“Dungeons, Dragons, and the Devil”: Faith, Authority, and Identity through Role-Playing Games during the Satanic Panic in Calgary

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Positionality Statement

As this paper begins, it is important to note my personal involvement with this topic and the biases that may have arisen as a result. Firstly, while I have an appreciation for faith and have dabbled with spirituality more broadly, I do not consider myself a religious person. I did attend a series of Catholic schools for much of my life, though this was done more out of familial tradition than any genuine involvement with the Roman Catholic Church and I exited the system as a non-believer. Secondly, I was born and raised in Calgary, though I had no relationship with the individuals I spoke to during the research of this paper prior to our meetings, nor have I ever interacted with the church communities or gaming groups referenced here. Third, I am a hetero-identifying man. Gender and sexual identities are important themes within this paper, and while I deeply value trying to ally and educate myself on these topics, my perspective will always be limited by my own identity. Lastly, I am an avid role-playing gamer, a lifelong lover of all things fantasy, and I have always believed that imagination and storytelling can be powerful forms of expression and self-assertion. They have been very beneficial to my own life and have led me to recognize the importance that they can have for others, both today and historically. While I see this as an asset as I seek to understand the relevance of gaming to those in the past, I also acknowledge how this has affected my gaze as a historian.

Introduction

Moral panics occur socially when groups who are perceiving social or cultural deviances in their communities attempt to expose or correct these deviances with unnecessary and disproportionate extremity due to the heightened emotional volatility and anxiety of the concerned groups, which often results in the demonization and mass-stigmatization of those who the fears are directed at.[1] Generally, moral panics are spread widely through mass media and legitimized by institutions of social authority such as the police and the broader judicial system.[2] In the 1980s, a moral panic, later known as the Satanic Panic, embedded itself into conservative Christian politics in North America. This movement articulated an anxiety that had infiltrated many Christian communities and homes across the continent; it feared that secretive cabals of Satan worshippers were operating within all levels of society, unbeknownst to the general populace.[3] Suspicions of anti-Christian activity and "occult crime" became highly sensationalized in North American media, with an explicit focus on stories that were deemed threatening to the lives of the conservative, nuclear, white suburban family.[4] These ranged from accusations of Satanic sexual abuse at daycares, to cult indoctrination disguised as local community groups.[5] Being the largest city within a province with a distinct history of Christian-

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[1] Jock Young, "Moral Panic: Its Origins in Resistance, Ressentiment and the Translation of Fantasy into Reality," *British Journal of Criminology* 49, no. 1 (2009): 13, doi:10.1093/bjc/azn074.
[2] Ibid, 13.
[3] Joseph P. Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds*, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 102.
[4] Sarah Hughes, *American Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970-2000* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 1-8. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-83636-8.
[5] Ibid, 1-3.

influenced conservative political thought, Calgary, Alberta was especially susceptible to the Satanic Panic in a Canadian context.[6]

Among the many vestiges of youth counterculture that were believed to have been weaponized by underground Satanists was the world of fantasy role-playing games. Dungeons & Dragons, alongside other contemporary RPGs, became swept up in a discourse of intense moral scrutiny which accused them of being brainwashing tools that were driving young people towards occult worship, witchcraft, suicide, and murder.[7] Anti-RPG advocacy groups, such as Patricia Pulling's B.A.D.D. (Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons), began to pop up in communities across the continent, lobbying schools, libraries, and community centers to ban the game from their premises. Striking rhetoric was used which was meant to shock parents into action. For example, Christian fundamentalist William Schnoebelen authored an article through the publishing arm of evangelist Jack Chick entitled "Straight Talk on Dungeons & Dragons," which contained a list of teenage suicides, which Schnoebelen attributed to Dungeons & Dragons, called the "Hall of Shame."[8] These anti-RPG advocacy groups commonly spread their messages through small pamphlets that were distributed at churches, schools, police departments, and welfare agencies.[9]

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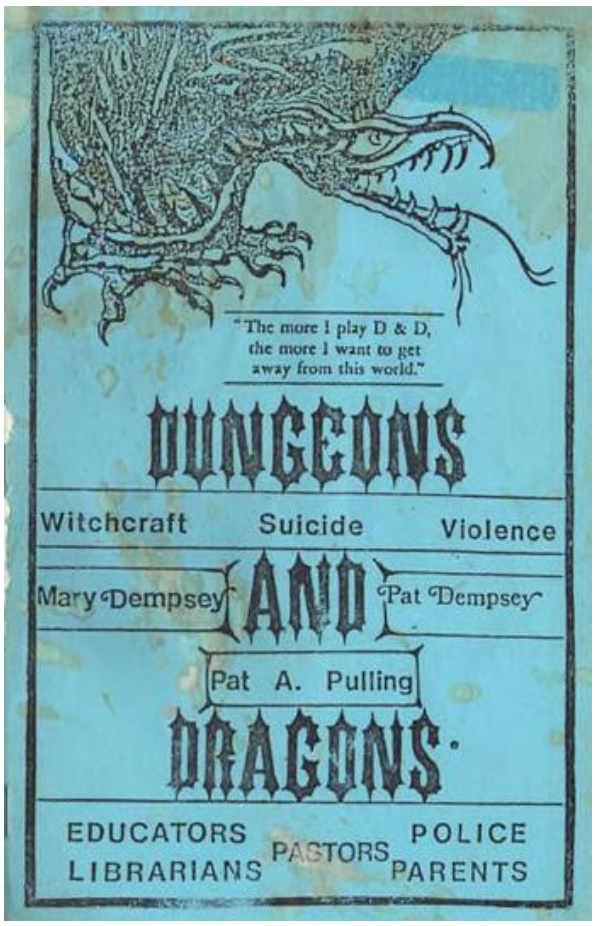
[6] Clark Banack, *God's Province: Evangelical Christianity, Political Thought, and Conservatism in Alberta*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), 103-5, doi:10.1515/9780773599307; Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945* (Montreal; McGill-Queen's University Press), 2017, 231.

[7] Mary Dempsey, Pat Dempsey, and Patricia Pulling, *Dungeons & Dragons: Witchcraft, Suicide, Violence* [1985?], 3, https://archive.org/details/dungeons_and_dragons-witchcraft_suicide_violence/mode/1up.

[8] William Schnoebelen, "Straight Talk on Dungeons and Dragons," Chick Publications, 1989, https://www.chick.com/Information/article?id=Straight-Talk-On-Dungeons-and-Dragons.

[9] David Waldron, "Role-Playing Games and the Christian Right: Community Formation in Response to a Moral Panic," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 9, no. 1 (2005), 11. doi:10.3138/jrpc.9.1.003.



[10]

Figure 1. The cover page of an anti-RPG pamphlet co-authored by B.A.D.D. founder Patricia Pulling. Content includes a list of suicides, in-game spell preparation, and themes of human sacrifice.

Today, we look at RPGs and other communal gaming spaces with eyes that are much less fearful. As Canadian society has become increasingly more secularized over the past forty years, and what was once considered subversive youth counterculture has been normalized in the lives of everyday people of multiple generations, the ammunition required to sustain a Christianity-

[10] Dempsey, Dempsey, and Pulling, *Dungeons & Dragons: Witchcraft, Suicide, Violence* [1985?], https://archive.org/details/dungeons_and_dragons-witchcraft_suicide_violence/mode/1up.

fueled moral panic has mostly left Canadian society.[11] In recent years, RPGs have exploded in popularity and though no concrete statistics are available, Wizards of the Coast (Dungeons & Dragons' publisher) has claimed that in 2017 they saw a near 50% sales increase from the previous year and estimated between 12 to 15 million active players in North America alone.[12] The negative stigma associated with the hobby has mostly bled away, and if you are looked down upon for playing Dungeons & Dragons today, it would probably be through a harmless eye roll and the question, "don't you have anything better to be doing?" Accusations of Satanism are long removed from the equation.

For these reasons, it is easy for us to look back and scoff at the outlandishness of the type of rhetoric that was used to describe RPGs and their players in the 1980s. However, it is important for us to remember that for those who grew up in environments where such accusations were seen as credible, the effect of these accusations on players' sense of self, their social life, and their conceptions of faith and social authority were very real. Even when they themselves did not personally buy into the anxiety, as was true of the participants in this study, having one's own community embrace such an extreme narrative had an effect. The narrative players were being told often contradicted their own knowledge of themselves and their values, and this would have had an impact on that person's sense of identity and of community.[13] This is especially true when we consider the challenges, including ostracization, that a young person may have to endure should their life not align with the teachings of their church. These Christian

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[11] Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 245.
[12] Nicole Brodeur, "Behind the scenes of the making of Dungeons & Dragons," *The Seattle Times* (Seattle, WA), May. 4, 2018.
[13] John, Interview with the author, February 3rd, 2025; Sean D., Interview with the author, January 23rd, 2025; Sean S., Interview with the author, February 25th, 2025; Walter, Interview with the author, February 7th, 2025.

teachings tended to be more restrictive in conservative branches of Christianity such as evangelicalism.[14]

The historical context of the Satanic Panic provides a unique backdrop through which to study the function of role-playing games which are, at their core, a form of communal storytelling; it is my view that they are worth studying as a form of expression. As is true for more typical expressive art forms, such as music and cinema, the stories we choose tell ourselves and each other will always be reflective of our own personal contexts. In this thesis, I examine how people who grew up exposed to conservative Christian environments, and were active members of role-playing communities, were impacted by the attacks on RPGs during the Satanic Panic in Calgary. Specifically, I focus on how this contentious relationship affected players' understandings of faith, authority, and identity in their own lives and in their communities. I argue that RPGs served as a tool through which players were able to explore and challenge the social order of their everyday environment, and that it was this function of RPGs that made them threatening to the religious hegemony within conservative Christian communities. During this time, the games were at once a catalyst for social panic and anxiety, and a tool through which players could process reality, challenge reality, and explore their identities on their own terms.

Methodology

The primary methodology of this thesis is oral history, which was done through oral history interviews and is supported by traditional secondary source scholarship. Interviews were

[14] Jenny Trinitapoli, "'I Know This Isn't PC, But ...': Religious Exclusivism among U.S. Adolescents," *Sociological Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (2007): 475-76, doi:10.1111/j.1533-8525.2007.00085.

conducted with four individuals who were active members of role-playing communities during the mid to late 1980s and were also either active or peripheral members of Christian communities in Calgary during this time. Participants were also between the ages of 16 to 25 during the Satanic Panic. I selected this age group as RPGs were much more prominent in youth culture in the early years of their popularity than among the rest of the population. I would also argue that, when considering identity development and expression amidst shifting ideas of community and social relationships, that our youth and early adulthood are when these things firmly root themselves within our worldviews.[15] To reach potential participants to interview, I used social forums for local Calgary gaming groups to advertise the project and invited anyone who fit these criteria to contact me. When determining the oral history questions I asked and the order in which they were asked, I was guided by Valerie Yow's *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, as well as Lynn Abrams' *Oral History Theory*.[16]

Oral history is an appropriate method for this study when we consider the topics being engaged with. Questions of faith and identity can be incredibly complex and fluid; every individual will experience these things in different ways unique to themselves. People should be given the opportunity to speak, in their own terms, about how they conceptualize their own identities, rather than having such things imposed upon them based on assumptions made from secondary literature. Given the relatively contemporary timeframe of the project, and the greater

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[15] Krisztina Jakobsen and Paige Pischer, *Child Adolescent Development: A Topical Approach* (James Madison University: JMU Press, 2023). Chapter 11. https://pressbooks.lib.jmu.edu/topicalchilddev/chapter/identity-development-theory/

[16] Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2nd ed., (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2005); Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 2nd ed., (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016).

visibility that role-playing communities have enjoyed in the 21st century, interviews with community members who were active during the 1980s were a relatively accessible means of researching the era, especially when we consider the sparse historiography, which will be expanded upon below.

Fortunately for this project, the participants were quite eager to share their stories about the Satanic Panic. Playing RPGs was a rather important aspect of each of the participants lives when they were younger, and they remain so today. They were central to their social lives during the 1980s and have resulted in decades long friendships. Two of the participants have even made professional ventures out of their passion for fantasy and role-playing. It is a privilege to have had the opportunity to speak face to face with these individuals and work with their stories directly. Had this project relied entirely on secondary material, the types of experiences shared in the interviews would likely have only been accessible through indirect references and footnotes. A large benefit of interviews is that the researcher, when questioning the information being laid out to them, can do so literally and be given an immediate response. Exploring each individuals' unique perspective is a lot more straightforward when they are being directly prompted to communicate it to you as best as they can. Oral histories and interviews are naturally very subjective things, as they are influenced in both directions by the questions the interviewer chooses to ask and the story the participant desires to tell.[17] The nature of oral history, and historical research more generally, makes this kind of subjectivity unavoidable, but it is important to be aware of how it may present itself. For example, the participants in this study love to play RPGs and they came into the interviews wanting to share why. In the context of this study, that subjectivity is less of a concern given that the narrative that each participant has

[17] Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences,* 17-23.

created for themselves, both to explain the Satanic Panic and articulate the role of RPGs in their own lives, is exactly what this thesis seeks to explore.

It is also important to briefly acknowledge memory as a source and to understand its construction and the factors affecting it. As oral historian Lynn Abrams understands, "memory is not a storehouse where one can find a ready-formed story. What is important is that memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings."[18] The contemporary framework through which the participants view the Satanic Panic will influence which memories they access and how they form a narrative out of them. Looking back on the Satanic Panic's treatment of RPGs, Canadian secularization combined with the normalization of the games today have made it a rather alien event to many Canadians of the 2020s. When the participants recall their individual memories of the Satanic Panic, they do so under the influence of a contemporary society that has generally concluded that it was a strange time with many extreme claims that are often laughed at today. This framework appears in the memories shared by my interviewees, but nonetheless, they provided important insights into the role that this game played in their lives during this time.

Of course, this methodology certainly has its limitations. First and foremost, interviews were conducted with four individuals, and all were male. This is not necessarily a surprising sample bias; though the hobby has seen much more female representation in recent years, the RPG community was certainly male dominated during the 1980s. Dungeons and Dragons creator Gary Gygax stated in a 1979 issue of *Dragon Magazine* that the female demographic of the game was estimated to be around 10%, while scholar Gary Alan Fine used survey data and RPG

[18] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 79.

convention attendance listings to argue that the true figure was likely closer to a mere 5%.[19] Additionally, none of the four men interviewed openly identified with the LGBTQ+ or other minority communities. The role of RPGs in the lives of those grappling with questions surrounding identity and expression is a core question of this paper, thus, gender and sexuality are naturally relevant themes within this conversation. These topics came up relatively frequently within the interviews, but most commentary on alternative expressions of gender and sexuality was made regarding friends of the participants and other players in their games, rather than personal experience. This is an unfortunate shortcoming regarding representation within my sample, but I would argue an acceptable one given that this is the first effort to explore these issues in this historical context, and I hope it will help this issue be explored further in the future.

Historiography

Historical accounts which treat tabletop role-playing games as more than an insignificant hobby of a niche section of late-20th century 'nerd' counterculture is certainly sparse within the field. Modern sociology has embraced both role-playing games and broader gaming environments as instruments which serve an important social function, but this interest has yet to penetrate the historical discipline in a significant way. This is likely due to a combination of factors. Firstly, role-playing games are a relatively young form of communal gaming; the first edition of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons was published in 1974 and did not enjoy a significant level of success until 1979, when it was being played by an estimated 300 000 players

[19] Gary Gygax, "The Melee in D&D," *Dragon Magazine* 3, no. 10 (1979), 19; Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1983, 41.

worldwide.[20] Given that the game did not gain mainstream significance until the 21st century, it is likely that historians just have not considered it a worthwhile subject of study or have never been exposed to the games. Secondly, RPG communities in their early years of popularity were quite insular. Due to both the youth of the players and the general social stigmatization of the game, gaming groups typically encompassed a small number of people who were often already friends or acquaintances before they joined the groups. The existence of RPG groups was not always outwardly obvious, and the 'insider-outsider' nature of the hobby meant that they typically grew through interpersonal relationships and word of mouth, as opposed to the widely accessible advertisements we see digitally today.[21] These factors have resulted in a rather limited academic source base, which I have bolstered through oral interviews and other primary sources.

Of the academic literature available which looks at RPGs specifically in the context of the Satanic Panic, I have primarily consulted Joseph Laycock's *Dangerous Games* and David Waldron's *Role-Playing Games and the Christian Right*. Laycock, writing from a religious studies perspective combines elements of both history and sociology, whereas Waldron's writing is expressly historical. Laycock's book provides the most comprehensive overview of the Panic's chronology, as well as analysis of the dynamic relationship between religion and fantasy games, how this relationship brought forward questions about the social construction of reality, and how it may be both reinforced and challenged by our collective imagination.[22] His generous usage of primary sources and quotations, typically from newspaper publications and other media, was exceptionally helpful in finding appropriate sources for this project. Waldron's article addresses

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[20] Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds,* 66.
[21] Walter, Interview with the author, February 7th, 2025.
[22] Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds*, 2015.

the evolution of the RPG community as a result of the Panic, examines the communal identity of RPG participants which arose during and following the Panic, as well as several ways in which the community defended itself during this period.[23] Another, more general source is Sarah Hughes' *American Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970-2000*.[24] The book analyses the relationship between the Panic and American 'infotainment' journalism, and though it was written in an American context, it remains applicable to this paper; Canadians do tend to consume large amounts of American media, and I have not found any scholarship which suggests that the American and Canadian contexts of the Satanic Panic are significantly different from one another in their causes. A limitation that is consistent throughout all three of these sources is that they are not geographically specific beyond a very broad continental lens, or in Hughes' case, an American lens. Laycock and Waldron both acknowledge to the scope of the Satanic Panic, but they consider it a distinctly American event and are not concerned with evaluating it from a geographic standpoint.[25] To remedy this, I have relied on sources that explore the sociopolitical and religious context of Alberta during the 1980s, and these sources are expanded upon further below.

Gary Alan Fine's *Shared Reality* is a foundational text on the world of RPGs and how players create meaning within them which reflects themselves and their socio-cultural environment.[26] His book is, to my knowledge, one of the first instances of scholarship on RPGs and has informed much of the additional literature I cite in this thesis. Both Fine and Laycock

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[23] David Waldron, "Role-Playing Games and the Christian Right: Community Formation in Response to a Moral Panic," 2005.
[24] Hughes, *American Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970-2000*, 2021.
[25] Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds*, 2015; David Waldron, "Role-Playing Games and the Christian Right: Community Formation in Response to a Moral Panic," 2005.
[26] Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*, 1983.

recognize the allure of the alternate-self which exists within RPGs and the use of liminal spaces within games to explore identity and challenge the status quo. However, in their work this is mostly articulated through the player relationship with power and violence within the game world.[27] This interest in social taboo exploration does not extend beyond acts of violence, thus I have looked to contemporary sociology to fill the gap regarding the less insidious, more context dependent examples of taboo and identity exploration which have become a focus of this paper.

Sociologists Katherine Cross, Felix Rose Kawitzky, Sonder Van Wert, and Kristina Howansky have produced contemporary studies which examine the role that role-playing environments have taken on in the exploration of gender and sexuality within the LGBTQ+ and feminist communities. They argue for the liminal space of RPGs as an opportunity for the construction of queer utopian spaces where individuals may be encouraged to explore their own identities without fear of consequence or discrimination, should they not be comfortable or socially permitted to express such aspects of themselves in their immediate reality.[28] This scholarship has been very helpful in helping fill the gap within historical literature which has yet to treat games as significant in identity formation and expression; however, these are sociological sources which were not written with a particular historical framework in mind. Though they were written about contemporary RPGs, their analyses of how these games function in their players' lives can in many ways be applied to a historical analysis of earlier players. RPGs have evolved

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[27] Ibid; Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds*, 2015.

[28] Katherine Angel Cross, "The New Laboratory of Dreams: Role-Playing Games as Resistance," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 3/4 (2012): 72-88; Felix Rose Kawitzky, "Magic Circles: Tabletop Role-Playing Games as Queer Utopian Method," *Performance Research* 25, no. 8 (2020): 129–36. doi:10.1080/13528165.2020.1930786; Sonder Van Wert and Kristina Howansky, "Fantasy Worlds, Real-Life Impact: The Benefits of RPGs for Transgender Identity Exploration," *Journal of Homosexuality* (2024) 1–27, doi:10.1080/00918369.2024.2320242.

in terms of settings, rulesets, and instruments of play, but their core ideas have not changed nearly enough to warrant a different definition of what an RPG is between a late 20th century in-person context and a 21st century digital context.

To place this framework within the context of Southern Alberta's Christian communities, I have predominantly consulted Brian Clarke and Stuard Macdonald's *Leaving Christianity*, Clark Banack's *God's Province*, and Jason Bivins' *Religion of Fear*.[29] *Leaving Christianity* tracks the broader national trends of religious affiliation throughout Canada, with particular focus on the shift away from Christianity and increase in self-identifying non-denominational and non-religious people from the 1960s onwards.[30] The text approaches Christianity on a national level, and thus lacks any explicit focus on Albertan Christian conservatism, though it does provide useful background and a clearer sense of the broader secularization of Canadian society over this period. Alberta is to some extent an exception to this pattern of secularization and the texts *God's Province* and *Religion of Fear* have been especially useful in understanding the conservative thought inherent in Christian evangelicalism and the factors behind its prevalence in Alberta during the Satanic Panic. Bivins illustrates the need for salvation amidst the fear of dark, corrupting influences tied to everyday society as a central motivator for pious living in Evangelical communities, and Banack echoes this sentiment in his understanding of the increase in Christian-motivated social conservatism in 1980s Alberta as a response to the 1982 Charter or Rights and Freedoms.[31] These studies help to situate the religious tensions of the Satanic Panic in

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[29] Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945*, 2017; Banack, *God's Province: Evangelical Christianity, Political Thought, and Conservatism in Alberta,* 2016; Jason Bivins, *Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in Conservative Evangelicalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2008.

[30] Stuart and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 2017.

[31] Bivins, *Religion of Fear*, 2008; Banack, *God's Province*, 2016.

an Alberta-specific socio-religious perspective as opposed to the more general North American context that the majority of texts have used.

The Satanic Panic in Calgary

Before analyzing the experiences of the participants, it is important to situate the Satanic Panic in a context specific to Calgary. Broadly, scholar Sarah Hughes argues that the Satanic Panic was symptomatic of the formation of the "New Right" and its antagonisms towards the numerous liberal social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The normalization of LGBTQ+ advocacy, sex positivity, feminism, black power movements, and science as a replacement of faith was unifying for conservatives Christians who feared that their children were at increasing risk of falling prey to dangerous lifestyles which were being promoted by a society straying further and further away from traditional biblical stewardship.[32] This theory falls in line with 1980s Albertan politics which saw Christian-based social conservatism extending beyond its rural pockets and into Calgary and Edmonton as a reaction to the introduction of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.[33] The Charter enshrined equality rights for religious minorities in federal law and legislated against sexuality-based discrimination, a development which social conservatives saw as encouraging immoral behaviour.[34] This is an aspect of the Satanic Panic that was reflected within one of the interviews of this study; Sean D. considers the Satanic

[32] Hughes, *American Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970-2000*, 3-4.
[33] Banack, *God's Province: Evangelical Christianity, Political Thought, and Conservatism in Alberta*, 160.
[34] Ibid, 161.

Panic's presence in Calgary to be an echo of the American mobilization of the Christian right during the Reagan era.[35]

If we look at some of the conservative Albertan media of the time, explaining the Satanic Panic as a symptom of political dissatisfaction continues to make sense. *The Alberta Report*, a conservative magazine based in Edmonton, saw an estimated readership of 250 000 by the mid-1980s and, during the height of its popularity, it maintained the message that societal decline, from the end of the nuclear family to increased crime rates and drug use, could be attributed to the idea that Alberta had lost its respect for traditional Christian values.[36] This fear that the increased acceptance of anti-Biblical values were widening the cracks in Canadian society created the conditions necessary for the Satanic Panic to bleed north of the American border and become present within the socio-political discourse of Albertan conservatives. A 1990 academic survey of conceptions of Satanism in Canadian society contains numerous references to the appearance of Satanic fear in Calgary newspapers.[37] Among these references is an Alberta RCMP constable claiming that in "Calgary alone there are supposedly 5000 practicing Satanists," as well as an American 'expert' putting the number of Satanists at "under 100 000" with no indication as to whether that number represented Alberta, Canada, or the whole of North America. Both quotes were published by the Calgary Herald in 1987.[38] Of the four participants in this study, three shared that their gaming groups were incredibly quiet about the fact that they played RPGs due to the hysteria that they were witnessing in their communities and in the

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[35] Sean D., Interview with the author, January 23rd, 2025.
[36] Banack, *God's Province: Evangelical Christianity, Political Thought, and Conservatism in Alberta*, 161.
[37] Randy Lippert, "The Construction of Satanism as a Social Problem in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 15, no. 4 (1990): 417–39. doi:10.2307/3341129.
[38] Ibid, 424.

media.[39] Walter shared that, even today, he is not very open about being an RPG player because of his experience during the Satanic Panic.[40]

The fear that spread its tendrils throughout the conservative evangelical community often did so through televangelists with ties to the American Republican Party, which articulated the demonic as a threat to the nuclear, suburban family.[41] Leading voices in the anti-RPG discourse such as Jack Chick, whose comic strip (or Chick Tract) 'Darkest Dungeons' is now an iconic example of this discourse, also published an extensive series of comics containing hateful rhetoric which demonized different kinds of people seen as deviant by the Evangelical church, such as the LGBTQ+ community, painting them as major threats to children.[42] There would have been a large amount overlap between this type of rhetoric and Albertan conservative politics which had a history of arguing against the political advancements of LGTBTQ+ rights, abortion, multiculturalism, and other aspects of left-wing policy from a Christian basis in publications such as *The Alberta Report*.[43]

The movement of the Satanic Panic into Alberta is by no means entirely reliant on a porous cultural border with the United States, as earlier 20th century Albertan history has a deep connection to politically active Evangelicalism on its own. The Alberta Social Credit Party, which is a conservative party founded on evangelical principles, was in power in Alberta from

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[39] Sean D., Interview with the author, January 23rd, 2025; John, Interview with the author, February 3rd, 2025; Walter, Interview with the author, February 7th, 2025.
[40] Walter, Interview with the author, February 7th, 2025.
[41] Hughes, *American Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970-2000*, 90.
[42] Jack Chick, "Dark Dungeons." Chick Publications, 1984, https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=0046; Jack Chick, "Home Alone?" Chick Publications, https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=1039&ue=m; Jack Chick, "Birds and the Bees," Chick Publications, https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=1052&srsltid=AfmBOoqL0TpuAVOyPZWHHbmw9aGAlcmLNQF4H3rCBl37fD23HgczhNtF.
[43] Banack, *God's Province*, 164.

1935 until 1971. The party was founded by radio evangelist William Aberhart and upheld for many years by Ernest Manning following Aberhart's death. Both men were devout Christian fundamentalists whose religious beliefs greatly influenced their political thought, and they each served as Premiers in Alberta for a combined 33 years. Banack shares that the religious perspective of Aberhart and Manning's Social Credit "did grow out of the same broad tradition of American evangelical Protestantism."[44] Social Credit normalized thinking about the role of the state in the individual's life as protecting their specifically 'God-given' rights, creating a political atmosphere in Alberta that is unique when compared to the secularization in other Canadian provinces.[45] Albertan conservatism has a long history of Evangelical-influenced political thought in the decades leading up to the Satanic Panic, which, in conjunction with the influence of American mass media and political mobilization, helps to explain why it was able to take root in Calgary during the 1980s.[46]

Why Fantasy Role-Playing Games?

On a surface level, the conflict between fantasy and Christianity can be confusing and rather contradictory. The genre is, after all, foundationally linked with biblical stories and Christian iconography. As a brief example, early pioneers of the fantasy genre J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, now revered as some of the most influential literary minds of the 20th century, both relied heavily on Christianity in the construction of their fantasy worlds and the tales told within them. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* tells a story of creation in which the villain, Melkor, is an angel-

[44] Banack, *God's Province: Evangelical Christianity, Political Thought, and Conservatism in Alberta*, 103-105.
[45] Ibid, 105.
[46] Ibid, 103-105.

like being who rebels against his creator and is thus corrupted by evil, becoming Middle-Earth's version of Lucifer.[47] C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* contains a death and resurrection scene full of allegories to the story of Christ.[48] Both authors tell stories of universal good triumphing over their own corrupted antitheses. These authors were incredibly influential to all the fantasy that came after them, and Dungeons & Dragons is no different; three of the four participants in this study directly referenced Tolkien and Lewis as being early cultivators of their love for fantasy.[49] The game's creators, Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax, were both deeply religious people; Arneson worked as a missionary during the 1980s, and Gygax was a devout Jehovah's Witness.[50] There is much within the game that is explicitly religious; the Cleric and the Paladin, two of the handful of class options given to players when constructing their characters, are largely defined by their in-game religious affiliations, and even non-religious characters are governed by a strictly defined system of morality that frames good and evil as absolute.[51] Universal models of morality are religious in nature. Their inclusion and the expectation that players adhere to the pre-defined morality of the character they choose to inhabit is indicative of the rigid world structuring that Anderson and Gygax would have been exposed to as devout Christians.[52]

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[47] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (Great Britain: Geroge Allen & Unwin, 1979), 3-12.
[48] C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Scholastic Inc., 1950), 156-166.
[49] Sean D., Interview with the author, January 23rd, 2025; John, Interview with the author, February 3rd, 2025; Sean S., Interview with the author, February 25th, 2025.
[50] Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic of Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds*, 77.
[51] Ibid, 77-85.
[52] Ibid, 79.

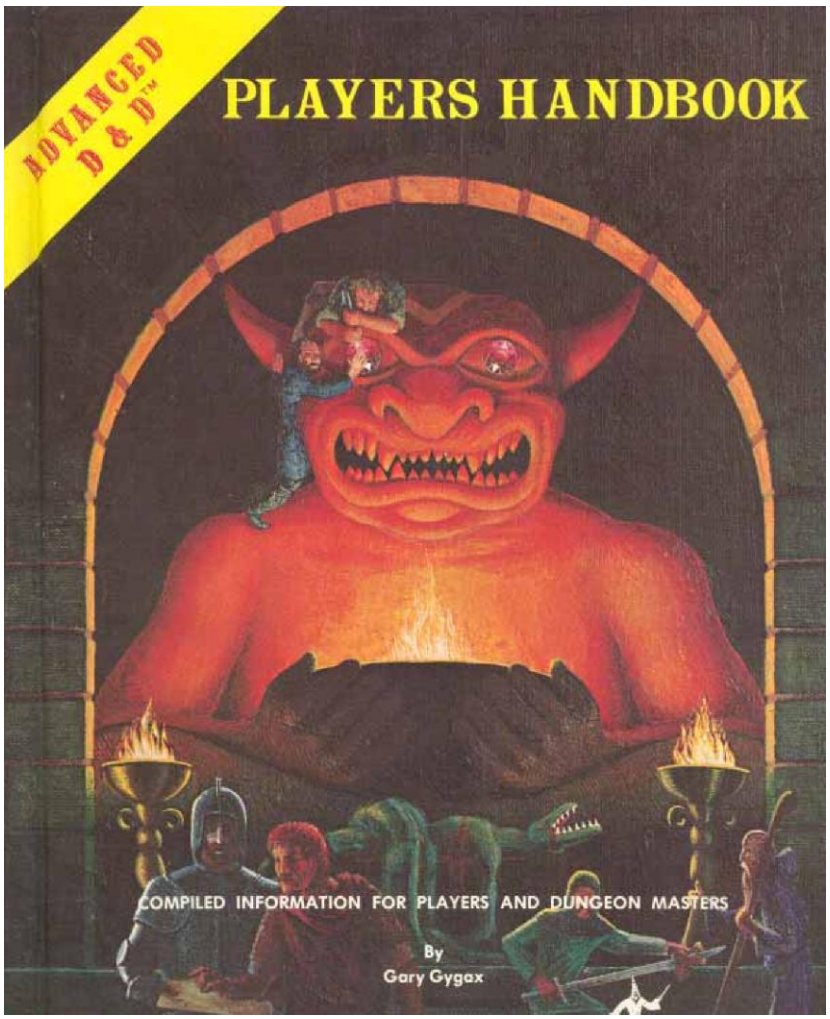

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Figure 2. Cover art of the first edition of the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Players Handbook. 1978.

For example, the cover image for the first edition of Gary Gygax's *Player's Handbook* contains an image of a devil-like character exhibiting several biblical motifs of the genre. The beast-like features, particularly the red horns and predatory teeth, are common among Christian images of the devil. Additionally, the devil is often portrayed as a serpent; the serpent-like corpses that it is

[53] Gary Gygax, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Player's Handbook* (United States: Random House Inc, 1978).

implied have been killed by knights and mages – representing the player characters – strengthen the biblical allusion in the fight against a fantasy evil.[54]

These allusions that are found within Dungeons & Dragons and its foundational material are by no means anti-Christian. If anything, they indicate a positive relationship with Christianity. Why then did they become so threatening to the status quo of the Christian right? I agree with Laycock' interpretation that RPGs' abilities to create meaningful new realities in the lives of their players, as well as to question the structures of their 'real' reality, was the ultimate cause of this conflict; "Beneath the religious attack on role-playing games there lurks a fear that Christianity could also be a socially constructed world."[55] Laycock posits that the imagination can be threatening to any institution that wishes to maintain hegemonic control, which is true for this conservative Christian context, though not exclusive to religious control alone.[56] This belief is consistent with literature on moral panics more generally; sociologist Jock Young states that "a moral panic does not occur when hegemony is successful, but rather when it is in crisis."[57]

> This is another, broader issue here. The values of the game are not only pro-violence and death; they also entrain the player in an entirely different way of looking at life: what is called by anthropologists the "Magical World View." This Magical World View is far outside the cultural norms of most societies, and certainly outside the realms of Biblical values.[58]

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[54] Darren Oldridge, "Depicting the Devil," in *The Devil: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), doi:10.1093/actrade/9780199580996.003.0004.
[55] Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic of Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds*, 268.
[56] Ibid, 269.
[57] Young, "Moral Panic: Its Origins in Resistance, Ressentiment and the Translation of Fantasy into Reality," 13.
[58] William Schnoebelen, "Straight Talk on Dungeons and Dragons," 1989.

This quote, taken from Schnoebelen's *Straight Talk on Dungeons and Dragons* demonstrates this relationship very well. The "Magical World View" does not exclusively refer to a literal ability to invoke magic in the name of Satan, but a worldview that allows for the construction and exploration of realities that are not necessarily consistent with conservative Christian teachings. To allow a "Magical World View" to develop amongst the youth of your church, school, community center, or household is to risk that one day they may decide that a new reality, one of their own making, is more attractive than the one that has been laid out before them.

Faith and Authority

I have argued thus far that the motivations for the Satanic Panic's targeting of fantasy role-playing games went beyond express religious dogma and can be seen to have been more closely tied to a need to maintain social control over a new generation that was increasingly more likely to take a more active role in defining the structures of their own world. This hypothesis has been supported by the oral interviews conducted for this study. Throughout my interviews, the intersections of faith and authority became central themes of discussion as the participants spoke on their experiences during the Satanic Panic. These discussions made it quite clear that the participants conceptualized faith and authority as two very different things, and that in several cases the liminal spaces of their RPGs aided them in negotiating how both ideas fit within their worldviews.

The participants' backgrounds and their relationships with Christianity are diverse and unique to themselves. They do not represent a group from a homogenous environment of conservative Christianity. Sean D. was raised in a Lutheran Church which he defines as being

"fairly liberal," relative to other denominations around him at the time, though he was exposed to extreme conservatism at an Evangelical megachurch which he attended in his late teenage years. He has since left the church and no longer considers himself a Christian.[59] John was a regular churchgoer in his youth "somewhere between the United and Presbyterian churches," and has maintained a high level of religious devotion throughout his life. As an adult in the years following the Satanic Panic, he attended seminary and became an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church, though, more recently, he has individually worked for the United Church of Canada.[60] Both Walter and Sean S. held more loose religious affiliations in their youth. Walter grew up in an Anglican household, though not a strict or particularly zealous one, and his family stopped attending Church early in his life due to interpersonal politics within that specific parish.[61] Sean S. was raised by an atheist father and a vaguely Christian mother. He attended Catholic school growing up, and while he does believe in and value the idea of faith, he considers himself to be generally spiritual as opposed to explicitly religious.[62]

Despite the relatively diverse religious backgrounds of these participants within the Christian context, all were exposed to the rhetoric of the Satanic Panic to varying degrees of intensity. This supports the fact the Satanic Panic, though initially spurred and fueled by highly conservative Evangelical voices, was not felt within these communities alone. Religious denominations are not closed spaces, and several participants mentioned having friends whose parents would not allow them to play RPGs either due to their own religious beliefs or the

[59] Sean D., Interview with the author, January 23rd, 2025.
[60] John, Interview with the author, February 3rd, 2025.
[61] Walter, Interview with the author, February 7th, 2025.
[62] Sean S., Interview with the author, February 25th, 2025.

sensational media that they read or viewed.[63] In one particular instance, Walter recalled a time where, even though RPGs had been more or less normalized in his household after some initial concern regarding the fear of suicide associated with the game, he spent upwards of two hours on the phone with the mother of a friend who was worried after her son had spent all day long creating the character that he was going to be playing.[64] This mother's fears echoed the ones that Walter had heard from his own family, which was that gaming was an anti-social behaviour that led to suicide.[65] Whether this fear was communicated in religious terms is unclear, but Walter referenced associations between role-playing and its use in therapy as a connection that made people in his life view the playing of RPGs as a sign of mental health struggles.[66]

Based on these interviews, it seems that most of the pressure to stop playing RPGs came from the family level, whether that was experienced by the interviewees themselves or witnessed in others.[67] If the rhetoric of the Satanic Panic was mostly being communicated to young people through their parents, authority is fundamentally brought to the forefront of the conversation. Faith would certainly have been involved in some of the conversations that children who played RPGs were having with their parents, but it is equally possible that in less devout households the conversations would have boiled down to a simple "stop playing that game, it's violent," which is a reason that Sean S. cited hearing even today from parents who do not want their kids playing

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[63] Sean D., Interview with the author, January 23rd, 2025; John, Interview with the author, 2025; Walter, Interview with the author, 2025.
[64] Walter, Interview with the author, February 7th, 2025.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Sean D., Interview with the author, January 23rd, 2025; John, Interview with the author, February 3rd, 2025; Walter, Interview with the author, February 7th, 2025; Sean S., Interview with the author, February 25th, 2025.

RPGs.[68] The explicit reasoning that each person who was not allowed to play RPGs was given would be unique to their own family, but the experience that would have been near universal in these situations is that "my parents told me no." In this, faith and authority, while connected, did not act on the participants as one. The language of faith may have been used to communicate displeasure with, and fear of, the role-playing community, but it was always through structures of authority that young people interested in the games were told "no."

To further this point, it is important to recognize that participants shared very little in the way of negative thoughts about faith. John, being a practicing minister today, obviously places a great deal of importance in the Christian faith and how it has shaped his life and his ideals.[69] Sean S., though not himself a practicing Christian, looked back on his time in a Catholic school quite positively.

> "I actually quite enjoyed it, and looking back on it now…. my experiences from public and Catholic, I thought the Catholic school was way better. The community spirit was so much higher, so much stronger…. There was an overarching community to it, which I thought was very interesting."[70]

Similarly, Walter never looked at the dangerous labels being applied to RPGs and their players as reflective of the Christian faith system as a whole; he cited a letter from a priest that had been published in *Dragon Magazine* that defended RPGs from a Christian point of view as being a reminder to him that these attacks were the product of specific people and their own politics, not the Christian faith system itself.[71] Of this group, Sean

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[68] Sean S. Interview with the author, February 25th, 2025.
[69] John, Interview with the author, February 3rd, 2025.
[70] Sean S., Interview with the author, February 25th, 2025.
[71] Walter, Interview with the author, February 7th, 2025.

D. experienced the most polarizing shift with religion, as he was raised in a Lutheran household and has since split with religion entirely. However, his justifications were mostly directed towards disillusionment with the Church as authority figures, rather than a negative view of faith as a concept, because when he was able to engage with his faith more independently, he remembered it more positively.[72] Reflecting back on his confirmation into the Lutheran Church, which involved a two-year education program and an intensive reading of both the Bible in its entirety and Luther's Small Catechism, Sean D. reflected that "it was a grind, but in the end I don't regret it too much."[73] He appreciated being able to directly engage with the texts himself rather than only through the conclusions about the texts which were told to him at Sunday school.[74]

Additionally, despite the fact that the Satanic Panic was strongly tied to conservative Christianity, the religious organizations in the participants lives were not entirely unified in opposing RPGs. At Sean S.'s Catholic school, the RPG club's teacher supervisor was a nun.[75] Similarly, some of Sean D.'s friends who went to a different Lutheran Church than he did had a younger pastor who invited the group to use the church basement to hold their game sessions.[76] The opposite was, of course, still true in places; Sean D. recalled a different pastor from the Evangelical church he visited in his later teenage years sitting in on a game determined to find evidence that it was, in fact, Satanic, though he eventually left after failing to find any evidence.[77] Games were still

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[72] Sean D., Interview with the author, January 23rd, 2025.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Sean S., Interview with the author, February 25th, 2025.
[76] Sean D., Interview with the author, January 23rd, 2025.
[77] Ibid.

insular and secretive, but this was done more in response to the stigma around RPGs that the Satanic Panic had amplified, as opposed to an entirely oppositional relationship with every religious body in the participants lives.

The participants of this study took very little issue with faith, though several indicated that they did take issue with the systems of authority that had been telling them what their reality was supposed to look like. Sean D. stated that the Satanic Panic "really got me questioning why I should take some people seriously."[78] It comes as no surprise that it was during this time that Sean began to have problems with some of the more alienating aspects of his parish's teachings, such as a Church elder reprimanding him for playing the saxophone, calling it "the Devil's instrument."[79] Him and his family's eventual split from the Lutheran Church was largely motivated by this issue, as well as calls for conversion which they viewed as intolerant.[80] In the exact same vein, Sean S. shared that "The [Satanic] Panic changed my opinion on people who are older than me, who are supposedly the people of knowledge and the people running things."[81] Sean S. was 15 or 16 at this time, and he referenced it as an early instance in his life where he saw people who are supposed to be listened to by children, such as parents and teachers, be blatantly incorrect about something that he knew was positive to his life; "It was a very interesting, eye-opening experience… You don't often get to see that, I think, at an early age."[82] Sean S.'s view may not have caused a radical change in his worldview, but the sentiment remains similar to Sean D.'s experience. The narrative that was being

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[78] Sean D., Interview with the author, January 23rd, 2025.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Sean S., Interview with the author, February 25th, 2025.
[82] Ibid.

communicated to them did not align with the world that they experienced every day, and it spurred them to look critically at their own reality.

These effects that the participants experienced on their understandings of the relationship between faith and authority are consistent with academic theory on role-playing games and the meaning they create for their players. Fine speaks of the presence of fluid cultural and social systems which exist within one game to another that are built by, and shift alongside, the frameworks defined by the players.[83] When speaking of these frames, he states that "the implications of this are consistent with seeing interactants negotiating reality with each other – a reality that is continually in dynamic tension, subject to shifts in interpersonal definitions."[84] The Satanic Panic helped the participants to look critically at the structures of faith and authority in their lives independent of the games themselves, but there is evidence that this was also exercised within the worlds of their RPGs as well.

In John's case, his experiences in-game helped prompt him to refine his own ideas of what a genuine Christian life looked like because of how extreme the dissonance was between his understanding of his own faith versus the narratives about RPGs being espoused by Evangelical voices. In John's words, the rhetoric used during the Satanic Panic never had an overt effect on him because "I would like to say I'm religious, but not superstitious."[85] His theological rebuttal to people who feared that fantasy was a potential "doorway for the demonic" was the question, "How weak do you think God is?"[86] If

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[83] Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*, 2.
[84] Ibid, 200.
[85] John, Interview with the author, February 3rd, 2025.
[86] Ibid.

Patricia Pulling and William Schnoebelen were to be believed, then John should have been celebratorily committing gruesome acts of imaginary violence in his Dungeons & Dragons games. To John, this was clearly not the case. He had a terrible time playing evil characters.[87] Though underneath the same incredibly broad umbrella of Christendom, both parties were operating within distinct and juxtaposing realities. John knew that when he played RPGs, he interacted with the world and his fellow group members in a way that was still consistent with his personal Christian faith and value system. If concerns about the game resonated with his understanding of faith, there would have been more friction in John's life regarding RPGs. The absence of friction means that John was able to distinguish his own faith from the message being pushed by Evangelical voices, and his distaste for playing characters whose actions would go against the tenants of his faith suggests that the ability to explore different moral value sets within RPGs aided him in this.

Sean D. shared a story of when he was 19 years old, playing a game of Dungeons & Dragons with a group of young people in which he was the Dungeon Master.[88] One of the players, who was from a similarly religious background to Sean's, wished to change the in-game deity that his character had chosen to follow away from one of the mythical deities of Dungeons & Dragons, to instead follow Jesus Christ. While Jesus, nor any other representation of a common world religion such as Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, exist within Dungeons & Dragons, Sean decided he would allow the player to become a

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[87] John, Interview with the author, February 3rd, 2025.

[88] The Dungeon Master essentially runs the game for the other players. While the players each represent their own unique character, the Dungeon Master represents all non-player characters. They define what the world consists of, how it responds to the players actions, and whether the players succeed in their actions based on their knowledge of the game rules.

Christian within the game world. Later in the game session, the party ended up failing a puzzle challenge which resulted in the summoning of a demon. The player character who had become Christian attempted to banish the demon by invoking the power of God, and Sean decided that, as is true for most actions in the game, the success or failure of the attempt would be governed by the roll of a twenty-sided die. The player rolled low on the attempt, which, according to the game rules, meant that the player had failed to use the name of Christ to banish the demon. This resulted in an argument because, in the player's reality, it was impossible that Jesus would lose in a battle against a demon, and he began to cite biblical scripture to defend his position. The rest of the group decided that the rules of the game superseded an in-game application of their faith, and the player ended up exiting the game and never again returned to play with them.[89]

This example is an excellent summary of how notions of faith and authority were stress tested by the liminal reality that the game created. The group had, together, negotiated a reality in which the absolute word of God, a defining and objective factor in the creation of their everyday reality, was in fact subjective. This mirrors how John's confidence that RPGs were not a threat to his faith was due, in part, to how much he disliked embodying characters that did not align with Christian values. In both scenarios, the game environment provided the players with opportunities to inhabit a world in which the conservative Christian narrative was not being applied, which in turn encouraged them to dissect that narrative in their own lives. This does not mean that everybody who played the game experienced a revelation about religious hegemony, after all one of the

[89] Sean D. Interview with the author, January 23rd, 2025.

players in Sean S.'s game was offended and chose to stop playing, but the fact that there was conflict affirms that the game was challenging to their reality as well.

Conservative Christian animosity towards RPGs during the Satanic Panic was fueled by the games' ability to provide tools through which to critically question the realities that players were presented with every day. For the participants of this study, that animosity only served to encourage critical engagement, which manifested both in their everyday reality, as well as the ones they created within their role-playing spaces. As the Satanic Panic bled into conservative discourse in Alberta, conceptions of faith and authority became important topics of negotiation in the lives of the participants. While the results of that negotiation were different for each individual in matters of faith, there is remarkable unity in how each participant's perspective on institutional authority as a generator of narrative shifted as they took more independent roles in defining their own realities due, in some part, to the presence of the Satanic Panic in Calgary.

Identity and Expression

During the Satanic Panic, role-playing games were not only applied as functional tools through which to explore alternate worldviews, but alternate selves as well. Being able to step into a different persona, one with defined skills, interests, culture, and ambitions that may or may not align with your own, is central to the function of the game.[90] Of course, the ability to completely disappear into the skin of another character is likely a talent reserved for the few

[90] Fine, *Shared Reality: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*, 205-6.

great actors of each generation, thus it is much more common for RPG players to bring aspects of themselves into the characters they choose to play, to varying degrees.[91]

There were varied responses within the interviews as to how the participants viewed their characters in relation to themselves. Sean D. felt that "playing by alignment" was quite important, meaning that playing his characters in accordance with the predefined system of morality which he would have assigned to them was something he tried to hold true to, even if it meant that that character would perform actions that Sean D. would never do himself.[92] "I understood well enough that this is how a character acts, then that's not me…. I never had a problem separating that from how I saw myself as a spiritual or ethical human being."[93] Other participants had different experiences, and Sean S. shared his perspective with the following quote:

> "I think it is pretty much impossible for anyone to play a Dungeons & Dragons character without some of them[selves] being in it. There obviously is a big interest of being the opposite, which is not being yourself and being totally different. But even in those points, I think a lot of yourself shines through."[94]

If you choose to divert your character's personality away from your own in a significant way, there is personal meaning to the way you choose to do so. To revisit Sean D.'s statement that he had no issues playing characters radically different from himself, this feeling still reflects an aspect of his personality and how he expressed it.[95]

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[91] Fine, *Shared Reality: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*, 206.
[92] Sean D., Interview with the author, January 23rd, 2025.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Sean S., Interview with the author, February 25th, 2025.
[95] Sean D., Interview with the author, January 23rd, 2025.

> "For me, it mirrored much of my personal life, [I was in] a very experimental and maybe indulgent phase is a good way of putting it. I just got into a bit of everything and everybody, and so I think that obviously mirrored the way I played the game."[96]

Of course, it would be a leap to claim that RPGs were primarily responsible for this aspect of Sean D.'s personality, as it is much more likely the inverse that is true. Though, even if this was a part of his personality that had been present for a long time, RPGs allowed him to engage with it in a relatively consequence free environment. Just as is true for the discussion about faith and authority, the liminal game world acts as a type of safety net for player exploration that can encourage players to be more comfortable inhabiting characters different from themselves, or characters which reflect parts of themselves that they cannot express every day.

When it comes to identity expression, especially within the context of socially conforming conservative worlds, questions of gender and sexuality are an absolutely necessary part of this discussion. Modern, non-historical scholarship has recognized how RPGs can take in active role in the discovery, exploration, and support of queer identities for their players. Kawitzky speaks of the "Magic Circle" when writing on how queer utopian spaces can be cultivated inside role-playing spaces; they define these as "bubbles of suspended, altered reality rooted in a contemporary and historical necessity to have access to spaces that are not governed by rules that criminalize, threaten, other, or ostracize queer lives."[97] Cross shares the same sentiment in her analysis of role-playing games as conduits for feminist resistance. She compares it to the feminist science-fiction's "laboratory of dreams" which allows for the imagination of worlds in which female agency can be exercised and celebrated without the sexist constrictions

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[96] Sean D., Interview with the author, January 23rd, 2025.
[97] Kawitzky, "Magic Circles: Tabletop Role-Playing Games as Queer Utopian Method," 132.

that are so deeply embedded into our society. Role-playing games push this potential further by cultivating a communal, participatory environment for creation which is not replicated by the author-reader relationship of traditional fiction.[98] The "Magic Circle" and "Laboratory of Dreams" defined by Kawitzky and Cross are not new concepts.[99] Though they are articulated by sociologists today as a method of exploring utopian idealism, the idea of a closed space in which people are allowed to stress test the confines of their immediate reality sounds incredibly similar to the "Magical World View" that Shnoebelen so hastily condemned in his attack of RPGs forty years ago.[100]

Comments made during the interviews make it abundantly clear that this benefit of RPGs did not develop alongside contemporary queer theory but has been an aspect of the game since its early years of play. In our conversation, Sean D. stated that "a lot of the guys I played with at the time were gay [and were] closeted… in hindsight, I now know who they played was who they were identifying with as opposed to the construct which they acted every day to get through life."[101] Paralleling this statement, John shared an anecdote about a friend from his gaming group who had, unbeknownst to them, been severely struggling with personal trauma and their own sexual identity. This individual was unable to find support from the authority figures in their life who leaned towards more conservative theology and political belief but found some solace through playing a transgender or non-binary character in the liminal game world.[102] "It allowed

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[98] Cross, "The New Laboratory of Dreams: Role-playing Games as Resistance," 85.
[99] Kawitzky, "Magic Circles: Tabletop Role-Playing Games as Queer Utopian Method," 132; Cross, "The New Laboratory of Dreams: Role-playing Games as Resistance," 85.
[100] William Schnoebelen, "Straight Talk on Dungeons and Dragons," 1989.
[101] Sean D, Interview with the author, January 23rd, 2025.
[102] John, Interview with the author, February 3rd, 2025.

people to explore different versions of themselves."[103] This was able to happen because the "veneer of 'I'm just roleplaying'" removed the immediate social consequences that would have occurred had they explored this in the 'real' world.[104]

Of course, a player's character need not always directly mirror their true self. Those who conform to their own understanding of gender will not always challenge the social binary through those characters, and hetero-identifying people will not always align this with how they play. Sean D., in our interview, mentioned times when he inhabited characters of a different race and gender than his own. "Why would you not? Why would you limit yourself…. For me it was about experimentation."[105] Sean D. was not walking into RPG groups with the intention or need to express aspects of his identity that were not permitted by his religious upbringing. Regardless, he still found himself engaging with an altered reality that encouraged him to imagine what it may be like to be someone different from himself and inhabited that character in a communal space.

The need for an insular space away from the public eye in which people could express themselves, if not entirely freely, then more freely than their immediate environment allowed for, makes sense when we consider once more the conservative context of 1980s era Calgary politics. It was a hostile time to be open about oneself if their gender or sexuality did not conform to the norms established by the majority of their community. Today, research is embracing RPGs as a modern tool through which people can maintain agency over their own identities, but by taking this framework and looking historically, there is evidence that players have experienced this

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[103] John, Interview with the author, February 3rd, 2025.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Sean D, Interview with the author, January 23rd, 2025.

benefit of RPGs for as long as they have been played. This has historically gone unnoticed, likely due to the stigmatization that the Satanic Panic caused, and the secretive way in which players enjoyed the game as a result. However, now that the popularity of RPGs and gaming communities have grown by orders of magnitude and become much more accepted in the 21st century, we have an opportunity to look backwards at the historic role that communal gaming spaces and imagination have played in the way people create and express their sense of self.

Conclusion

Like most moral panics, the Satanic Panic occurred in Canada when society was experiencing a strong shift in what the dominant discourse viewed as socially acceptable behaviour, which resulted in a threat to religious hegemony in conservative Christian communities which saw young people taking greater agency in defining their own values outside of the Church's narrative.[106] This resulted in a conservative Christian zeitgeist which attacked RPG games for presenting their players with alternate realities ripe with opportunities to step outside the strictly defined sense of social morality that evangelical and other conservative Christian denominations had taught them. Though the fear was communicated through extreme and fantastical accusations of Satanism and the paranormal, it seems that RPGs did, in a way, serve this function in some people's lives.

For the participants in this study, their experiences in the Satanic Panic encouraged them to critically evaluate the narrative that hegemonic structures of authority had established in their

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[106] Banack, *God's Province: Evangelical Christianity, Political Thought, and Conservatism in Alberta*, 160-161; Young, "Moral Panic: Its Origins in Resistance, Ressentiment and the Translation of Fantasy into Reality," 13.

lives, both religious and non-religious. Playing RPGs aided them in this experience, and through playing them they were spurred to negotiate the relationship between faith and authority both for them personally and for their communities, as well as to explore their own identities in an independent and self-motivated space.

One of the appeals of the fantasy genre is that it presents us with worlds vastly different from our own that we can disappear into, but this does not only function as mere escapism. The act of collective storytelling within fantasy RPGs, like any stories we create, reflects the social and cultural contexts of those creating them. RPGs are distinctive in this because they provide the players with a participatory space in which they can tangibly create and interact with any structures they create in a communal environment, and in doing so they are given unique tool through which they can test the reality that they interact with every day. Fantasy and play in this context have traditionally been absent in historiography as there is a very small amount of academic literature that considers it significant. I hope that this thesis encourages future researchers to examine communal gaming spaces in greater detail, to consider the role that imagination plays in how our worldviews develop, and to examine the many creative ways that people have subversively asserted their own agency and challenged social hegemony throughout time.

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