

## Script - Tea Spill

OPEN: Stock video of a D20 being rolled. Cut to animated Spill.

The role playing game Dungeons and Dragons has been sweeping the nation and pop culture, but some people cannot separate it from its moral panic controversy in the eighties.

VIDEO GRAPHIC: Fade in subsequent text.

Before I get into the tea, I just want to put out a disclaimer. Please do not send any hate to Gary Gygax, Patricia Pulling, BADD, 60 Minutes, or anyone else mentioned in this story. This video is simply meant to report on the news and give some insight into the situation. Now let's get into the tea.

VIDEO GRAPHIC: Spill sips her tea. Hard cut to red background with "THE STEAM TUNNEL INCIDENT" in white lettering. For the reported evidence, mainly stock photos will be used with an exception made for media that directly relates to the controversy (60 Minutes footage, examples of The Player's Handbook, etc.)

Dungeons & Dragons is known for being the first role playing game to hit shelves in 1974, but in 1979, a 16-year-old boy named James Dallas Egbert III disappeared. His parents hired private investigator William Dear to look into the case, and Dear was set on the idea that James' disappearance had something to do with playing Dungeons & Dragons.

What was actually occurring was that James suffered from mental health issues such as depression and drug addiction. He used the utility tunnels under Michigan State University, where he lived, to escape his surroundings and commit acts of self-harm. He left for New Orleans and attempted to commit suicide again, and when that proved unsuccessful, he called Dear and gave his location out. However, he asked Dear to withhold the truth of his struggles to his parents and the world.

It had been a month since James had left home and the nation was watching, calling it the Steam Tunnel Incident. James committed suicide the subsequent year in 1980. The true story was not told until William Dear released the book *The Dungeon Master: The Disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III* in 1984.

Sales for Dungeons & Dragons skyrocketed but the stigma grew with the same fervor and even reached the Hollywood market. *Mazes and*

*Monsters*, the 1981 book by Rona Jaffe, which warned players about the dangers of role playing games, was subsequently made into a movie for CBS in 1982 starring Tom Hanks. Multiple other books and shows started to depict playing knockoff Dungeons & Dragons games in sewers and steam plants in later years, including Neal Stephenson's college-themed novel *The Big U* in 1984.

However, James Dallas Egbert III was not the only victim in the limelight.

VIDEO GRAPHIC: Hard cut to red background with "THE RISE OF BADD" in white lettering.

In 1982, a student named Irving Lee Pulling committed suicide and his mother, Patricia, formed a group called Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons. She led an uprising of people who considered role playing games to be Satanist in nature and distributed questionnaires to police departments for use in interrogating possible players of these games. BADD achieved success in Christian media, and Pulling became a director for the National Coalition on TV Violence two years later.

BADD was supported by another incident in 1985 where 18-year-old Mary C. Towey was strangled by two men: Darren Lee Molitor and Ronald G. Adcox. Molitor told the judge of his trial that the trial was unfair because he was unable to provide evidence of how Dungeons & Dragons contributed to the mind games he and Adcox, allegedly, attempted to play with Towey.

Pulling also co-wrote a book called *The Devil's Web: Who Is Stalking Your Children For Satan?*, which was later bashed for its incorrect uses of common terminology and questionable statistics. She went on an episode of [60 Minutes](#) with Dungeons & Dragons creator Gary Gygax where the show was demonized. This did not help her case, and even more children were drawn to the game as a result.

VIDEO GRAPHIC: Hard cut to red background with "THE STACKPOLE REPORT" in white lettering.

Pulling and BADD were condemned by game designer Michael A. Stackpole in his writings *Game Hysteria and the Truth* (1989) and *The Pulling Report* (1990). Pulling was said to have misused her credentials and that BADD's statistics were collected via insufficient data collection and reporting methods. In 1991, the American Association of Suicidology, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, and Health and Welfare Canada showed no link between role playing games and suicide, and BADD halted after Pulling's death in 1997.

The only significant recent case in the United States was in 2010 when the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit upheld a ban on D&D by the Waupun Correctional Institution. For a while since, Dungeons & Dragons flew under the radar, but recently it has been experiencing a resurgence in popularity.

VIDEO GRAPHIC: Hard cut to red background with "THE AFTERMATH" in white lettering.

The students who played D&D in the 1980s, despite their geeky demeanors, have grown up to do bigger and better things. Many players of the game hold respectable jobs and have high earnings. As the generations after them grow up, more of them are starting to find role playing games and enjoy them for similar reasons.

Pop culture is also picking up on this new trend and resurgence in "geek culture". For instance, the television show Stranger Things has a multitude of references to D&D, as it is set in the 1980s. The most apparent case of this new phenomenon is the growth of D&D podcasts and web series online such as High Rollers, The Adventure Zone, and Critical Role.

Critical Role in particular has proved its popularity by its recent Kickstarter earlier this year. The show raised over \$11 million with over 88,000 backers to fund a new animated show where the goal was \$750,000. That goal was broken within the first hour and the Kickstarter itself is the most successful film or television project to come out of the platform.

That seems to be the end of the story.

VIDEO GRAPHIC: Hard cut to red background with "THE ISSUE" in white lettering. Spill sips her tea and then talks.

So, what's the big issue?

VIDEO GRAPHIC: Cut to red background with "SATANIC MESSAGES" in white lettering.

Satanism and the promotion of its messages has been claimed to be hidden in corporate symbols and various forms of media. This includes Starbucks, Proctor and Gamble, Google Chrome, the Olympic Rings, Disney, and Harry Potter. The promotion of the number 666 in the swirls of the Chrome logo, to believers, is just like the promotion of the occult in Harry Potter.

However, Dungeons & Dragons, despite some of its good portrayals of religion such as its paladin class, was not the first of its kind and definitely not the last to be accused of nefarious intentions.

VIDEO GRAPHIC: Hard cut to red background with "THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS" in white lettering.

American history shows that fears of new trends and the unknown and accusations of witchery and Satanism date all the way back to the Salem Witch Trials in the 1690s. Many were accused to be witches and were put on trial. If they did not name other witches, they were executed. Over 200 people were accused and 19 of them were found guilty and hanged.

In more recent pop culture, wars over censorship span across every new trend. For instance, the gory comic books of the 1950s and the sex and violence depicted in rock music of the 1980s were met with similar backlash, their own mass moral panics, and Senate hearings. Currently, this same issue is being revisited with violent video games that are being blamed by some for the growth of mass shootings in the United States. This history shows that moral panic is common in America.

VIDEO GRAPHIC: Hard cut to red background with "THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PROPAGANDA" in white lettering.

The term propaganda has its origins in the Catholic Church's attempts to stop the rise of Protestantism in the 17th century. The Merriam Webster dictionary says that propaganda is "the spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person." Propaganda is an appeal to pathos like no other. It targets fear and love alike and is an emotional manipulation, which is why emotional reactions come before analytics and analysis. By throwing a viewer into a state of fear, organizations like BADD are able to promote their agendas. Thus, propaganda can lead to the start of outbreaks of mass hysteria.

Mass hysteria is considered to be a psychogenic illness, which is a condition that begins in the mind and has effects on the body. Physiological symptoms can include pseudoseizures, pseudoparesis, fainting, headaches, and more. This is similar to what was seen in the Salem Witch Trials.

If what the propaganda said was completely true, violence and misconduct should have risen in teenagers with this recent resurgence of popularity. According to statistics by the Department of Justice,

the juvenile arrest rate has kept dropping since 1993. However, the true reasons for playing Dungeons & Dragons for the widespread majority have nothing to do with spells and summonings.

VIDEO GRAPHIC: Hard cut to red background with "FINAL THOUGHTS" in white lettering. Animated Spill speaks.

For players of today, Dungeons & Dragons is a form of escapism from the stresses of everyday life, a form of social interaction, and a way to meet and connect with new people. The game seems to have shrugged off its earlier backlash and is now firmly rooted in tabletop history and its future.

What do you think about this story? Have you thought about other mass panics in American society? Let me know in the comments below!

VIDEO GRAPHIC: Animation of tea being poured from a kettle into a cup.

End video.

## Works Cited

- Haberman, Clyde. "Two Pop Culture Wars: First Over Comics, Then Over Music." *The New York Times*, *The New York Times*, 25 Oct. 2015, [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/26/us/two-pop-culture-wars-first-over-comics-then-over-music.html?ref=us&\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/26/us/two-pop-culture-wars-first-over-comics-then-over-music.html?ref=us&_r=0).
- Haberman, Clyde. "When Dungeons & Dragons Set Off a 'Moral Panic'." *The New York Times*, *The New York Times*, 17 Apr. 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/18/us/when-dungeons-dragons-set-off-a-moral-panic.html>.
- "How D&D Writers Fought the Satanic Panic Of The 1980s." *Geek and Sundry*, *Geek and Sundry*, 13 Apr. 2016, <https://geekandsundry.com/how-dd-writers-fought-the-satanic-panic/>.
- "How the Art of Dungeons and Dragons Helped Make It a Phenomenon." *Vice*, *Vice*, 23 Oct. 2018, [www.vice.com/amp/en\\_us/article/geek9/how-the-art-of-dungeons-and-dragons-helped-make-it-a-phenomenon](http://www.vice.com/amp/en_us/article/geek9/how-the-art-of-dungeons-and-dragons-helped-make-it-a-phenomenon).
- "Life Sentence Given In 'Dungeons & Dragons' Killing Case." *AP NEWS*, *Associated Press*, 31 May 1985, <https://apnews.com/a1121256e68b13b701eea0bc355a6a5c>.
- "Mazes and Monsters." *IMDb*, *IMDb.com*, 28 Dec. 1982, <https://m.imdb.com/title/tt0084314/>.
- "Patricia Pulling." *Wikipedia*, *Wikimedia Foundation*, 27 Sept. 2019, [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patricia\\_Pulling](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patricia_Pulling).
- Stackpole, Michael A. "The Pulling Report." *Michael A. Stackpole: The Pulling Report*, 1990, [http://www.rpgstudies.net/stackpole/pulling\\_report.html](http://www.rpgstudies.net/stackpole/pulling_report.html).
- "The Great 1980s Dungeons & Dragons Panic." *BBC News*, *BBC*, 11 Apr. 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26328105>.
- Whitten, Sarah. "Dungeons and Dragons' Kickstarter Breaks Record with \$11.3 Million Campaign." *CNBC*, *CNBC*, 19 Apr. 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/04/19/critical-role-vox-machina-kickstarter-ends-with-11-million-in-funding.html>.

