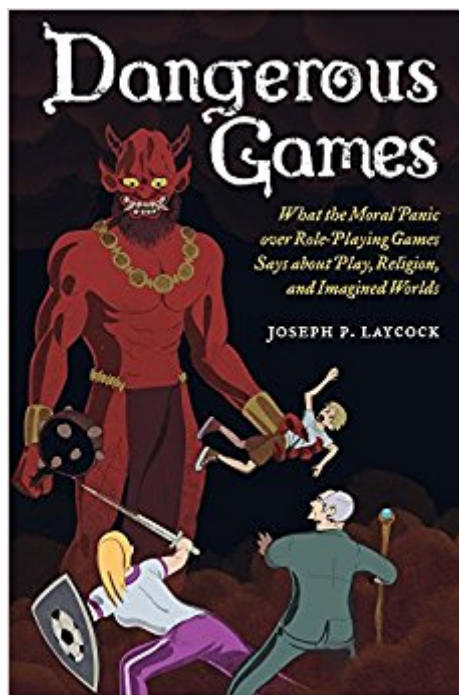


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# Dangerous Games: What The Moral Panic Over Role-Playing Games Says About Play, Religion, And Imagined Worlds



## Synopsis

The 1980s saw the peak of a moral panic over fantasy role-playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons. A coalition of moral entrepreneurs that included representatives from the Christian Right, the field of psychology, and law enforcement claimed that these games were not only psychologically dangerous but an occult religion masquerading as a game. *Dangerous Games* explores both the history and the sociological significance of this panic. Fantasy role-playing games do share several functions in common with religion. However, religion—as a socially constructed world of shared meaning—can also be compared to a fantasy role-playing game. In fact, the claims of the moral entrepreneurs, in which they presented themselves as heroes battling a dark conspiracy, often resembled the very games of imagination they condemned as evil. By attacking the imagination, they preserved the taken-for-granted status of their own socially constructed reality. Interpreted in this way, the panic over fantasy-role playing games yields new insights about how humans play and together construct and maintain meaningful worlds. Laycock's clear and accessible writing ensures that *Dangerous Games* will be required reading for those with an interest in religion, popular culture, and social behavior, both in the classroom and beyond.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Joseph P. Laycock's book delves into the minds of both avid gamers and evangelical Christians and returns with surprising and unsettling conclusions. Gaming, Laycock shows, teaches social and psychological strategies to resist cultural authority and to view reality from radically new

perspectives. This book affirms the transformational power that motivates this increasingly popular activity, and thus it is essential reading for scholars of both contemporary popular culture and American religions."•#151;Bill Ellis, Professor Emeritus, English and American Studies, Pennsylvania State University •#147;Laycockâ™s book brings a robust, theoretically informed eye to a topic that has been understudied by sociologists. His case is presented in such a way that other scholars could apply his method and understanding of moral panic to other aspects of popular culture. This is a crucial aspect of scholarship. Laycock writes engagingly, tells a deft story, and advances our understanding.â•#151;Doug Cowan, Professor of Religious Studies and Social Development Studies, Renison University College •#147;Laycock provides an in-depth, theoretically informed analysis of fantasy role-playing games that will both help scholars interpretively and further allow instructors to provide students with a more sophisticated view of their culture. This book more broadly examines the social construction of reality, particularly religion. Laycock's approach makes a much-needed contribution to the understanding of the human need and capacity for creating and inhabiting multiple realities. A truly novel interpretation.â•#151;David G. Bromley, Professor of Religious Studies and Director of the World Religions and Spirituality Project, Virginia Commonwealth University Â

Joseph P. Laycock is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Texas State University. His previous books include *Vampires Today: The Truth About Modern Vampirism* and *The Seer of Bayside: Veronica Lueken and the Struggle for Catholicism*. He is also a blogger for *Religion Dispatches*.

This book is a mix of RPG industry history, and sociology/religious studies text. The sociology parts are presented as an academic view of the various moral panics that have been associated with role playing games. The religious studies aspect includes an analysis of how RPGs are and are not similar to religion, and why this comparison was so often made in society at large. You may or may not agree with the author's conclusions but I feel it these are mostly a fair analysis and not merely a cheap shot at religion generally. The book is well written and the author keeps the subject matter interesting. For RPG fans, the history of TSR and White Wolf is worth the price of admission alone.

Superb, thoughtful, well-researched. If you're interested in the history and culture of role-playing games, the nature of moral panics, or the sociology of religion, this is a fascinating read. Makes a good companion piece with one of my other favourite books about RPGs, Daniel Mackay's *The*

## Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art.

Very insightful look into the root causes of the "Satanic panic" of the '70s-'90s, as well as the birth of TSR and White Wolf games. Yes, it's written with sociologists and religious studies majors in mind, but this is one of the few academic books on gaming that deserves a wider audience. The most enjoyable book on gaming culture I've read since *I, Avatar* by Mark Stephen Meadows.

Excellent book, explored why people are afraid of such RPGs

Long, long ago, back in the ancient junior-high days, I played Dungeons & Dragons. This was back in the old boxed set era – what I still think of as the glory days of D&D – and I’ll freely admit it was a weird game. Most game sessions involved exploring underground dungeons populated by nothing but seemingly random collections of monsters living in squalor but surrounded by treasure. Wizards weren’t allowed to wear armor or carry weapons more significant than a dagger, and their spells disappeared from their minds as soon as they were cast – unless they’d memorized the same spell more than once. And there was some sort of armadillo that had somehow evolved the ability to cause metal to rust. But the weirdest thing of all was how many people believed that playing a game of pretend could cause you to worship the devil. I was lucky, because while my parents surely thought D&D was weird, they never believed it was evil, and they never told me I wasn’t allowed to play. But there were lots of people who bought into that ridiculous story. But why did people believe it? Why did people push it? What were they getting out of pushing something so utterly deranged? That’s what this book is about – why was there a huge moral panic about D&D (and roleplaying games in general), why were people so eager to believe that bookish teenagers were devil worshipers, who were the people helping to fan the flames, and what benefits did they gain from inventing conspiracy theories that made no rational sense? Laycock’s book is exhaustively detailed, detailing the history of the game and the panic from the beginning, setting down the names of a vast number of conspiracy theorists, and analyzing not just the motives of the theorists, but the many ways they were actually very similar to the teenagers they were targeting. Let’s start out with this, though – this isn’t an easy, two-nights-to-finish pop-psych skimmer. This is a pretty serious academic work. There are hefty chunks of the book devoted to professorial discussions of play, religion, and the imagination. Those may sound easy and fun, but when you’re analyzing the research into these academic areas, they can be a bit of a slog to get through. There are pages of this book you may

have to force yourself to get through, particularly if you're not well-versed in these academic areas. This may sound like a bad thing, but it isn't really. You learn stuff going through these sections, and learning this stuff helps you appreciate Laycock's analysis later in the book. This is the nature of academic works, and it doesn't make it bad just because it isn't easy. What are some of the things we learn in Laycock's analysis? One of the key discussions is about play and imagination – particularly when it's healthy and when it's unhealthy, and what happens when people can't tell the difference between their imaginations and reality. I don't think it'll come as a great surprise to anyone who's followed this phenomenon before, but there are some serious similarities between D&D players and the conspiracy theorists who persecuted them. D&D players played at being brave heroes battling against monstrous horrors to save the innocent. And the conspiracy theorists like Patricia Pulling, William Dear, and Jack Chick also played at being brave heroes battling against monstrous horrors to save the innocent. Now which ones do you think knew they were playing a game, and which ones do you think had mistaken their game for reality? Even then, there are some items in here that still surprised me. I never really imagined there were people who were actually opposed to anyone using their imagination – but there are, because imagining things means thinking of things that God didn't create. And this distrust of the imagination actually extends back centuries – some Greek philosophers didn't trust fiction or the arts at all, and even Thomas Jefferson hated novels because he thought books should only convey things that were true, not falsities and fictions. There's a lot of excellent stuff to learn in this book. If you're an old-school gamer with a taste for the hobby's history, if you've got an interest in moral panics, if you love learning new things about how humans use and abuse play and religion, you'll probably really enjoy this book.

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