Dungeons and Dragons: Altering the Course of the Fantasy Genre

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of English
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

Spring 2023

# An Abstract of the Thesis of

Aislyn Putnam for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
In the Department of English to be taken June 2023

Title: Dungeons And Dragons: Altering the Course of The Fantasy Genre

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Although myths and folktales have always contained fantastic elements, literary scholars often date the origins of the modern "fantasy" genre to the 19th century and works such as *The King of the Golden River* 1851 by John Ruskin, *The Princess and the Goblin* 1872 by George MacDonald, and *The Well at the World's End* 1896 written and illustrated by William Morris. In the 20th century, one of the most influential works, if not the most influential, is J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. With *The Hobbit*, Tolkien introduced readers to a vision of a fantasy world that continues to influence the genre today. *Dungeons & Dragons*, a table-top role-playing game published by Tactical Studies Rules in 1973, primarily under the guidance of Gary Gygax, derives many of its features from works that were popular when Gygax was growing up such as *The Hobbit*, as well as pulp fictions such as *Conan the Conqueror* by Robert E. Howard. With the origins of *D&D* being so explicitly rooted in notable works of modern fantasy, *D&D* provides a revealing interpretation of the genre. Indeed, although not a conventional literary text, *D&D* now arguably has a central place in the development of the genre. By studying the history and construction of the game, and the various controversies over its development and tropes, we can discover both the depth of influence it has had, both on the conventions and the public perception of the fantasy genre more broadly.

# Table of Contents

# Introduction to the Fantasy Genre

The origins of the modern fantasy genre are dated by literary scholars to the 19th century with such works as *The King of the Golden River* (1851) by John Ruskin, *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) by George MacDonald, and *The Well at the World's End* (1896) written and illustrated by William Morris. As early instances of the modern fantasy genre Ruskin and MacDonald's stories are considered to be a bit closer to fairytales and contained professional illustrations. *The River at the World's End*, a tale follows a young hero as he goes on a quest for a well the waters of which would grant him strength, youth, and immortality, is a work of high fantasy that would later serve as the inspiration for both *The Hobbit* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* (William).

From those beginnings the fantasy genre is one that has captured the hearts and imaginations of millions of readers around the world, *The Lord of the Rings* having been translated into 50 languages and having sold about 150 million copies (Gunner). Tolkien's works have since inspired many novels and other creative works that use his fantastical creatures as a model. Tolkien's work is also often cited as the inspiration for creative works across multiple forms of media over the last few decades, including many video games and popular films, like the game *World of Warcraft* which was created by fans of *D&D* (Kushner). Both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* have been adapted into successful films in the last two decades, those popular films being only some of the most recent adaptations of Tolkien's works. Tolkien's work also served as one of the main sources of inspiration for the creators of *Dungeons & Dragons*, which itself has since been adapted into more than one film and a few television series since its initial publishing 50 years ago. In 1983 *D&D* was adapted into an animated TV show that ran for

three seasons, but the most crucial appearance of *D&D* in film is *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves* which is just the most recent screen adaptation of the role-playing game.

As a genre, fantasy is not particularly difficult to define. The key features of adventures to unfamiliar lands, the mythical and magical, and the symbolic struggle of good against evil are uncontested hallmarks of the genre. In C.S. Lewis's *The Lion the Witch and The Wardrobe* for example, the Pevensie children, after being sent to the countryside for their own safety during the Second World War, find themselves magically transported via magical wardrobe to a mysterious new world covered in snow. The children thrust into this magical world of impossible beasts align themselves with the divine good of Aslan and emerge victorious in the land's struggle against the evil White Witch, in this victory named rulers of Narnia.

These elements are now considered staples of the modern fantasy genre, but they are not necessarily unique to it. Many of the traits now associated with high fantasy have their origins in many ancient myths and folktales. In fact, the entire narrative of *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* is embellished with religious and folkloric imagery and metaphors such as Aslan's role as Christ-like figure and a brief cameo from Father Christmas. According to Children's Librarian at the New York Public Library, Amanda Pagan, much of the tropes of fantasy are heavily influenced by, "the long-lasting popularity of European medieval poetry and fiction such as the epic of *Beowulf* and the legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table," (Pagan). However, these works are not generally classified as fantasy because of the instrumental difference between these two types of stories: fantasy, unlike myth, does not ask to be read as "truth", and does not serve the same overtly ideological function. For many readers the enjoyment they derive from reading fantasy is a direct result of its circumstances being obviously fabricated and impossible in our world as we know it (MasterClass). This suspension of disbelief

in which fantasy readers engage is the source from which fantasy derives one of its most alluring appeals being escapism. Despite the escapist nature of fantasy however, fantasy uses imagination and magic and whimsy to tell stories that speak to the human experience, the genre can help audiences to better understand and respond to their own real-world circumstances, or even model their behavior, through the fantasy media they consume.

When it comes to the commercial and critical success of fantasy as a genre, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy are the most influential texts. The heroic tale that Tolkien weaves about Bilbo and his adventure is not overly complex, and in fact thrives in its simplicity – it's a version of a quest-narrative that has been told for centuries. Writing as a person whose interest in fantasy was sparked by having *The Hobbit* read to me long after it was published, I can attest that some of its appeal is because of the pure fantastical elements. But the story is also about someone ordinary who is given the opportunity to accomplish something extraordinary, because—within a unique and equally extraordinary. This setting brings us to another element of fantasy that has attracted the interest of fans and critics: world-building. Combining aspects of the traditional folk tale and the hero's journey and placing them on the backdrop of Middle Earth, a world much of his own creation, but based heavily in the folklore he studied as a Professor of Medieval English. Tolkien poured many details into the creation of Middle Earth—and this accretion of detail is a large part of where the magic of the world comes from. Middle Earth feels like a living, breathing place with impossible fantastical creatures such as elves, orcs, and dwarves. Tolkien's commitment to world-building is apparent in his construction of new languages for his fantasy creature to speak—Tolkien's Elvish, for example is not limited to a few "made up" words, but is instead an entire language, with its own vocabulary and grammatical system that fans can learn to read and write, producing their own

original texts in Elvish. The website Tolkien Gateway boasts a full linguistic breakdown of Elvish, a source from which fans can learn the language for themselves ("Elvish").

These kinds of details, create a level of immersion to the experience of reading fantasy novels that has greatly added to the appeal of the genre to many readers. The world-building elements make the fantasy worlds feel almost as knowable as our own—allowing readers not only to escape from the mundane, but experience and better understand themselves in the context of the fantasy world.

## The Early Beginnings of the Role-Playing Game

*Dungeons and Dragons*, a table-top role-playing game published by Tactical Studies Rules in 1973, spearheaded by the efforts of Gary Gygax, is in its own right a work of fantasy that draws inspiration from the works of the genre that were popular when Gygax was growing up. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, and early pulps such as *Conan the Conqueror* by Robert E. Howard, among others, account for much of the creative foundation for what would later become D&D (Witwer). In fact, much of the earlier terms and names included in the game come directly from those of *The Hobbit*; early halflings were once called hobbits, Balrogs becoming Balor Demons and Ents become Treants and so on (Gygax "E-mail").

Gygax's interest in fantasy started early and was nurtured by his parents. When he was very young, his father, a salesman, used to make up stories for him, and Gygax described his father as "an excellent storyteller." Additionally, his mother used to read to him classics such as Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventure of Tom Sawyer* (Kushner). From a young age, Gygax's imagination was filled with ideas of incredible heroes and magical far-off lands, and his explorations of the fantastical were not confined to the books he would read.

Growing up in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin and often getting into trouble, the young Gary Gygax and his childhood friend Don Kaye would take a small backpack of supplies and explore the tunnels underneath the nearby abandoned Oak Hill Sanitorium. Treating the asylum as a haunted playground, Gygax and Kaye played pretend games as an almost precursor for the games that they would later develop together (Witer). As he got older, settling down, getting married, and starting a family, his interest in fantasy evolved as he and some of his friends discovered war games, in particular *Little Wars* by H.G. Wells. War games were the hobby that would eventually evolve into the inception of *D&D* (Kushner). *Little Wars* was a game system that utilized terrain and miniatures to allow players to reenact and create their own historical battles. While the role-playing elements were little to non-existent, players would act as the decision-making forces in imaginary war, the simulation of battle being something that exists in *D&D* to this day. Interested in seeing how he could change or improve the war games he loved, he began to tweak things slightly, asking his fellow players to test the quality of his improvements (Kushner).

He began by improving the war games he loved with small, mechanics-based changes: for instance, replacing the standard 6-sided dice with a more diverse set of dice ranging from 4 to 20-sided. Then in 1968, in order to get feedback on his improvements and to grow this small gaming community, he organized the first ever Geneva Convention (Gen Con), a convention where fans of war role-playing games and fantasy could come together and discuss and engage in their common interest, in 1968. Before branching off completely and writing his own game, Gygax with a fellow war game enthusiast, Jeff Perren, wrote a medieval war game with a fantasy supplement called Chainmail to add more variety to the war games that tended to be based in more recent historical periods and battles (Gygax "Chainmail"). Chainmail is an approximately

30-page document that outlines the new polynomial dice system he had created with an additional 15-pages at the end detailing how players could, if they wished, add magic and whimsy to their otherwise historically bound war simulations. He also added a mechanic that is much like the "hero" he would expand on in *D&D* laying out rules for man-to-man combat, something that was not yet common in war games as most of those were battalion or army based. Despite the minor but present role-playing aspects of war gaming, many had a hard time finding the value in stepping into this new role-playing role of "hero", but Gygax didn't give up. In 1969 Gygax met a man named Dave Arneson with whom he would begin to develop a new game, stepping away even more from war games and leaning more heavily in the fantasy hero element. The two of them would spend months sending ideas and notes back and forth co-writing the document that would eventually be published under Gygax's publishing company Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) in 1974, the first ever edition of Dungeons and Dragons (Kushner).

Publishing using his own new publishing company TSR, because he was unable to find a larger publishing company willing to take a risk on this game with seemingly no future potential audience. However, as an established member of fantasy, science-fiction, and role-playing gaming communities, Gygax was aware that his game would have an audience amongst fans of Fantasy literature and specifically those interested in Tolkien's explorations of fantasy in The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings trilogy. In an interview conducted by TheOneRing.net Gygax responded to a question about the Tolkien influence on *D&D* by saying, "Just about all the players were huge JRRT fans, and so they insisted that I put as much Tolkien-influence material into the game as possible," (Gygax). Though *D&D* has only grown farther from its Tolkien based fantasy roots in the editions that have followed the original, Tolkien's world building is foundational and thus cannot be removed from the essence of what *D&D* is. The ideal at the core

of *D&D* is that you, the player, by all accounts an ordinary person, are capable of doing extraordinary things if only you have the tools and imagination to do so, and *D&D* is that tool. The inspiration drawn from Tolkien's world-building cannot be understated for it is the frame upon which *D&D* has grown and achieved such great success, and certainly one of the most important pieces of inspiration Gygax pulled from the fantasy genre; but it is in *The Hobbit* in particular that the idea of, that given the opportunity, ordinary people rising to the occasion and become remarkable is most developed.

With the origins of D&D being so explicitly rooted in notable works of modern fantasy, *D&D* provides an interesting and unique interpretation of the genre. In its construction as a game, *D&D* is capable of more concretely manifesting the essential elements and qualities of the fantasy genre, which also makes *D&D* an interesting way to study the fantasy genre. Not only has *D&D* has a lot of possible influence on the fantasy genre but by studying the controversies that have surrounded the game we can develop an even deeper understanding of D&D's effect on the genre.

Notably *D&D* has both revealed and shaped social perceptions of those who engage heavily with the fantasy genre—particularly during the moral panic that surrounded the game in the early 80s. Additionally, in its role-playing aspect, *D&D* expands on the escapist nature of the fantasy genre by allowing players to realize themselves in a fantasy setting; allowing them to become their own fantasy protagonist. While *D&D* may not be what we initially think of when it comes to a literary work of fantasy, *D&D* clearly has a central place in the history and development of the genre. Through studying *Dungeons & Dragons*, we can both see the depth of influence it has had on public perception of the fantasy genre and also how its unique game format has expanded the scope of the fantasy genre and how it is explored.

**"The Hobbit Habit"**

In order to fully understand the effect that *Dungeons & Dragons* has had on the general

perception of the fantasy genre, first we need to understand the history of the modern fantasy

genre before *D&D* was introduced. As a staple of the genre, and largely considered one of the

greatest works of the modern fantasy genre, taking a look into the critical and public reception of

*The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* will help to create an accurate representation of

engagement in the modern fantasy genre. Additionally, when considering the direct relationship

between the high fantasy tropes established by J.R.R. Tolkien's work and *D&D*, the reception of

the novels will serve as an intriguing comparison to the public reception of the game.

*The Hobbit* was published September 21, 1937, but the novel would not become widely

popular in the United States until several decades later when the first installment of the *The Lord*

*of the Rings* series, *The Fellowship of the Ring* was published in 1954. After the entire series had

been published, slowly the American interest in the tales of Middle Earth grew until by1966 it

was the best-selling mass-market paperback in the country (Rothman). Time magazine

investigated why, college students in particular were so enamored with what Tolkien has written

and, quoting a student as saying that they enjoyed that they could "cheer the hero and boo the

villain," a quality they appreciated for its simplicity and the escapism it offered ("The Hobbit

Habit"). The need for escapism is understandable, especially given the state of the government

and politics in the US during the 60s.

On top of the novels incredible popularity, they were also well received critically; some

called *The Hobbit* "one of the best modern children's books around," (Hardwick). The critical

reception of *The Lord of the Rings* was slightly less unanimous, some hailing it in a positive light

much like that of *The Hobbit*. But some yet criticized *The Lord of the Rings* as "a story of boys

acting as adult heroes," (Hardwick). But any negative reaction of the novels had no lasting negative effect on their popularity, as the novels still sold millions of copies.

No critic of the era, however, seemed worried that the readers of the novels were more likely than others to lose touch with reality. By contrast, I have met several people whose parents would not allow them to read Harry Potter when they were younger out of fear that they would be harmed in reading stories about wizards and magic (and the evangelical opposition to the Harry Potter books is well attested in the media at large). Yet *The Hobbit* is also a children's book that includes far off imaginary places and famously includes fantasy creatures, magic, and wizards. I would argue that the shift in public opinion concerning fantasy novels—especially fantasy marketed towards kids and teenagers—is largely a result of *Dungeons & Dragons* in the 1980s and the related "Satanic panic." More specifically, I think much of the fearmongering concerning fantasy and its supposed side-effect of causing its consumers to lose touch with reality can be traced back to the case of James Dallas Egbert III.

## *Dungeons & Dragons* and its Consequences

### "The James Dallas Egbert II Effect"

In August of 1979, a student named James Dallas Egbert III, a 16-year-old student at the University of Michigan was reported missing. By the time the police were finally called it had been a week since he had been seen. The only real clue he left behind was a note left in his dorm that read, "To whom it may concern: If my body is found I wish to be cremated," (Hall). The note and the seemingly random disappearance of Dallas led investigators to believe that he had either run away for committed suicide. However, early in their investigation the police received an anonymous call informing them that Dallas and his friends had played *Dungeons & Dragons*

in the maintenance tunnels beneath the school—the anonymous caller stating that if he was found Dallas would likely be found dead.

So, despite all of the other clues and information that would be uncovered over the course of the investigation, the (at the time) unfamiliar game of *D&D* became the center of the media's narrative concerning Dalla's disappearance. The New York Times in reporting on this strange disappearance described *D&D* as "a bizarre intellectual game" (Sheppard). The Times did not draw a direct connection between the game and Dallas's disappearance; this implicit suggestion would become more explicit in later coverage and public interpretation of the case.

Dallas was by all accounts a brilliant young man. He had graduated from high school at the age of 13 and started attending University and 14 to study computer science. Despite his brilliance however, it was uncovered over the course of the police investigation that he was also quite troubled. Unhappy with the caliber of the police's efforts to find their son, the Egberts hired William Dear, a private detective, to see if he would be more successful in finding their son. When Dear eventually found Dallas, he discovered that prior to the disappearance, Dallas had apparently attempted to kill himself, and had attempted again in the two months that he was missing. After these failed attempts, he had elected to continue to run hoping from couch to couch—too ashamed and afraid to confront the reality of how much he was struggling (Hall). Over the course of his investigation, Dear discovered just how much Dallas was suffering, finding that he had been self-medicating with marijuana, cocaine, and PCP to try and cope with his depression (Hall). Dear also discovered that a cause of Dalla's depression may have been his own struggle with his sexuality in a largely homophobic society; he was unbeknownst to his parents, "a member of the gay student organization on campus" (Hall). Unable to reconcile the mental anguish from which he was clearly suffering, Dallas would unfortunately commit suicide

a year after his initial disappearance. The legacy of this case would not result in better advocacy, acceptance, or awareness of the mental struggles of young queer men; instead, his story marked the beginning of a moral panic surrounding *D&D* and the dangerous effect it could have on American children.

In his search for Dallas, Dear had merely postulated that perhaps, while under the school playing the game, he had gotten lost or injured. But in the media reporting of the case Dear's hypothesis was misrepresented, with some reporters suggesting that Dallas had lost his sense of self, attempting to become his role-playing character—and that it was therefore the dangerous role-playing game that had caused him to go missing. The Washington Post in an addition of dramatic flair, wrote, "Dallas' favorite character was the magic-user who, in the rules of *Dungeons & Dragons*, possesses high intelligence and the ability to cast spells, but lacks physical strength and armor. The magic-user is warned never to enter a dungeon alone. Had Dallas done that, against the wisdom of the Game?" (Hall).

This misrepresentation fundamentally shifted the narrative surrounding the case. The story the media told was that of a promising young man who had a whole life ahead of him as a genius computer scientist, but who had become a troubled young man who abused drugs because of a strange new fantasy "game" that caused him to become so detached from reality that he went missing. And while this was a gross misrepresentation blaming an unfamiliar fantasy game was easier for the public than confronting the far more complex issues of untreated mental health issues, especially those suffered by young queer people. When The New York Times reported on the story, they simply stated that *Dungeons & Dragons* was a game that Dallas was interested in; and yet, as is often true for stories like these, this narrative surrounding *D&D* took on a life of its own, sparking a deep paranoia into the potential dangers of the game. James Dallas Egbert III's

disappearance was the catalyst for an intense paranoia of fantasy genre and *Dungeons &*

*Dragons* specifically, that still exists today.

In the wake of James Dallas Egbert III's tragic disappearance and passing, several other

suspicious deaths of a handful of other young boys across the US would be investigated with a

potential connection to *Dungeons & Dragons*. For example, a pamphlet published and

distributed by a group of concerned parents called *Dungeons and Dragons - Witchcraft Suicide*

*Violence* cited six suicides with connections to *D&D* between 1980 and 1984 (Dempsey). This

pamphlet provided some of the only evidence that any of these deaths were connected to *D&D*,

but more importantly fanned the flames of moral panic surrounding the potential dangers of the

game.

## Moral Panic

Moral panic is a common phenomenon in the United States, usually driven by a

combination of sensationalist journalism, opportunistic politicians, and concerned citizens

exploiting the anxieties of parents and the potential negative effects certain media may have on

their children. During the last century, some of the most prevalent social panics have surrounded

the fear of communist influence in Hollywood (the "Red Scare"), the dear of popular forms of

music, (often a displacement of racism such as with media responses to jazz or the "violence

surrounding Hip Hop, and the anxieties triggered by the growing popularity of Rock n' Roll).

Another, more modern example of such panic is surrounding the potential negative effects of

violent video games on the behavior of children.

The controversy surrounding *D&D* would also closely overlap with the so-called

"Satanic Panic." Because the game openly included monsters such as devils and encouraged the

practice of witchcraft, however fake it may have been, parents began to worry that *D&D* was

exposing their children to mental health issues and quickly became associated with Devil worship.

According to Oxford Reference defines a moral panic as, "a mass movement based on the false or exaggerated perception that some cultural behaviour or group of people is dangerously deviant and poses a threat to society's values and interests," ("moral panic"). And by the early 1980s American parents were becoming increasingly concerned about the deviant potential of *D&D*. The Oxford Reference further suggests that moral panics are usually sparked and exacerbated by the media's coverage of the issue. Using the tragic deaths of several young boys, several news outlets began to cover the death in connection to *D&D*. For example, 60 minutes produced a segment on the potential dangers of *D&D* titled "Is *Dungeons and Dragons* Evil?" in 1985.

## Jack Chick and "Dark Dungeons"

But it wasn't just the news media fanning the flames of this particular moral panic. A religious leader based in Southern California; Jack T. Chick was also at the forefront of the outspoken attack on the role-playing game. Chick appointed himself as a leader in the moral defense of children against the facets of popular culture he found encouraged children to turn away from God and instead let their lives be influenced by the Devil. What distinguished Chick from his fellows in arms against the evils of *D&D* was his medium of dissemination, that being comics which would come to be known as Chick tracts. These tracts were in essence, short comics or zines that warned against the evil present in many elements of popular culture including but not limited to, homosexuality, Halloween, Rock n' Roll, and other religions such as Judaism. In conjunction with warning against the dangers of these sinful engagements he would encourage his readers to instead turn to evangelical Christianity and Jesus (Thielman). "Dark

16

Dungeons" was one such Chick tract written and published in 1984. The 20-page hand-held

comic holds only one panel per page but tells a rather intense story highlighting the profound

danger Dark Dungeons posed to young American minds.

"Dark Dungeons" opens with a young girl's character getting killed in the heat of a *D&D*

battle despite her obvious distress at her character's death. The Dungeon Master declares her

dead and banishes her from the table. She then turns to the other player, Debbie, and tells her that

her Cleric has reached a high enough level to start learning real magic.



(Chick)

The next panel is a cartoonish interpretation of a cult meeting with a pentagram drawn on

the floor and people standing around an altar wearing floor length dark robes. From that moment

on, Debbie possesses the power to practice real magic and uses it to force her father to buy her

more *D&D* materials. Despite her seeming happiness at being able to manipulate her father,

Debbie's interest in the evil magic of *D&D* fades as she discovers that her friend whose character had died in the first panel has committed suicide because she would no longer being able to play as her character.
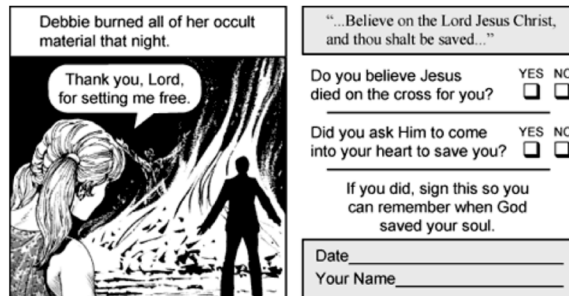


(Chick)

Her DM is furious to hear that Debbie is having second thoughts about *D&D* and learning magic, but her friend's suicide serves as a wakeup call for Debbie to turn away from the evil. Not knowing what to do, she turns to a friend at school who tells her that she should come with him to attend a religious meeting where she learns how to renounce evil through prayer and devotion to Jesus. In the final panel of the comic, she burns all of her *D&D* materials renouncing it for the evil that it is (Chick).
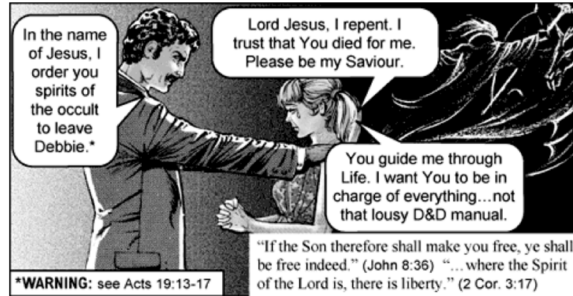
(Chick)

As an evangelical Christian Chick's objective in creating this comic is to demonstrate the spiritual dangers of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The second to last panel shows the Devil's influence literally leaving her body as she denounces *D&D* as the occult and devotes herself to God. And in the space on the last page next to the final panel is a form of sort that asks the reader "Do you believe Jesus died on the cross for you" and "Did you ask Him to come into your heart and save you?" with two boxes "yes" and "no" next to each question. It then prompts you to sign and date on the line below (Chick) in effect agreeing to the contract at the end of the comic.



(Chick)

While this comic is highly exaggerated and almost obnoxiously evangelical it speaks to a larger fear that gripped many parents in the early 80s particularly after James Dallas Egbert III

19

disappearances and eventual death and more cases like his that began appearing across the country. Chick portrays those who encourage Debbie to play *D&D*, as dangerous adults who are no longer able to differentiate between fantasy and reality. The fate of the character of Marcie in the comic, is very similar to the fate that people believed had befallen Dallas—she kills herself when forced to confront the fact that she would no longer be able to play as her Dungeons and Dragons Black Leaf—much like how investigators initially believed that Dallas had come to believe that he was his wizard character, and this had gotten him killed. Chick further plays to and sustains the narrative that the fantasy role-playing element of *Dungeons & Dragons* is inherently dangerous and confusing for its young players. Unfortunately, James Dallas Egbert III would not be the only case that drew a connection between *D&D* and the untimely death and suicide of young boys across the US.

## The Pulling Report

Among one of the more notable cases of this kind was the suicide of Patricia A. Pulling's 16-year-old son, Irving Lee Pulling II. In June of 1982 in Hanover County, Virginia, Pulling was found dead in his room after having shot himself in the chest. Investigation into his suicide found that Pulling had been very interested in *Dungeons & Dragons* and had played it in school. They describe many of his belongings in his room as being Dungeons and Dragons paraphernalia. Additionally, a Detective on the case describes some of the words in his suicide note as containing "unexplainable-type things" (Isikoff) that were attributed by the investigators and by Pulling's parents as being evidence of *D&D*'s influence in Pulling's suicide. But *D&D* is not the only thing these two tragic suicides have in common.

Both Dallas and Pulling were described by their parents and peers as promising and intelligent young men. Dallas was a 16-year-old-boy who was enrolled in math classes at University of Michigan in order to keep up with his incredible intellect (Hall). Pulling, described by classmates as "unusually bright," was enrolled in the Talented and Gifted Program at his school (Isikoff). However, both boys were also described by those around them as being troubled and having difficulties connecting with their peers. Instead of doing the difficult thing of admitting that perhaps they were not as aware of their children's suffering as they would have liked to have been, Pulling's parents in particular were insistent on blaming *Dungeons & Dragons* for the untimely passing of their son. Pulling's mother, Patricia A. Pulling, was so insistent in fact that Dungeons and Dragons was the main cause of her son's mental struggles and eventual suicide, she went on to sue the principle at her son's school, and TSR (Isikoff). When both lawsuits were dismissed by the courts, she went on to form a group of concerned parents called B.A.D.D. (Bothered about *Dungeons and Dragons*), making it her own personal mission to inform other parents on the perceived dangers of *D&D* for children and remove the game entirely from American schools (Zibart). Patricia A. Pulling not only founding B.A.D.D. but even wrote and distributed reading material including a book that she co-authored in 1989 titled *The Devil's Web: Who Is Stalking Your Children for Satan?*

## The Art of Role-Playing

Despite the controversy that *Dungeons & Dragons* has inspired since its creation, the game has nonetheless managed to expand both the fantasy genre and how it is explored by those who adore it. The most notable change in the fantasy genre created by *D&D* is the concept of role-playing and specifically in a fantasy context. Defining role-playing while possible is

21

rendered difficult due to its mutable nature, but the simplest definition based on some of its most fundamental elements is as follows: is over the course of a game instead of making the smartest tactical choice, player inhabit the desires and flaws of a character of their own design and making decisions in accordance with those characteristics. While a game master, or the arbiter of the game has the role of a sort of guiding hand, the story of any *D&D* campaign is written at the table—shifting, and evolving with the choices of the characters, as they engage in this sort of improvisational play acting. For all intents and purposes, the character portrayed in a game of *D&D* is a real person brought to life by the fantasy magic infused into the game.

Role-playing as a subset of improvisational acting is something that is explored in detail by Daniel Mackay in his book *A New Performing Art, The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*. He provides a more detailed definition of role-playing and role-playing games as "fictional world[s] autonomous from a discreet body of work, that grows, changes, and develops through the collaboration of many contributors," (Mackay). This definition again highlights the element of choice that draws so many to playing role-playing games. Role-playing games such as *D&D* give the player a degree of agency over how they choose to engage in the escapism of fantasy because they hold one of the many pens writing the fantasy tale in real time at the game playing table. Mackay continues his in-depth exploration of role-playing by describing the several levels of role-playing that he has identified and the intricacies of those different levels of engagement of role-playing performance in games such as *D&D*. He breaks role-playing into five different levels of engagement as follows: "1) the social frame inhabited by the *person*; 2) the game frame inhabited by the *player*; 3) the narrative frame inhabited by the *raconteur*; 4) the constative frame inhabited by the *addresser*; 5) the performative frame inhabited by the *character*," (Mackay). This list breaks down the way in which the players and the game master interact with

each other in game setting, both as themselves and as the fantasy characters they portray, describing the intricacies of performance that is explored in a role-playing game from both a player and game master's point of view. His level of detail and care in describing just how complex and interesting of an activity role-playing is speaks to just how novel and unique *D&D* is as a game, because according to Mackay, role-playing isn't just gaming, it is an art form.

Not only is role-playing an artform, but it is also a gateway to an early topic discussed in this paper, on the topic of fantasy and escapism. Those who read and engage in fantasy are drawn to it because it appeals to the idea that ordinary people are capable of doing and experiencing extraordinary things, and role-playing by its very nature caters to this desire. The collaborative storytelling effort of *D&D* allows each individual player to inhabit the skin of an extraordinary hero of their own design, and author the tale of the extraordinary heroism, author their own perfect escapist fantasy. Gary Gygax himself built the game with the understanding that those who enjoy the fantasy genre and the war games that he loved did so with the hope of experiencing that very feeling of escapism. Creating *D&D* thus was a natural extension of the desire for escapism that is satiated by fantasy and more fully by fantasy role-playing. Gygax, with the help of all of his under-credited collaborators, created an outlet that allows the ordinary person via a character of their own creation to do incredible things and watch a fantasy world change because of their extraordinary action and under the weight of their choices. Because the choices of the characters carry weight, *D&D* is the most potent extension of fantasy's escapist capacity.

# Deconstructing the Myth of Gary Gygax

Gary Gygax played an instrumental role in bringing *D&D* into the world as he created a majority of the game mechanics and the initial idea that would evolve into *D&D* was his. However, he, like many of the credited creators of history, has received quite a bit more of the credit for this creation than he is due. Additionally, many of the incredible strides that *D&D* has taken in terms of diversity, inclusion, and influence, were in spite of his contributions to the game and the fantasy role-playing sphere. In the more micro aspects of his over-accreditation, I would like to take the opportunity here to name some of the other indispensable contributors to *Dungeons & Dragons*, people without whom, *D&D* would not have been able to become what it is now—starting with Dave Arneson.

Dave Arneson was a young man that Gygax met in 1969. He was 21 years old at the time and a student in the history department at the University of Minnesota. Arneson, like Gygax, was fascinated by war games, the driving force behind him choosing to attend the second ever GenCon in 1969. The two of them bonded over their fascination with war games but also their shared desire to improve them, and after speaking for a long time on their thoughts on improvements to the games they both loved, they began an informal working relationship. They went back and forth for years after moving on from war games to leaning more heavily on how to make the fantasy aspects of the Chainmail supplement more playable and fun independently Arneson supplying a significant amount of the ideas that would eventually become the first edition of *D&D*. While Arneson is credited as a creator of the first ever rule book, he was never really an official member of TSR the publishing company and felt that he did not get enough credit for the work that he did. It took many years for Gygax and Arneson to overcome the bad blood between the two of them (Kushner).

And while none of the co-creators of the original edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* were so severely under credited as Arneson was, there are a few more names I would mention here that have been forgotten under the weight of Gygax's as the sole creator of *D&D* including Don Kaye who was the first ever partner in the publishing company TSR, and John Eric Holmes, who would edit the game of *D&D* to make it simpler and more digestible for the less experienced player in the Basic Set.

## Race in *Dungeons & Dragons*

*Dungeons & Dragons* has had several issues with how it handles race in the construction of the game for both playable and non-playable characters. The descriptions of some of the races in the source books of the game seem to ascribe to a level of racial essentialism in that all of the playable races have inherently ascribed traits by virtue of "racial" abilities. As both a representation of playable races in *D&D* and also some of the more problematic iterations of racial essentialism, half-orcs demonstrate an explicit level of racism in the game. Right in the beginning of the source book guide to playing a half-orc for flavor, the *Player's Handbook* says, "some [half-orcs] venture into the world to prove their worth among humans and other more civilized races," and coming from a culture of "barbaric customs and savage fury," demonstrating an immediate degradation of half-orcs as a race of "uncivilized" people. The God of the Orcs, Gruumsh One-Eye is a chaotic evil god of rage, whom people fear and loathe. The Handbook continues describing that Orcs live in "tribes and slums" and as tending to be short-tempered with rarely having "enough self-control to get by in civilized lands." In the racially essentialist lane, Half-orcs get an automatic increase to both the strength and constitution skills by virtue of their orcish heritage, and the ability to "savage attack," (Crawford).

While from a character construction perspective these ability scores are simply ones that would lend themselves to choosing a class based on being able to take a hit and deal a lot of damage. But immediately under the surface are some incredibly racist undertones associating orcs with an uncontrollable tendency towards violence that is eerily similar to descriptions of certain racial minorities in the United States. And to further the connection to the description of Half-Orcs and the harmful rhetoric associated with Black Americans, the only redeeming social qualities or Orcs are associated with their human or allegorically white heritage. In a Code Switch episode, a podcast distributed by NPR, Jess Kung poses the very important question of, "Are humans the white people of Dungeons & Dragons?" (NPR) a sentiment with which I would almost entirely agree. There is a caveat that needs to be mentioned about how elves fit into the racial metaphor being constructed in the *Player's Handbook* as the European Catholic counterpart to the Protestant American human, but that is beyond the scope of this particular argument. If indeed humans are the white, then it does not bode well that in a mix or racial stereotypes that it is only the human heritage that evens out the inherent "savage" nature of Orcs.

However, in more recent years, and additional supplements to the 5th edition game, Wizards of the Coast have made a more active attempt to step away from the racism that was baked into the game long before they could do anything to change it. In June of 2020 the Wizards of the Coast released a statement on diversity in the game and the active steps they were going to make to improve how it is handled, including a supplement to the game that would remove the need for race-based ability score improvement entirely ("Diversity and Dungeons & Dragons"). And the racial impact of *D&D* has not been all negative.

The official material that makes up the game of *Dungeon & Dragons* are by their very nature as source books, or a role-playing game are merely guidelines and suggestions. While

some of the material within said source books are problematic to say the least, they nonetheless have created a creative space that is, while perhaps not actively welcoming, open to the complete inclusion of minority groups that have historically been excluded from the hobby. Like most fandoms, particularly those based in fantasy-based works, the community of *D&D* players is overwhelmingly populated with white male members, and yet in the recent year's resurgence of *D&D* it has seen an increasingly vocal inclusion of minority voices. The live play *D&D* channel on Dropout, a streaming service published by CollegeHumour has twice now been gamemastered by Aabria Iyengar, a black woman who has made a name and space for herself in the majority white community of *D&D* players. The show also makes an effort to include diverse players or different races, genders, and sexualities, actively creating an inclusive space using a game system that was not originally intended to be so. Part of the magic of *D&D* is that it does not require anything from the player other than a willingness to learn an active imagination to participate. Yes, the rulebooks dictate certain things, but it is a game that is by nature mutable. If I do not like a mechanic that has been written into the rulebook, I can simply change it because of the most important element of the role-playing game, my own creative agency. *Dungeons & Dragons* is just a beautiful tool that can be wielded to suit the escapist fantasy of the players—a beautiful work of fantasy, with each change and shift in the direction of progress only making it more so.

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