

Fight Over Game: Play or Worship of Devil?

By RONALD B. TAYLOR, *Times Staff Writer*

The fantasy game Dungeons and Dragons has been outlawed from summer recreation programs in a Sacramento suburb after two evangelical protesters claimed the game is really devil worship and witchcraft.

The action has polarized the community of Rancho Cordova and a showdown on the game is expected today when those favoring it and opponents of it appear at a meeting of the community's Park and Recreation District Board to battle over reinstating summer classes in the game.

The protesters in Rancho Cordova are members of a small, but vocal number of "concerned Christians" who are convinced that the increasingly popular game has come "straight out of hell."

School officials in Heber City, Utah, have banned the game and in Hutchinson, Kan., a freelance evangelist has threatened to buy up all the games and burn them, if hobby shops and stores do not take the games off the shelf.

Radio evangelist John Torell of Sacramento has broadcast warnings

that role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons are in reality demonic religions that should be banned from schools and public playgrounds.

Several evangelical publishing firms, like the Christian Research Institute in Southern California, are mailing out similar warnings across the country, The Times has learned.

Dungeons and Dragons is the prototype of fantasy games that are sometimes compared to Monopoly or chess but are far more complex and involve the players in imaginative role-playing.

Those in favor of the game say it involves youngsters in creative, imaginative ways. It was included in school programs for "gifted" students in places like Heber, because it stimulated learning, proponents said.

However, the game has become controversial in the past two years among some fundamentalist Christian groups because the characters in the games include demons, dragons, dwarfs, witches and creatures

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who cast spells and exercise supernatural powers.

Bryon Pritzer, spokesman for TSR Hobbies of Wisconsin, creators of Dungeons and Dragons, estimated 750,000 of the games are sold each year at a cost of \$12 each.

"We think it is a wholesome game," Pritzer said. "It is creative fantasy, not unlike (the book) 'Lord of the Rings.'"

A "dungeon master" controls the game's format. Each player is required to use his or her own imagination in the elaborate creation of characters, good or evil, and to manipulate them through the fantasy nightmare adventure that can last days.

Dungeons and Dragons-type games are played widely across the country and are most popular among students in high school and college, observers say. It is also growing in popularity among adults.

While the makers of Dungeons and Dragons say their games do not involve explicit description of violence, they acknowledged that some of the game's imitators do include such "gore."

Current Controversy

Al Dager, editor of Media Spotlight, an evangelical newsletter based in Santa Ana, said Dungeons and Dragons is a part of a "spiritual warfare" that goes on between Satan and God.

The current controversy in Rancho Cordova began when a church directory salesman, Roy Welden and his wife, heard evangelist Torell's warnings about the game.

The Rancho Cordova Park and

Recreation District had scheduled two sessions of Dungeons and Dragons in its summer recreation programs, and 20 students had signed up at \$10 each to cover costs, district officials said.

Welden, a resident of the area, appeared before the recreation district board June 17 and, using Torell's Christian Life Ministry reports on the games, argued Dungeons and Dragon-type games were "demon worship" and "witchcraft" and constituted a violation of the constitutional requirement to separate church and state.

After 90 minutes of argument, the board voted 3 to 2 to cancel the summer Dungeons and Dragons classes.

No Action Taken

Audrey Ridenour, who has been on the recreation board for five years and who voted to cancel the program, explained, "If a program is controversial, we shouldn't hold it in a public facility . . . This is not apple pie or John Wayne; it (the game) has nothing to do with Americanism."

Welden also has appeared before the Fulsom-Cordova School Board asking that after-school Dungeons and Dragons activities be canceled. The school board took no action.

Since the recreation district vote, the issue has generated strong feelings in the community.

Those parents who have children playing the game are planning to appear at the recreation district board meeting today to demand the summer classes be reinstated.

Barbara Belka feels that Welden's portrait of the game is grossly distorted, saying, "Dungeons and Dragons is like playing King Ar-

thur, with set pieces. Each person has a character and acts it out."

When her 16-year-old son was asked if he believed the play was demon worship, he said, "(Welden) doesn't know what this game is like. We don't worship gods or act out witchcraft or light candles."

Welden, on the other hand, is calling church leaders in the community, seeking their support, and he is forming an ad hoc committee he calls Concerned Christians, to attend today's meeting.

Torell, the radio evangelist, contends that witchcraft and the practice of the occult is on the increase, saying, "Sacramento has 1,000 witches and the state has even recognized one of the covens as a religious organization."

He said that in the books and manuals used in the controversial game there are whole lists of gods and demigods and the players invoke these creatures.

"This is exactly like witchcraft," he said.

Of the Rancho Cordova controversy, he said, "We swung into action last Wednesday and we educated the board. This is religion in the guise of a game."

Torell said he also is opposed to Halloween, because that day is as important to witches as Christmas is to Christians.