The Attacks on Role-Playing Games

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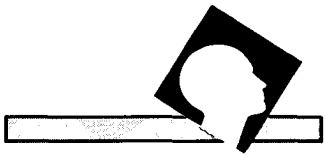
Television productions, particularly made-for-TV movies, are a popular source of paranormal claims. These are especially troublesome when they claim to be documentaries, since the producers and networks frequently retreat behind a defense of "entertainment" when challenged. One of the long-time favorite subjects has been role-playing games—almost exclusively Dungeons & Dragons, which is a trademark of TSR, Inc., but often misused as a generic term.



While diminishing in frequency, attacks on role-playing games are still popular with the mass media.

These games are not only among the favorite topics of TV movies. The Associated Press and United Press International, between 1979 and 1992, carried 111 stories mentioning role-playing games. Almost all named only Dungeons & Dragons, even though there are several hundred such games on the market, and among their manufacturers are more than a dozen companies beyond the desktop publishing level. These articles contained 51,182 words in 2,197 paragraphs.

These paragraphs were divided into four categories: those favorable to gaming, those unfavorable to gaming, those neutral (stating they existed, describing them accurately, but without value judgments, etc.), and those paragraphs not mentioning them at all, even by inference. Those in the last category were discarded. Based on the remaining paragraphs, each story was tabulated as having a majority of pro-game paragraphs, anti-game paragraphs, neutral paragraphs, or with no category having a majority. Of the 111 stories, 80 were anti-game, 19 had no majority, 9 were neutral, and only 3 were pro-game. Those three pro-game stories were all from UPI, which is a considerably smaller wire service than AP.

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Dungeons & Dragons was first marketed in 1972 as a supplement to the miniatures wargame system *Chainmail*. The D&D rules as a separate system were published in 1974. The game grew rapidly from a very small base, doubling sales each year primarily through word-of-mouth advertising (Gygax 1989). This occurred mostly on college campuses, which became its natural environment. During the late 1970s, several other role-playing games entered the market too.

The first attacks on role-playing games (RPGs) came in August 1979, during the disappearance of Dallas Egbert III from the Michigan State University campus just before exams. The campus police could not find him, and since all evidence indicated that he left the campus voluntarily, their jurisdiction was limited. Egbert's uncle then hired private detective William Dear, and the nature of RPG changed forever.

Egbert was a troubled kid. In 1979, according to Dear's book, *The Dungeon Master*, he was a sophomore in college at 16, with a 180 IQ, socially retarded (Dear 1985: 20-21), an epileptic not quite under medical control (pp. 88-89), a drug addict (p. 163) who claimed to make his own drugs (pp. 17, 22), and under severe pressure from his mother to make perfect grades, even though he had no difficulty making good ones (pp. 20-21, 316). Also, since Egbert was a homosexual (p. 316), the homophobia on campus in 1979 undoubtedly was a contributing factor to the stress that caused him to vanish. I am not comfortable relying only on Dear for all of this information, but since the Egbert family will not help, I must assume that either they are not interested in correcting the record or that Dear is essentially correct in his statements.

Dear came onto campus and from fragmentary tales, second- and third-hand, or worse, he pieced together the story that has become a cliché: Egbert, generally described as a "computer genius"—an exotic title at that time—was also involved in an even more exotic activity. He was playing the "strange" game of Dungeons & Dragons in the steam tunnels under the Michigan State campus (pp. 31-32), a statement denied by Dear's publisher in the acknowledgments and on page 13. In this story, Dear confused three separate and unconnected things.

First, almost every college has steam tunnels and steam-tunnel stories. Yet access to these tunnels virtually always involves at the least the crime of breaking and entering. MSU at that time was something of an exception in that access to the tunnel system could be gained through buildings under construction—still trespassing, but a lesser crime (Flinn 1988). The tunnels are cramped, hot, humid, and dirty. They are hardly an easy way to get from one building to another, as many students believe. Indeed, even if one had the proper keys to make the trip, one would look a mess upon arrival. One can get scalded from valving steam, and getting lost is a distinct possibility. It is a combination of the forbidden territory and real danger that makes this a modern urban legend on campus.

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Second, RPGs are played sitting around a table and improvising adventure tales (in a wide variety of genre, although classic fantasy is the most popular) within the constraints of a set of rules. It is played with pencil, paper, and an assortment of various-sided dice, which serve as random-number generators. The math field of probability is a major factor in playing these games. Everything is described, and nothing is acted out. This is quite contrary to the common impression generated by Dear and spread by credulous mass media.

Finally, there is the Society for Creative Anachronism, which was started in 1966 and recreates a fictional sort of medieval life of fairy-tale legend. The members get some media attention for their jousts, but their equally exotic costumes, lute-playing, juggling, and such, which typify the popular concept of the late medieval and early Renaissance, are largely ignored.

Dear, putting parts of all of these folktales and campus rumors together, came up with the hypothesis that Egbert was lost in the steam tunnels, where he had gone to play D&D with his fake broadsword. Never mind that a steam tunnel is too small a place to swing a fake broadsword, that D&D is played indoors, and that fake broadswords belong to a wholly different context. This was Dear's hypothesis and he promoted it at numerous press conferences.

There was another flaw in Dear's hypothesis. Neither Dear's crew nor the campus police found any game material in Egbert's room, even though he disappeared with only the clothes he was wearing. Nor could they find anyone on campus who had ever played a game with him (Dear 1985: 80). Egbert did subscribe to *Dragon*, the official D&D magazine, and had at least once registered at a gaming convention sponsored by TSR, GenCon (Kask 1979: 2, 11); although there is no real evidence he actually played, it can be assumed he played at least some. Certainly he was not deeply involved in the game.

Egbert eventually "found" himself about a month later—in Morgan City, Louisiana, claiming to be an oilfield roughneck (Dear 1985: 324). Since at 16 Egbert looked about 12, this does not ring true; but then very little else

about the Egbert case does either.

While the reputation of RPG never quite recovered from this media circus, things were a bit quieter for about four years. TSR's sales did not double that year—they *quadrupled* (Gygax 1989: 13). TSR seemed to think that this proved that bad publicity was good publicity, and it rarely defends its game. Other industry watchers point out that at this time TSR entered into a distribution agreement with Random House, and this just might have had some positive effect on sales.

Then came the second event that would permanently imbue RPGs with the same aura that haunts so many of the subjects examined in this publication. Another 16-year-old

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super-genius, this one still with his own age-group, committed suicide. This was Irving (Bink) Pulling II. He had actually played D&D as a part of the gifted/talented program at school. However, he was as troubled as Egbert. A nominal Jew, he was apparently a fan of Adolf Hitler (Bauerlein 1988). He got up one night and killed 17 rabbits and a neighborhood cat for no apparent reason. He was socially isolated, once failing to get even a proforma "campaign manager" to sign on for him when he wanted to run for school office (Isakoff 1983).

Yet his mother, Patricia Pulling, described him as "a happy, well-adjusted kid" and blamed D&D when he committed suicide with her pistol. She also claims receiving ESP knowledge of the event upon reaching the gates of their house (Pulling 1989: 4).

The suicide mechanism, she claims, was a curse placed on Bink's game character during a school game. She claims that this curse compelled him to kill and that he heroically sacrificed himself rather than carry out the curse. Classmates present at the time of this supposed curse deny there was any such event (Picton 1985). The attackers consistently confuse player and character and try to make them the same thing.

Pat Pulling then embarked on a decade of lectures attacking the game. She has only recently abandoned this tactic. She sued the school for Bink's death, only to have the suit quashed (*Pulling v. Bracey*, 1984). She teamed up with the National Coalition on Television Violence (NCTV), essentially a one-person organization headed by Illinois psychiatrist Thomas Radecki, and ultimately became a director at NCTV. Pulling also created her own organization, Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons (B.A.D.D.).

In January 1985, B.A.D.D. and NCTV jointly filed a petition with the Federal Trade Commission demanding that warning labels be required on the games, stating that they were hazardous and could cause suicide. The FTC forwarded the petition to the Consumer Products Safety Commission because the petition alleged an unsafe product rather than fraudulent advertising. The CPSC finally decided that there was not a close enough connection between the product and the alleged danger to warrant such labeling.

The list of "victims" submitted with this petition became the basis of ongoing compilation. The petition had nine cases, one of which gave no name, date, place, or documenting citation. Another was an accident, not a suicide as stated. Three were children of

members of Pulling's B.A.D.D. group for whom Pulling's simplistic explanation may have been a means of their avoiding facing the deaths of their children. This is not a universal reaction. Three other cases were disputed by the parents of the victims, who claimed that the games had nothing to do with the deaths (AP 1985; Grice 1985).

NCTV and B.A.D.D. claim that 120 such cases implicate role-playing games; this figure remained unchanged from 1987 until Radecki upped it to 128 in March 1993 (Gil Gross Show 1993). During that time of stasis, they still added "cases" to the list. They provide names, dates, and/or places (rarely all three) in fewer than 25 of these. Of those few, one has never been found in any documentary account, and another was from an item in a newspaper from a town more than 250 miles from the alleged event, but no newspaper coverage could be found in the city in which it supposedly happened. In the few cases of citations, they are almost always in relatively obscure, small-town newspapers that, when they are finally located, turn out to be based on statements from anti-game individuals. The alleged dangers of playing these games have been treated by newspapers and TV talk shows as fact, as so often happens with claims of flying saucers, the Bermuda Triangle, livestock mutilations, satanic sacrifices, and all kinds of other horror stories.

The collection of anti-game anecdotes has sometimes been called a "modern urban legend," a term coined by the folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand. Actually, it is a collective delusion. The modern urban legend is a traveling tale, in which the same story is set in various parts of the country and has "actually happened" to a friend of a friend, with only the names of the people and places changing. A collective delusion, on the other hand, is seen to be a situation that is "everywhere" but "they" are keeping it a secret. Thus the attacks on role-playing games are part of a phenomenon that Brunvand calls "satanic panic."

The attacks have gone through several stages. In the early 1980s, much was made of gamers', particularly younger ones, "casting hexes" on teachers and parents. Aside from assuming the magic in the games was not only real but translatable into real life, there was another assumption: that the game was teaching this real magic.

Fortunately, I was actually able to observe one of these cases in 1984. A junior high school let those students arriving early go to the lunchroom to escape the bad weather while waiting for school to start. Four students played D&D while waiting and as a result were verbally attacked and ultimately denounced before the school as "Satanists" by one of the teachers.

Two of the students were active members of mainline Protestant denominations, one was a rather nominal Roman Catholic, and the fourth was an extremely devout member of a fundamentalist sect. He

moved shortly after the episode and attended a fundamentalist parochial high school that had no difficulty accepting role-playing games.

An additional problem for the school was that the parents of one of the students were both law-enforcement professionals. They conducted an investigation of the episode that totally verified the students' story. The teacher made an insincere apology, and the school principal promised it wouldn't happen again. However, the game is still banned from the before-school free time, and the teacher was given a merit raise at the end of that year.

The kids found it more amusing than traumatic. Mocking the credulity of the teacher, they would make weird gestures when they met him in the halls. This ridicule, I contend, is what was really going on in the "hexing" stories.

With the FTC petition, the emphasis changed from magic to suicide. After all, magic is rather hard to prove, while suicides are a matter of public record.

There are more than 5,300 suicides a year in the United States in the 15-to-24-year-old age group (National Safety Council 1988), which in the mid-1980s provided most of the gamers. The average age is climbing, and the average age of the serious players may well be even higher. Therefore, to have no connection whatsoever, there would have had to have been at least 1,060 gamer suicides per year. Yet, in the whole time since 1979, there have been only 128 claimed game-related suicides, murders, robberies, rapes, etc., combined, and Radecki claims only one-quarter (64) are suicides (Gil Gross Show 1993). The statistics are actually arguing that gaming prevents suicides rather than causing them.

Of course it does neither. Role-playing gaming requires imaginative solutions to complex problems. Therefore it attracts those who have some degree of skill in doing just that. These people can generally do the same in real life and thus avoid using "a permanent solution to a temporary problem," which suicide usually is. Again, the game-bashers have their cause and effect reversed.

In the late eighties, there was another change in emphasis. The games now were said to cause murder. Again some post hoc ergo propter hoc "case histories" were brought out, and again they were disproved on examination.

The final change occurred around 1990. Building on the regular appearance on tabloid TV shows of multiple-personality syndrome cases in which persons claimed to have been the victims of ritual satanic cult abuse, the anti-game campaign came almost full circle. Critics now claimed that RPG was the same as Satan worship.

However, this time the anti-gamers went just a little too far into the spooky area for many followers outside the groups that provide the foundation for the anti-game movement itself. It is true that they have had some success in "cult-awareness seminars," which are closed to any dissenting viewpoints and are used to indoctrinate teachers, social workers, and police. But this initial anti-gamer success is slowly being countered by gamer backlash and the beginning of skepticism in the general public. Even the mass media have been neglecting such charges of late.

This skepticism is due to several factors. First is common logic. With so much evil in the world, obvious just by turning on the TV news programs, these games pale into insignificance. Some 7.5 million play these games at least once a month (Buettell 1990), mostly in the U.S. and Canada, with

sizable numbers in Britain and Australia, and smaller but quickly growing activity in Scandinavia (including the Baltic republics), France, New Zealand, and Brazil. While this is a small number in percentages, it means that most of the people these attacks are aimed at convincing—the upper-lower- to upper-middle-class white, religious suburbanites—personally know quite a few persons who play these games, and they notice the charges are definitely not true for these friends and acquaintances. Therefore, they tend to question the validity of the same charges against people they don't know.

Second, in 1988, a couple of gamers who had been corresponding after meeting at a game convention decided it was time to organize in defense of gamers. This was the start of the Committee for the Advancement of Role-Playing Games (CAR-PGa). What William Flatt and Pierre Savoie started has slowly grown since, although more in quality than in numbers. After several years of comparative silence, the Game Manufacturers Association is again taking a stand on the issue.

When CAR-PGa was first organized, it was assumed that at least some of the stories must be true, and that the group would find what the variable was, change that, and make the games completely safe. After several years of searching the literature, it became obvious that we were dealing with a colossally successful "big lie," supported by the mass media's ignoring any opposing views. How the anti-game groups gained such influence over a generally anti-censorship mass media is yet to be discovered and any such evidence would be greatly appreciated. To be sure, horror stories sell papers and attract audiences, but controversy does so even more. Nevertheless, all controversy was kept

out of the media; only the anti-game side was presented.

There was a final factor that undermined the anti-game forces. During the first years of NCTV, Thomas Radecki claimed to be on the faculty of the University of Illinois (Champaign-Urbana) medical school. When I checked the school, I found that he had never been on the faculty. Although at one time he had been given the honorary "clinical faculty" status—given to doctors who are accredited to practice at a teaching hospital and not involving any faculty duties, except for the answering of occasional questions asked by medical students—this was pulled in 1985 (O'Morchoe 1988), long before he stopped claiming faculty status in promoting NCTV.

In March 1992, Radecki quit NCTV and turned it over to a Beverly Hills colleague, Carole Lieberman.

The faltering campaign against RPG was given a boost during the 1992 "May sweeps" for TV audience ratings. On the first day of sweeps and again on May 17 and 19, two heavily hyped TV movies were shown based on the murder of Leith Von Stein, in Washington, North Carolina, in 1988. While the first was a turkey, the second, *Cruel Doubt*, was better acted, if just as hokey, and returned to network broadcast in August 1993, right after extensive play of the admittedly fictional *Mazes and Monsters* movie.

In the Von Stein case, a boy arranged for two friends to kill his parents. The stepfather was killed and the mother survived. A $2-million inheritance was barely mentioned, as though it couldn't possibly have been a motive. Both movies, and the books they were based on, had a "smoking gun," a game scenario describing the murder. The problem is that no such scenario was found after exhaustive searches by CAR-PGa and the university-based computer bulletin board, UseNet.

Yet, since these books were published, there have been two more cases copying the Von Stein modus operandi explicitly. In the first, the British Columbia Huenemann/Leatherbarrow case, a boy arranged for friends to kill his mother and grandmother, both successfully, for a $3-million inheritance (Mullins 1992). In the second, the Koslow case in Texas, the daughter arranged it for a $12-million inheritance. The stepmother was killed, and the father survived his injuries, but games were never mentioned (Crawford 1993). However, in neither of these cases, were the two "true crime" books investigated as a blueprint—but in the Von Stein case a nonexistent game scenario was blamed.

It is still too early to tell what effect these programs will have on public opinion. The original broadcast of *Cruel Doubt* was opposite a show hyping flying-saucer abduction stories. One can assume that these incredible beliefs will never die out, but will live on in the minds of a credulous minority, be tolerated by an apathetic majority, and to the rest of us sometimes be a source of persecution and always be a source of irritation.

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Science Without Solemnity

. . . [Francis] Crick set the tone with a talk of the kind [in] which he specializes: not a wasted word. . . . The talk was deft, as deft as a double helix with the strands running in opposing directions. What was it like then? No rushing to the lab. No secretaries, but no mail to speak of either. No traveling except perhaps to Paris. No trans-Atlantic telephone. Hardly any literature to read. And no keys to the lab at night (so that people had to climb the railings if they wanted to work then). Much was done in pubs. . . . Crick's purpose—but he is too much a gentleman to have declared it—may have been dangerously nostalgic: to demonstrate by example that it is possible to do good science without being solemn, even that science can be good fun. He laughed a lot, mostly at himself.

—John Maddox, in "Watson, Crick, and the Future of DNA," writing about the fortieth anniversary celebration of the discovery of the structure of DNA, in *Nature*, March 11, 1993.