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THE ETHICS OF MODERN BOARD AND CARD GAMES

by Richard J. Poupard

SYNOPSIS

Board and card games are increasing in popularity. They offer a means for social interaction as well as creative and ethical decision making. Christians should not participate in activities closely mimicking witchcraft or the occult or anything replicating the advance of evil. Unlike fantasy role-playing games, modern board and card games tend to be focused on mechanics and strategy, with the actions of the player far removed from the acts represented on the board. The popular game *Magic: The Gathering* is an example of a mechanics-based game with little thematic influence. We never should violate our conscience, but participation in today's board and card games can be a means for quality family times and interesting moral conversations.

The night was bitter cold, and we had been enduring for more than three hours. My son and some others we had recently met accompanied me. It seemed that all of us were working well as a team, but my son and I suspected a betrayer was in our midst. We were exhausted after surviving crisis after crisis, and now the "zombies" were closing in very quickly. Our small colony was holding on by a thread, and it was my turn to act. A quick survey of my position revealed an awful truth — there was almost no way I could escape. However, there was a chance that I could sacrifice any chance of winning to allow the others to survive. I elected to donate my food to the group, which resulted in their triumph. It was soon revealed that without my actions, we all would have lost. As it turned out, everyone in our group tasted victory because of my sacrifice. Everyone except me.

It really was not all that cold out. We were in a climate-controlled convention center with about a thousand other players at Boardgamegeek convention, a gaming event held every year in Dallas, Texas. The game we were playing was called *Dead of Winter*, and the scenario I encountered was the result of the game's unique method of victory. This is a semicooperative game in which the players are all on one team but must fulfill both a general and specific condition to win. I could help the others win, but

to do so would forfeit any chances that I could be victorious. The experience led to a conversation with my son about ethical decision making and demonstrating self-sacrifice in a secular environment — a topic we have discussed numerous times over the years. This is an example of some of the complex decision making and ethical choices we've encountered during our multiple hours playing board and card games together.

A REVOLUTION IN GAMING

There has been a revival in board and card games in the last several years, beginning in Germany in the mid-1990s. Game designer Klaus Teuber introduced the popular game *Settlers of Catan* in 1995, which changed the idea of what a board game could be. The game was easy to learn, had an impressive amount of interaction between opponents, finished in a reasonable amount of time, and involved complex, interesting decisions. There was an element of randomness but the role of luck was minimized. Board games continue to evolve into the strategic, complex, multifaceted experiences of today. The popularity shows no signs of slowing, with Internet tools helping to fuel the success. The website Boardgamegeek (BGG) contains reviews, forums, ratings, and pretty much anything else that one would desire in exploring any game.[1] The YouTube series TableTop has more than 1.5 million subscribers and consists mainly of celebrities playing games for the camera.[2]

In 1981, this publication published an extensive evaluation of fantasy role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*.[3] That analysis contains excellent guiding principles in evaluating the moral content of fantasy role-playing games, and is still applicable today. In their conclusion, the authors recommend that Christians consider new games. These games should finish within a reasonable period, lead the participant to more creative ways to confront life's challenges (instead of escaping them), and should not require the player to act out aggressive activity forbidden in God's Word.

In many ways, board games today do an outstanding job of fulfilling these specifications. In general, games are designed to encourage social interaction, incorporate multiple paths to victory, minimize downtime, and engage the mind in ever more creative ways. Unlike passively watching movies or television, games actively engage both the rational and creative mind. They can foster the competitive spirit between players, or players can work cooperatively for a common goal, winning or losing together as a group. In a world where so many of our youth seem to spend so much time looking passively downward at the tiny screens of their phones, the benefits of encouraging the active interaction and engrossment in board and card games is clear.

Christian Concerns

As with any hobby or recreational activity, there are reasonable concerns regarding the amount of resources that one invests in pursuing entertainment. It is possible to spend an unhealthy amount of time, money, and mental energy in playing games. However, I

wish to focus on a more common concern among those interested in gaming: the thematic content and actions required in these games. What limitations (if any) should a follower of Christ have when deciding to engage in a gaming experience?

The large number of games available encompasses almost every theme that one can imagine. One day, your group can be fighting together to cure a worldwide plague, the next, a tense battle between two warring generals followed by playing a silly party game. Yet along with these positive elements lies a challenge for the Christian. Elements of fantasy, magic, horror, and imagination are a common feature. When does an experience of fun cross over the line into participation in evil? Is it possible to perform an act in a game that would be immoral in real life? Imagination is a gift from God, but what if we use that imagination to create worlds and environments that deny objective moral truth? Is it moral to participate in a game that uses images of horror, human objectification, or graphic violence?

In areas that Scripture does not give us explicit direction, we need to be careful not to place burdens where God did not intend. There may be different standards for those with unique sensitivities to sin. An attempt at a list that would tell us which games are morally acceptable and which are not would not be helpful in teaching discernment. However, there are some basic ideas we can use to make wise choices for those interested in this fascinating hobby.

I do have one word of caution. Historically, I instinctively have taken a very conservative stance in evaluating gaming content. With so many games available, why even consider playing a theme that is questionable? I now believe there can be negative consequences to such an unwavering stance. A few years ago, a group from our church met routinely to play euchre, a card game played frequently in the upper Midwest. Every month, we would have a great time of fellowship, and new people were added to the group frequently. At one meeting, a teacher at a local Christian school stated that they could no longer join us, due to a long-forgotten code of conduct that she had signed that forbade the playing of cards. The mood quickly changed. Others in the group became wary of breaking some subjective moral code, and it soon disbanded. A group of Christians rejected the opportunities for outreach and fellowship in our community merely for the fear that this innocuous activity could be viewed as wrong. We were not responding to our conscience but to an arbitrary, long-forgotten list of rules. I would argue that such a strict stance did nothing to protect our hearts and in fact was a hindrance to the communication of the true message of the gospel. In my desire to avoid questionable content, I do not wish to make that mistake again.

There is a wide variety of themes available in games, which is both a benefit and a hindrance in examining the morality of a game. Looking at the top ten rated games from Boardgamegeek.com allows you to cure a global contagious disease, fight the Cold War or World War I, build one of the seven wonders, manage a medieval farm, or recreate a battle from the Star Wars universe.[4] On the other hand, the sheer number of

titles that are released creates challenges in determining the appropriateness of any individual selection. Games in which you perform morally positive or neutral actions to promote the good in a real-world environment are unambiguously morally acceptable. The challenge comes when the actions required in a game are morally ambiguous or clearly wrong, the gaming environment does not reflect reality, or the images used in the production or promotion of the game are inappropriate.

Should We Perform Unethical Actions in a Game Environment?

Where do we draw the line when it comes to pretending to perform actions that would be considered unethical in real life? For example, lying is immoral, but is it wrong to lie or bribe an officer of the law in a make-believe game? In the popular family game *Sheriff of Nottingham*, you attempt to deceive the sheriff about the contents of your hand. If the sheriff catches you being untruthful, you are given an option to bribe him. What about other behaviors we know are wrong? The 2013 Game of the Year Winner, *Colt Express*, depicts the players as outlaws in the Old West robbing a train. By playing a game such as this, are we encouraging (or even worse, *teaching*) immoral behavior?

Although this concern is understandable, I believe it is overstated. We recognize a difference between pretending to perform a potentially immoral action and the action itself. For example, our children can pretend to be a pirate or dress up as a western bandit, yet we do not assume that it condones or supports immoral behavior. We don't associate an eye patch and a cutlass sword with the violent actions and motivations of an actual pirate. They are not going to choose a life of crime because we have introduced them to the thrill of piracy. Likewise, I don't contemplate raiding a passing train after an evening of playing *Colt Express*.

At the same time, we recognize other situations would be inappropriate. For example, most parents would not allow their children to pretend to be the leader of a street gang. Pretending to sell drugs and shake down their siblings would not be tolerated. On reflection, the moral actions of pirates are similar to the lying, intimidating, and violent actions of a gang leader. Why do we treat them differently?

One consideration is the space — both time and distance — from the immoral act to the player. For example, in war games simulating World War II, like Memoir '44, one player commands the Axis troops, and the other controls the Allied troops. However, the gameplay emphasis is on the tactical decisions of each player. The time and space between the actions of a player recreating the decisions of a German officer militate against them pretending to participate in the evil of the Nazi regime. The role is abstract, and there is little connection to the horrific acts that occurred. Contrast this to (an imaginary) game in which you played a German SS officer in charge of escorting as many prisoners as possible to their death. Here, your proximity to the evil performed makes the reproduction in a game environment immoral. Whenever the victory conditions require you specifically to act out an unambiguous evil act in a virtual environment, it should be avoided.

HOW ATTACHED TO A THEME IS THE GAME?

Another consideration is the genre of the game. Games differ greatly regarding the importance of theme to the experience of the game. Some games feature theme as an essential element to the gaming experience, while others rely on nonthematic tactical mechanics. For example, games like backgammon and checkers are completely abstract, while role-playing games are almost completely thematic. The purpose of the rules in a role-playing game is to give the player the most immersive thematic experience possible. Most board games fall in between these two extremes. Historically, the games that were designed in Europe, so-called Eurogames, were predominately games focused on mechanics. Often a theme was simply pasted on to provide some flavor. In fact, often these games are later released using the same mechanics with a new theme.

American style games tend to be more thematic — the theme is more closely tied to the experience of the game. If the theme is central to the gameplay, the act of playing such a game will more closely mimic the immoral action. For example, if someone playing a fantasy role-playing game must speak an incantation to cast a spell against his enemy, his actions closely resemble what would occur in reality. Contrarily, a player in a Eurogame that rolls a pair of dice to attack an enemy via a spell is several steps away from the act itself. They are not pretending to incant magic but are attempting to beat whatever mathematical mechanism that the designer built into the game. Chess is played with the same principle. Players who sacrifice their pawn are not acting out the death of a soldier but are merely making a tactical decision to move toward victory.

Where a game lands on this spectrum can be an important determination in helping to determine its appropriateness. A mechanism-based game with a pasted-on fantasy theme has a different moral quality than a roleplaying game where you act out participation in the occult. Unfortunately, this differentiation sometimes can be difficult because the best way to evaluate this is to participate in the game itself. Resources such as BGG can be very helpful in researching the closeness of the gameplay to the theme prior to deciding to play.

Questionable Gaming Environments

The environment that the game is set in is also an important consideration. There is a moral difference between games set in a world based on reality and those invented in human imagination. For those based on reality, any close replication of the occult or the promotion of evil should be avoided. However, designers often will use imaginary worlds to present dangerous challenges to a player. A player confronting a beast, demon, or dragon usually is not participating in the occult but using their minds to overcome the dire circumstances presented by the designer.

Myths

An example of an imaginary world frequently used in gaming is the Cthulhu mythos. This environment is based on a short story from H. P. Lovecraft and is the setting of

many popular games.[5] Cthulhu is a fictional creature who is trapped in the ocean and, to become free, uses his powers to terrify humans. Should we reject any games based on this mythical, imaginary universe? Although I would urge caution, I do not believe there is reason to reject these games completely. In most instances in which this universe is utilized, it is an environmental device to represent a terrifying situation for the players to overcome. Players are playing the side of good attempting to vanquish an imaginary, evil enemy. There are reasonable concerns, for example, if a game requires you to work for the benefit of this fictional creature or worship him in any way. However, I would hesitate to argue that every game set in this universe crosses the line to immorality.

Images

Lastly, there should be caution regarding the images used in some of these games. As is sometimes seen in the adolescent art forms of today, there is no shortage of images of scantily clad women or images of graphic violence. Human beings, being intrinsically valuable, should not be objectified intentionally or have their dignity desecrated, even in a fictional world.[6] There is little excuse to participate in an activity that promotes or tolerates such.

The Case of Magic: The Gathering

For our family, an encounter with one of the most popular card games ever designed — *Magic: The Gathering* — was instructive in applying many of these ideas. *Magic* was designed in 1993 and remains extremely popular today. Weekly *Magic* tournaments, so-called Friday Night Magic events, are held in hundreds of game stores nationwide. There is a professional *Magic* tour, where the best players face off against each other for points to compete in the Magic National Championship.

Magic is a collectable card game and has some unique and fascinating qualities. First, the game is always changing. Multiple times a year, new cards are released with new themes that keep the game fresh, even for long-term players. There are strategic decisions to make before you sit across the table from an opponent. You have the option to collect ever more powerful cards by purchasing them separately from the initial starter deck, and then build a deck of sixty cards in the most optimal way to have the best chance of winning. This level of preparatory strategy along with the randomness of the card draw makes this an extremely interesting experience.

Dabbling in Magic?

At first glance, there is much about the theme and universe of *Magic* that may be concerning. You are representing a Planeswalker, a type of magician, using supernatural magical power to defeat your opponent. You use a force called mana to summon creatures and cast spells to bring your opponent's life from twenty to zero. You play in a fantasy environment, the multiverse, where players can traverse

dimensions to lands of infinite variety. Cards are illustrated with the classic, dark fantasy style, which is why I steered clear of this game for many years.

Then my son asked whether he would be able to join a *Magic: The Gathering* club at his local school. We were known as the "game" family, and those we knew were asking our advice on this club. For that reason, I felt the need to investigate by investing in a deck and playing it myself.

My experience was surprising. Initially concerned about the fantasy elements, I found the actual playing of the game a far different experience than I first suspected. It never felt like I was pretending to summon creatures or cast spells. It played like an extended game of chess, with the game play focused on finding the optimal recipe of cards to play a winning combination. As soon as the game was over, I was focused on thinking up new combinations and improving my deck. I soon had my sons joining me at our local game store for many Friday nights of fun and rewarding competition. We don't play much *Magic* anymore, but there is no question that our experience was a positive one that created many great memories.

Magic or Mechanics?

The designer, Richard Garfield, has a PhD in combinatorial mathematics and has designed several games. Did he design *Magic* to promote a fantasy theme, or was it primarily a mechanism-driven game with a theme later added? He answered, "So, with Magic, my game was inspired by the mechanics. I was interested in designing a game in which people could construct their own decks, and that was the root of the game. It wasn't until months later that I came up with the idea of attaching a magical theme to it."[7] Early designs of the cards had simple, if not silly, illustrations with very little

connection to the theme of today.[8]

The hobby of board and card games has given our family hundreds of hours of quality time together, interaction with friends, and has been an outlet for strategic and creative thinking. It is far more beneficial to have a group of young players using their intellect engaged in a game than to see them mindlessly stare at their phones. As with any recreational activity, we should be cautious that we do not spend too much time, money, or energy in this pursuit. We should be cautious about games that encourage acting out to aid in the progression of evil, replicating rituals of the occult, or viewing inappropriate images. We should not violate our conscience regarding things not specifically prohibited in Scripture. However, we should also not foster a fear of effects that have no power over us. For those interested, playing board and card games offers a plethora of opportunities to use the creative and imaginative minds given to us by our Creator.

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NOTES

1. www.boardgamegeek.com.
2. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL7atuZxmT956cWFGxqSyRdn6GWhBxiAwE.
3. See Brian Onken and Elliot Miller, "Dungeons and Dragons: Two Researchers Look at Fantasy Role Playing Games," *Forward* 4, 2 (1981): 9–10, 13–14 (http://www.equip.org/article/fantasy-role-playing-games/).
4. https://boardgamegeek.com/browse/boardgame.
5. H. P. Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu," *Weird Tales*, 11, 2 (February 1928): 159–78, 287.
6. An example is the upcoming game *Kingdom Death: Monster*, in which many game elements both in the game as well as the promotional materials are clearly inappropriate.
7. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/an-interview-with-richard-garfield-creator-ofmagic-the-gathering.
8. Richard Garfield, "The Creation of Magic: The Gathering," Magic: The Gathering, http://magic.wizards.com/en/articles/archive/making-magic/creation-magicgathering-2013-03-12.