive scientist now know that the imagination does not weaken children's grasp on the real world but is actually a mechanism through which the world is rendered sensible. If we abandon our capacity to create new worlds, other capacities are diminished as well. Our facilities for reason, art, and abstract thought of all kinds begin with our ability to step outside the world as it is given to us and discover it anew. A Christian like Tolkien would argue this is not a heretical faculty but our divine right as subcreators.

- o **Commentary:** It seems *almost* beyond imagination now that there was such a public brouhaha over fantasy role-playing games in the 1980s and into the early 1990s (but no fundamentalist objection apparently to military miniatures games, board wargames, and games like Monopoly, Easy Money, etc.). According to the pundits, Dungeons & Dragons ("D&D") was the end of American youth, an existential threat to the future of the country, and/or a sign of the end of times. I had a subscription to Dragon Magazine for a couple of years starting in 1990 and also bought some older issues to add to my collection; all together, I have about 50+ hard copies stretching from #113 to #213, plus a few others. Additionally, all of the issues of Dragon Magazine are available for free in PDF on annarchive.com. In those days, Dragon Magazine regularly included arguments about "Christian gaming," and especially the controversy over TSR's poor decision to remove demons, devils and angels (or rather, to rename them) from AD&D 2nd Edition. Oddly, there are two specific situations that I remember from Dragon Magazine that I cannot now locate:

    - ✓ An editorial or article where TSR belatedly admitted "we caved in" to pressure from religious fundamentalist who would never buy or read D&D books and that they had betrayed the paying customers who bought their books, who have no problem with demons, devils and angels in the game, and who constitute the player base of D&D.
    - ✓ A public response to a letter allegedly sent by religious high school students asking the editors questions about D&D as if D&D were a religion. The ruse was transparent; they were trying to bait the editors of Dragon Magazine (an organ of TSR) to say things in response that could be used against D&D (or construed as satanic or occult). The editors saw through it and took the high road, pointing out the purposes of education and encouraging the students to do research.

    I spent a couple of days looking for these articles, but it seems as if they occurred in an alternate reality. But in the process, I located the text excerpted above, which excellently reprises the situation; noting however, that the outline or form of the arguments offered by Mr. Laycock are the same as those previously used against religious injunction or repression of sexual activities and carnal desires (even within a marital relationship): conspiratorially suggesting that the clergy or "moral entrepreneurs" were secretly terrified of their own sexuality and carnal desires, and desired to deprive everyone else of the same, and that doing so was a means of establishing socio-moral control and hegemony over society, gaining for them political power and wealth. Such arguments are difficult either to prove or to dismiss entirely, and so remain, especially in light of the Church's recent (and long history of) scandals.

    On the other hand, the religious right didn't do themselves any favors arguing over D&D, they came out looking like fools. If Nick Spencer's assertions are correct, the brouhaha over D&D played significantly into the cause of modern atheism rather than bringing more people, especially youth, to the church. The religious right does not seem to have learned from the experience, they just find another boogieman.