

EDITORIAL

Role-playing and the real world

The following guest editorial is by Michael A. Stackpole, game designer, writer, and member of the Phoenix Skeptics.

The thief listens at the door. He hears nothing. He knocks once and waits for an answer. None comes. Because there are lights on, he knocks again, this time a little more insistently. Again, there is no reply. Just to make triply certain, he taps on the window.

All clear. Standing in the darkness, he puts his shoulder against the door. The door jamb creaks. He pushes with more effort and gets another creak. Third time's the charm; the door jamb splinters. A table near the door tips over, scattering books and scrolls across the room.

The thief waits and listens for a scream, a curse, or any sign that he's been detected. There is none. Slowly, he enters and closes the door, surveying the treasure. From just what he can see on the surface, he is rich beyond his wildest dreams.

You—you're the character defending the treasury. You just heard the break-in. What do you do? Do you bare steel and attack the thief? Do you step into the hallway from a back room and cast a spell? Do you utter a quick and dark prayer to your patron deity to summon a lightning bolt to reduce this idiot to ashes? Quick, what do you do?

In a role-playing game, as we all know, there may well be one answer to that question for each player asked. Tactics and preferences differ within groups and between characters run by the same player. Some characters would kill the thief, others would trap him, and yet others might offer to spare his life in return for information or even a possible split of the profits. Whichever answer seems to you and your group to be the most fun is most likely the one you will choose.

But what would you do if this were real life?

If you are a role-player, and if the theories expounded by groups like Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons (BADD) or the National Coalition against Television Violence (NCTV) are true, then you launch yourself at the thief in a homicidal fury. You, the poor gamer, unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality, snarl at the man, summoning different game creatures and gods to deal with him. You, the poor unsuspecting victim of institutionalized violence promoted by movies and TV, are incited to take justice into your own hands and violently deal with this threat.

You do this, groups like BADD and NCTV assert, because society and role-playing

games train you to be antisocial and amoral. Games warp your mind so you can no longer tell the difference from real life and fantasy. In games, you become involved in a web of demonic evil that will never let you go.

Dr. Carl A. Raschke is the author of a book of dubious scholarship entitled *Painted Black* (San Francisco: Harper &, Row, 1990). In the chapter on role-playing games, he notes that "One of the old tricks of brainwashing, perfected by military interrogators and even inquisitors centuries back, is to confound fantasy with reality."¹ He goes on to say:

What distinguishes "Dungeons and Dragons" [from other games] is its open-endedness. No board exists, and there are no real rules in force—only some vague limits and options for each character. The identity of the player and the character, even though they are formally separate, tend to merge.²

Clearly, in Dr. Raschke's opinion, the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® game becomes an engine for developing psychoses.

When you are taught to believe that the traps and pitfalls of an inherently evil world—signified as a dungeon—are so enormous, so abundant, and so bizarre that you can only survive by a magic

without moral substance, you are likely to go off the deep end. You are even more likely to bow down and prostrate yourself before the Power that reputedly rules over the maddening mesh of wickedness. You are apt to identify with . . . Satan.³

D&D is really an elementary-level home study kit for "black magic."⁴

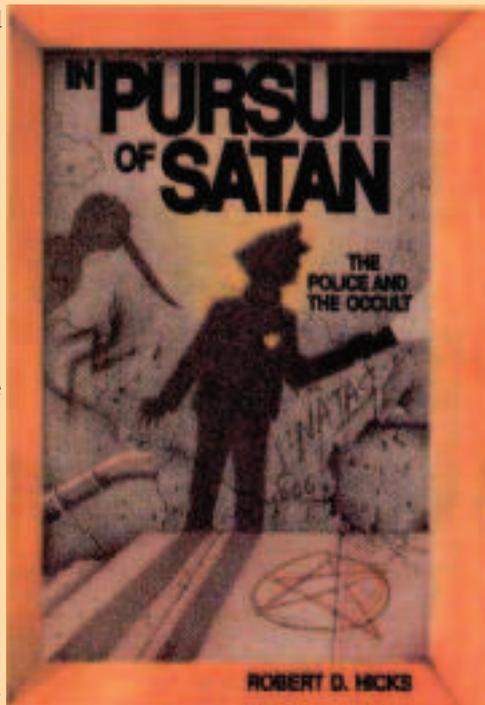
To Raschke, there is no escape from the evil snares of role-playing games:

The kind of role-playing that occurs with D&D, however, is not an attempt to learn or "model" anything. It is an increasingly desperate effort to achieve heightened fantasies of power. Complex fantasies of power by their own momentum give rise to paranoia. The more treasure the player gains, the greater the peril. Because there is no exit to the dungeon fashioned brick by brick by the mind, the suicide solution frequently seems the only cogent alternative.

If the solution is not suicide, it is rage and aggression in a desperate gambit to bring about a triumph of the will. The player of D&D finds himself or herself increasingly alone in a fantasy world of threats, feints, stratagems [sic], and counter-moves. There is no board to limit his or [sic] sense of where the game can, or should, be played. The game is one's fate. Like a Lear or any other tragic hero, it is not inconceivable that the only conceivable outcome is madness, or death.⁵

The focus of Dr. Raschke's book is on magic and Satanism, so his slant on role-playing is not unexpected. Dr. Thomas Radecki of NCTV on the other hand, has a wholly different opinion as to what RPGs and popular culture do to us. Radecki and his organization regularly review and rate movies, TV shows, and books for their violent content. Radecki, in conjunction with Pat Pulling of BADD, has also issued numerous press releases purporting to detail cases of mayhem and suicide caused by games. While Dr. Radecki says *all* the evidence is open for examination, NCTV has refused to provide copies of the same to the Game Manufacturers' Association, despite GAMA's offer to pay for the duplication.

In NCTV's newsletter, *NCTV News*, Dr. Radecki provides definitions for the group's rating scheme: "RV is given when the film is likely to cause viewers to become more prone to anger and violence."⁶ In other words, if you see this film or view this show, you will be more likely to commit acts of violence than someone who did not watch it. The following shows, in the Fall 1990 lineup, earned the RV rating: "The Flash," "DEA," "Young Riders," "Top Cops," "MacGyver," "Hunter," "America's Most Wanted," "Jake and the Fatman," "Cop



Rock," and "Unsolved Mysteries." "The Flash" earned top honors with an estimated 45 acts of violence per hour.⁷ *Ghost* and *The Witches* earned that rating for films.⁸

Given the theories that Dr. Raschke and Dr. Radecki operate under, I am a lost soul. I started playing fantasy role-playing games in 1976 and sold my first game design in 1977. Since that time, I have designed all or part of three role-playing games, three computer role-playing games, and countless adventures for role-playing games, including TSR's AD&D[®] and TOP SECRET/S.I.[™] games and FASA's BATTLE-TECH[®] game. I've written nine novels, six full of BATTLETECH game violence and the other three having violence and magic in them. I've played and run all sorts of role-playing games, both at home and at conventions in the U.S.A., the U.K., and Canada. My work has been translated into five different languages, including Japanese, and my first computer fantasy role-playing game, *Wasteland*, has sold over 100,000 copies.

It gets worse. "The Flash" happens to be my favorite TV show in the current season. My choice of fare at the movies is not wimpy RV films, but films that earn the XUnfit rating, like every Arnold Schwarzenegger movie from the 1980s, except *Twins* and *Red Heat*. Not only that, but I read books that NCTV has rated unfit because of violence, like the collected works of Tom Clancy and Stephen R. Donaldson.

But wait, there's more! In my house, I have a real Japanese samurai sword. I also have an antler-handled, 15" -long dagger that friends gave me as a gift. I have a number of Buck knives, including one with an 8" blade. And my father brought me a genuine shillelagh from Ireland. I also own a replica of a 1916 broomhandle Mauser pistol; it works like real, but the barrel has not been drilled out, and even then the metal couldn't withstand the chamber pressure of a bullet being fired.

I don't own a real gun, but by Dr. Raschke's way of thinking I either don't need one because, after 16 years of gaming, I should be a full-fledged archmage (or at least think I am) or I should believe my pistol replica is real. According to Dr. Radecki—who never explains how his raters can watch and read all this stuff without going mad themselves—I'm a time bomb just waiting to tick over. As far as they are concerned, the difference between me and Hannibal Letter (of *Silence of the Lambs*) is that I don't throw enough dinner parties.

Why do I bring all this up? Last night, at approximately 10:30 P.M., I was in my apartment when I lived through the example that opens this essay. I heard the creaks as the thief pushed at the door. I went back into my bedroom and was going for the samurai sword when I heard the crack of the door jamb and the crash of the table near the door. My left hand

was two feet away from the 15" dagger, and my right hand was one foot from the Mauser replica when the thief entered my living room.

What did I do?

I picked up the phone with my left hand and dialed 911. I left it pulse-dialing on the bed as I stuck my head out to see if the thief was still in my apartment. When I caught sight of him, I was full in the hallway. Inside me a voice was screaming, "Wait, moron, what if he has a gun?" By that time, though, I saw the thief had nothing in his hands.

What did I do?

Adrenaline is a wonderful thing. It makes you immensely powerful, but it also makes you berserkly stupid. Snarling a string of curses that would have put any sailor to shame, I ran at him. I shot past the shillelagh near my desk and bypassed the 8" Buck knife on my filing cabinet. Roaring, shouting, letting every ounce of my fear and outrage and surprise ring through my voice, I bellowed at the man.

I think, in his mind, I looked something like the Tasmanian Devil from the Bugs Bunny cartoons. He had figured he was alone and had it made when this shrieking, furry silhouette shot out of the back and went after him like a shark after a bleeding fish. Realizing he'd made a mistake, he did the only sensible thing: He opened the front door and ran like he'd accidentally stepped through the gates of Hell. (Yeah, my apartment is messy, but not *that* messy.)

Dr. Radecki would point out that my first instinct was to go for the sword. Sure. The sword is a rough equivalent of a security blanket. When thinking about what I might or might not do in an intruder situation, having a sword in hand is always something that makes me feel safer. It means that, despite my small size, I can surprise an enemy. That speculation and planning clearly comes under the definition of fantasy.

The reality was this: When the door crashed in, I dialed 911. I suffered no problem differentiating between fantasy and reality. I didn't even think of grabbing the dagger that lay 4" from the phone. I didn't go back after the sword, which was buried under some shoes beside my bed. I didn't grab the Mauser replica. I called the cops.

That's what I did, but that's only one case. It's anecdotal evidence and has no validity. I am an aberration, apparently, because I have thus far avoided the diabolical and violent snares of my society.

Dr. Raschke writes:

According to psychologists Sheryl Wilson and Theodore Barber, approximately 4 percent of the population comports with a profile they term *fantasy-prone personalities*. [Emphasis *his*.] The fantasy-prone are not only highly hypnotizable, or suggestible, they also tend to experience their fantasies as *real*. [Emphasis *his*.] They see imagined sights with both their eyes closed and opened. And they respond to

their fantasies with emotions that in other people would be aroused by actual, sensory perceptions. The group is capable of experiencing "anything" in fantasy, and when embroiled in their fantasies, "they do not ask whether their experiences are real."⁹

We know that, even before the advent of the AD&D 2nd Edition game, there were literally millions of D&D[®] and AD&D rules sets in existence, so it is safe to posit a base of 10,000,000 people who have been exposed to fantasy role-playing games. If Raschke's theory holds true, there should be 400,000 people who have been exposed to fantasy role-playing games and who are unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality. They would believe they could work magic, since Raschke has already said the D&D game is a black-magic primer. So, somewhere out there, we have 400,000 magickers wandering in a daze, casting spells to take care of their daily chores.

That's roughly half the number of Jehovah's Witnesses in the U.S.¹⁰ or almost the entire population of the state of Wyoming.¹¹ In fact, despite the vast pool of players who have been enjoying fantasy role-playing games for over 17 years, NCTV and BADD claim that only 125 lives have been lost because of these games. If they were correct in their thinking, the toll taken because of games should be staggering, not an amount about equal to the total number of Americans killed in action in Operation Desert Storm.¹²

There is no way to overemphasize the need for clear, critical thinking about the phenomena Carl Raschke and Tom Radecki tackle in their books and publications. Robert D. Hicks, a criminal justice analyst for the state of Virginia, is the author of *In Pursuit of Satan* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1991). This book presents a detailed and in-depth study of the whole alleged "Satanic Crime Conspiracy," including an extensive section on the allegations made concerning role-playing games. As a law-enforcement professional, Hicks looks at the materials produced through "cult cop" seminars, special-interest groups, and the media to point out the fallacies concerning the myth of cult crime. Concerning tracts written to inform parents about what their teens are doing, Mr. Hicks writes:

Such literature, written by adults for other hand-wringing adults, relies on supposition, guesses, and speculation, and reacts to music, games, fads, and fashions *meant* to intimidate adults. Very little literature on teens' interests in things satanic involves empirical study. Much of what fuels the literature comes from what cult cops say on the lecture circuit to teachers, counselors and therapists, and parents. . . . In particular, I suggest that cult cops, in warning parents about teen's interests, have divorced themselves from law enforcement; what they tell parents consists of their *opinions* of what's harmful, occasionally mixed with specific examples of teens who went

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astray, implying causal connections not suggested by the evidence.

The real value of Hick's book is that it provides the background study necessary for people to come to grips with everything they have heard, and it supplies them a frame of reference in which to deal with it. Chapter six of his book discusses Patricia Pulling and her efforts to discredit gaming. Hicks succinctly points out the vast holes in Ms. Pulling's understanding of games, statistics, and what constitutes evidence of criminal activity. While this book is written with the law-enforcement professional in mind, it is invaluable for dealing with the assault on games and is very readable for the layman.

When all is said and done, we do have to ask ourselves, "Are there people who have trouble handling games?" Sure. We've all seen kids who spend too much time gaming and not enough time studying. The important thing is that in a social game, where people share with each other and become friends, the players build up a support network to help each other. They learn how to cooperate. They learn what is real and what is not, and they deal with the world accordingly.

As game players, we are not abnormal. We are not freaks. We're just regular folks, enjoying a hobby that demands some brain sweat but is no more harmful than a community theatrical group. Games are not for everyone, but that doesn't make them evil or tools of the Devil or violence-desensitization kits.

Oh, yeah, now that I've fantasized about what happened regarding the real-life thief, would I have changed anything? Would I rather have gone for the sword and left the man's blood on my blade? Would I have held him at bay with the fake pistol? Would I have clutched the dagger in my hand and struck silently? Sure, if it had been in a role-playing game, I might have done all of those things.

But this wasn't a game.

If I had it to do over again, I'd have dialed 911 faster, shut my bedroom door, and hoped like hell the police arrived in time to catch the thief red-handed.

Mike Stackpole

Footnotes

1. Raschke, Carl A. *Painted Black* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1990), p. 185.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
6. *NCTV News*, Vol. 12, No. 1-2, Jan.-Feb. 1991, p. 7.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 11 and 13.
9. Raschke, *Painted Black*, p. 189.
10. Hoffman, Mark S., ed. *The World Almanac and Book of Facts 1991* (New York: Pharos Books, 1990), p. 609.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 608.
12. The total U.S. casualties from Operation Desert Storm include 128 killed in action, 18 missing in action, 357 wounded in action, and 101 killed in noncombat-related actions (*Milwaukee Sentinel*, 21 March 1991, no page number available).
13. Hicks, Robert D. *In Pursuit of Satan* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1991), pp. 271-272.

Editor's note: If copies of Robert D. Hicks's book, *In Pursuit of Satan*, are not available in your bookstore, it may be ordered directly from Prometheus Books for \$23.95 (hardbound), plus shipping. For phone orders, call: (800) 421-0351, toll free. Purchases may be made by credit card or check. Ω

Letters

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wolves in popular myth and culture. Both books are essential for anyone writing about these monsters or running a fantasy campaign that uses these monsters on a large scale. In closing, I would like to say that it was refreshing to see I was not the only one who felt for a particular type of monster.

Dear Dragon,

I really like kobolds! Ever since I first saw their picture in a friend's *Monster Manual*, I've been drawn to them. Later, when I accidentally bought the *Dungeon Masters Guide* instead of the *Players Handbook*, I came across a picture of a green dragon attacking a poor band of kobolds, and I've pitied them ever since. It's weird why I like kobolds, but when the *Monstrous Compendium* came out, I found a redeeming statement in it that said perhaps kobolds were evil because they were always beaten up by the bigger races. Anyway, I'm now a DM for an after-school group, and I plan to raise the kobold race to new levels. Strangely, even though it's not been a conscious thing, I never seem to have played a gnome character in my life.

Tristan De Buyscher
Holly Springs NC

Dear Dragon,

I've always had a sort of sympathy for rocks (not the large flying birds), because when I was a kid, my big brother would make me be one while he went off to adventure. To this day, I love rocks and am proud of my heritage as a rock.

William J. Keevan
Blue Hill ME

As mentioned in issue #166, I personally love dinosaurs, and so does my son. Godzilla was my hero when I was a pre-teen, and I used to cheer him on when watching him at the drive-in or on late-night TV. What a great guy.

I also like hamsters and guinea pigs, from which sprang my entry for giant space hamsters in the first SPELLJAMMER™ appendix for the Monstrous Compendium. Unfortunately, I've had a hard time finding people who like giant space hamsters as much as I do (well, Jeff Grubb likes them, but he had the original idea for them, so he doesn't count). Some people told me they even took the giant space hamster page out of their notebooks! I was devastated. I know giant space hamsters deserve better than that.

In fact, now that I'm thinking about it, I'm going to have a contest:

The reader who sends me the best, most original letter on why he, she, or it loves giant space hamsters will win a year's subscription to DRAGON Magazine. Runners-up will get some other sort of prize. TSR employees can enter but won't win (sorry). I'll print the most insightful, thought-provoking, gushingly positive answers in this column later this year. You can lie if you want, just as long as you say that giant space hamsters are wonderful in 100 words or less. Send your praise and adoration to: I Love Giant Space Hamsters, c/o DRAGON Magazine, P.O. Box 111, Lake Geneva WI 53147, U.S.A. Make sure your name and full address are on your submission. The postmark deadline for contest submissions is August 31st, 1991. It's never possible to love a monster too much.

Wyvern trouble

Dear Dragon,

I had an interesting problem when I played in a recent AD&D game. Our party was attacked by a male wyvern in rut. To fight him off, our highest-level magic-user turned herself into a wyvern, which made her also in heat (don't ask how, you don't want to know). What is the percent chance of her becoming pregnant? What would the offspring be like? What would happen if the wyvern were female (and in season) and the magic-user were male?

Robby Vogel
Keizer OR

On the other hand, maybe it is possible to love a monster too much. I take back my earlier statement.

Interspecies dating is one of those areas of role-playing that is best left to the DM's whim. Most likely, nothing will happen, but there are Oriental tales of dragons and humans having kids together and we all know about Gilthanas and Silvara in the DRAGONLANCE® Chronicles. Think they had fun? You bet.

I strongly suggest that no matter what the DM decides, he should sit back and smile a lot for the next few months as if something were going to happen. That's all—just smile. It keeps the players and their characters on their toes. Ω