

Demons & Devils: The Moral Panic Surrounding Dungeons & Dragons, 1979-1991

by

Austin Wilson

Submitted to the Department of History of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for departmental honors

Approved by:

David Farber, Thesis Coordinator

Sheyda Jahanbani, Committee Member

David Roediger, Committee Member

Date Defended: 4/24/2019

On June 9, 1982 Irving “Bink” Pulling committed suicide by shooting himself in the chest. His distraught mother Patricia Pulling attempted to find out what had driven her son to such extreme measures. In her search for answers she laid the blame squarely on *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*, in which Bink had been heavily involved. Patricia Pulling started the organization Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons (BADD) in 1983. BADD crusaded against roleplaying games like *Dungeons & Dragons*. As she would argue in many works that she subsequently published, including her 1989 manifesto, *The Devil’s Web: Who is Stalking Your Children for Satan?*, *Dungeons & Dragons* was a dangerous game that put the lives and moral virtues of youths at risk by serving as an entry point to the occult.<sup>1</sup>

This paper will argue that there was a moment of crisis centered around the family in the period and the broader discussion of youth entertainment which allowed for BADD to gain traction. By examining pamphlets produced by BADD and Patricia Pulling’s appearance on shows like *60 Minutes* the dogma of the group can be understood. By juxtaposing other pieces of media that a parent may have seen in the same period such as the senate hearing for parental advisory labels on music and anti-drug PSAs this paper will illustrate the ways that people were primed by other panics of the period to believe that *D&D* could be dangerous. Several other scholars have written about the other panics of the period and their work will be used to illustrate differences and similarities between the methods of BADD, which had only meager successes toward their goal of destroying *D&D*, and more successful groups like the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) which was able to achieve their goal of parental advisory stickers on records.

---

<sup>1</sup> Pulling and Cawthon, *The Devil’s Web*.

While this assertion that a game of make believe and rolling dice could pose a significant danger to youth seemed absurd to players of these games, it did not seem absurd to Patricia Pulling and other likeminded parents. During this period many Americans felt under siege. The shifting tides of American culture pushed drugs, metal music, and horror movies which all refuted traditional family values. Parent's fears for their children produced a moral panic.

A moral panic occurs when a group of moral entrepreneurs, a term coined by Howard S. Becker in 1963 to describe people who create or maintain social norms, stir social concerns about issues which led to a feeling that there is evil in a society to combat.<sup>2</sup> In Becker's analysis of a moral panic there are two groups of moral entrepreneurs, one that are "rules creators" and another that are "rules enforcers." Rules creators do exactly what their name would imply, they establish social norms, while rules enforcers take action against those that step out of societal norms. The moral entrepreneurs in this period constructed American culture as an attack on youth, which led to a paternalistic approach towards social issues during the 1980s. Moreover, with the perceived erosion of the American family and traditional moral values, many people like Patricia Pulling began to question who should be protecting children. They arrived at answers ranging from communal efforts to police the media their children received to actions on the part of the United States government. These varied responses to the question are manifested in the methods used by the multitude of organizations that tried to solve the endangered children "issue."

Throughout the 1980s parents became enthralled by moral panics surrounding the safety of their children and teens. Many people, predominantly the New Christian Right, throughout the country felt that the American family as an institution was under attack and they attempted to

---

<sup>2</sup> Becker, *Outsiders; Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*.

reassert traditional family values.<sup>3</sup> This perceived “crisis of the family,” as Robert Self, a historian and professor at Brown University, describes it put the American family on the same level of civil rights and communism, in their respective periods as key pillars of debate for conservative figures at the time.<sup>4</sup> The perception of a family crisis fed into the need to protect children. As more middle-class women entered the workforce, both because of second wave feminism and economic necessity, moral entrepreneurs feared that the protective influence of mothers would be lost.<sup>5</sup> This crisis, along with other contributing factors, such as the rise in teen suicide rates, would lead to an assortment of child and adolescent-centric moral panics that sought to control the media and environment that was thought to be corrupting the youth of the period.<sup>6</sup> Conservative activists capitalized on these fears. The leaders of BADD, namely Patricia Pulling sought to protect children and teens from *D&D* by feeding the fears that already suffused middle class culture of the time.

*Dungeons and Dragons* is a tabletop role-playing game where a group of players sit around a table and tell a collective story. *D&D* was created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, two wargaming enthusiasts, in 1974. The mechanics of the game, especially the earlier editions, such as *D&D Basic* and *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (AD&D)*, are sometimes convoluted, but the game can be boiled down to rolling dice and interpreting the numbers received as the outcome of an action the character takes. For instance, if a player encountered a monster like a gelatinous cube and wanted to strike it with their sword, they would tell this to the dungeon master (DM) who would ask the player to roll dice. Depending on the total number they rolled

---

<sup>4</sup> Self, Robert O. *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s*. First edition. New York: Hill and Wang, 2012. 310.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 314.

<sup>6</sup> Center for Disease Control, “QuickStats: Suicide Rates for Teens Aged 15–19 Years, by Sex — United States, 1975–2015.”

(after modifiers) the DM would tell the player if they hit or missed. While this description of the game might sound dry, the excitement and appeal of the game lies in the minds of the players. While one DM may say “You dealt 3 damage to the gelatinous cube,” and end there another DM might say “You bring your mighty sword through the soft form of the monster, spraying parts of its acidic jelly across the wall of the dungeon, dealing 3 damage.” This game allowed a group of people, usually teens and young adults to gather in private and go on adventures where they might be a mighty warrior wielding a flame-wreathed axe, or a studied wizard who can conjure the forces of nature. The freedom and creativity afforded to each group to run a game that fit their own personal interests led many young adults to love the game. The dungeon master would create intricate dungeons that they carefully curated with monsters, traps, and treasures then the players would interact with this world and many times come away with riches. This is the game that BADD tried to paint as dangerous.

The anti-gaming panic surrounding *D&D* was started by religious parents like Patricia Pulling. From the anti-drug campaigns, to fears surrounding violence on television, there were a multitude of parent-driven movements that set their sights on protecting the youth of America from outside “evils.” Most scholarly writing about the moral panic surrounding *D&D* contextualizes it within the broader Satanic Panic of the same period, however that view of the panic provides too narrow an understanding of the period. It does not adequately capture the larger parental fears of the 1980s. In his book *Dangerous Games* Joseph Laycock interprets the panic around *D&D* more broadly as a result of religious anxieties. He asserts that the imagined nature of roleplaying games and the shared desire for “re-enchantment” that gamers and members of the New Christian Right had made *D&D* a threatening opposition to Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Laycock, Joseph. *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015. 242.

Re-enchantment, as depicted in his book, is the movement away from the disenchantment of the 1960s and 1970s which suffused American culture and toward a fantastic belief in true Good versus Evil struggles. While this interpretation is valid and compelling, the assertion that the crisis is mainly one of religion fails to consider the broader parental movements that were secular in orientation. The Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC), which aimed to protect children from sexualized music, for example, was almost entirely secular. Groups like BADD however, were founded on principles of religion by members of the New Christian Right and focused on stamping out rival fantasies as explained by Laycock.

Patricia Pulling used her appearances on *60 Minutes* and *Geraldo* to push the messaging of BADD, that *D&D* was a dangerous game which sucked in impressionable teenagers and led to their deaths.<sup>8</sup> Her 1985 appearance on *60 Minutes* was particularly indicative of her stance on the game. She asserted that a curse Bink's character received in the game was a factor in her son's suicide.<sup>9</sup> She goes on to say, "It was obvious through his writings that he felt he had assumed this character." The segment on *60 Minutes* also points out her involvement with law enforcement who had cases they believed were tied with the occult. This involvement is further expanded upon in her book where she mentions police who could not find motives for certain crimes and suspected an occult influence on the victims or perpetrators who turned to her as an expert.

While groups before the 1980s had used media to espouse their views, groups like BADD and the PMRC were able to use television to garner support for their particular brand of moral panic. The Partnership for a Drug-Free America was founded in 1985 and their most well-known use of television was the "Any Questions?" PSA where a brain on drugs is likened to a frying

---

<sup>8</sup> Stackpole, "The Pulling Report."

<sup>9</sup> CBS, *60 Minutes on Dungeons and Dragons*.

egg.<sup>10</sup> In addition to this, the Parents Music Resource Center called on congress to have a hearing surrounding the content of music in 1985 and applied pressure to do so by utilizing appearances on television.<sup>11</sup> These groups realized the potential of the medium of television to spread their views, particularly to the parents that they targeted. The ever-present nature of television in the American home helped fan the flames of these moral panics. A concerned mother needed look no farther than her living room in the 1980s to find a plethora of panic-inducing horrors. Televisions had been in most homes in America since the 1950s, but with the advent of cable television and the broader selection it offered the 1980s saw the first steps toward the echo chamber effect that people often attribute to the social media age. Moving away from major broadcast networks and slowly towards a more specifically tailored form of entertainment meant that people could help reaffirm their beliefs by watching television which explicitly supported their viewpoints.

From Pulling's perspective American culture was making a concerted effort to destroy children in the same way she believed it had destroyed her son. People were primed to accept that media targeted at children and adolescents was dangerous, this is evidenced by the multitude of organizations created and run by parents which sought to protect children from deviant culture including the PMRC, BADD, in addition other anti-metal and anti-rock music groups. The crusades against metal music, and horror movies helped moral entrepreneurs create a narrative where culture had become dangerous to youth. This narrative coupled with the deaths that BADD associated with *D&D* allowed them to take a game which was not harmful on the surface and entangle it the vast conspiracy that their target audience believed was working against the

---

<sup>10</sup> Keye, Paul. "'Any Questions?' PSA," 1987. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FtNm9CgA6U>.

<sup>11</sup> Fontenot, Maria, and Chad Harriss. "Building a Better PIG: A Historical Survey of the PMRC and Its Tactics." *Media, Culture & Society* 32, no. 4 (July 1, 2010): 565–80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443710367692>.

American family by targeting children. In a world where music, drugs, Satanists, TV, movies, and cults are all plying at children and adolescents for their devotion and attempting to corrupt them the idea that *D&D* could be a tool of Satan and his “vast network” to lure children into Satanism seems plausible. This idea is best exemplified by the opening of Patricia Pulling’s book: “During the last seven years I have investigated the subject of teenage devil worship... I have learned of the evil that stalks our land, about those whose sole purpose is to lead our children away from home, family, church and the moral values that they have learned.” The fact that people accepted these words and the coming propaganda as fact is evidence that they had been conditioned throughout the 1980s to believe that the boogiemán was coming for their children – whether that boogiemán was drugs, violent TV, a charismatic cult leader, or Satan himself the fear that was stoked throughout the 1980s led to an environment where media could be vilified and harmless games could be blamed for deaths and disappearances. The way that these ambiguous threats melded together was no mistake. It was the concerted efforts of people like Patricia Pulling, Dr. Thomas Radecki and Texe Marrs who sought to demonstrate an overarching issue with American culture. While some of the threats to youth, such as drugs and the rising crime rate, were credible dangers, the conflation of these with Satanism and roleplaying games was a conscious construction on behalf of religious and anti-gaming groups. This conflation of real and imagined threats allowed the activists like Pulling to paint *D&D* in a negative light.

The moral entrepreneurs that sought to bring down *D&D* were inflammatory in their assessment of the game. Some elements of the game do point toward Satanic imagery, for instance the inclusion of Devils and Demons in *D&D*. Demons are beings of chaos and evil which come from The Abyss and seek to destroy all that is orderly in the world. Devils on the



other hand readily fit into Judeo-Christian mythology. The horned and cloven hooved Devils make dark deals and attempt to use their influence and the force of law to impose their will on the world. Parents such as Patricia Pulling saw these images of Devils corrupting characters as a direct attack on their children. These parents were upset by some of the darker tones and images which offended them on a religious level. They asserted that *D&D* served as a gateway to cults and Satanists activities. Their next argument logically followed from this point; if nobody else was going to protect children from the evils of these games they would have to raise awareness so that no other children would go the route of Bink Pulling.

### **Save the Children! - The American Family in Crisis**

The panic surrounding *D&D* did not exist in a cultural vacuum. The desire to protect the nation's youth is evident in the multitude of moral panics from the 1980s. This multitude of panics can be read as an attempt to push back against the culture of crisis that permeated the 1970s. Where the 1970s was fraught with crises from gas shortages to the war in Vietnam, the groups outlined in this paper saw themselves as fighting back against the new crises of the 1980s. From the desire to protect youth from drugs, to conservative figures decrying horror movies there was an intense fear that the children of America were at risk from a variety of factors in their environment and American culture at large.

Parents associated with the New Christian Right helped lead this counter-attack. Such New Christian Right, activists the newly mobilized group of evangelical Christians, became a political force with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and continued to exert influence throughout the 1980s.<sup>12</sup> The New Christian Right also encouraged traditional conservative politicians to take on more socially conservative views in order to garner the votes of this new

---

<sup>12</sup> Self, *All in the Family*, 341.

voting bloc. The paternalistic moral panics of the 1980s were aimed at a variety of subjects including: drugs, horror movies, violence in television, and violent or sexually explicit music. While this is not an exhaustive list, these panics best exemplify the drive of parents and evangelicals to utilize both the government and media to protect children from the evils they perceived in society. These groups all place their central concern on what youth do with their free time. American childhood and adolescence by the 1980s contained what some people saw as an obscene amount of free time. These youths were then able to decide what they wished to spend their time being entertained by, and the groups that will be discussed have strong objections to some of the leisure activities that the youths might engage in.

One of the biggest moral crusades of the 1980s was focused on keeping drugs out of the hands of children. While the war on drugs began earlier in the 1970s, the latter half of that decade saw the rumblings that would later become the Just Say No campaign. In 1976, Martha Kieth Schuchard let her 13-year-old daughter invite friends over for a birthday party. In the aftermath of the party Schuchard was inspecting the yard and found “Crushed cans of malt liquor, empty bottles of wine and – most disturbing of all – marijuana butts and roach clips.”<sup>13</sup> In a panic she called the parents of all the neighborhood teenagers that had attended the party to let them know what she found. The parents of the neighborhood began to enforce a curfew on their children as well as chaperoning various events in order to prevent the children from engaging in more drug use, but Schuchard’s crusade did not stop with her neighborhood. She went on to form an organization called Families in Action with one of her neighbors in 1977.<sup>14</sup> This was the first national organization that sought to prevent teen drug use. Lee Dogoloff, an advisor in the Carter administration on drug use held a meeting with Schuchard where he concluded that “If we could

---

<sup>13</sup> Massing, Michael. *The Fix*. New Ed edition. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, 143.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 145.

support parental involvement at the grassroots level, there was a promise of turning things around.”<sup>15</sup> This was the beginning of the strategy that would follow the movement to rid American youths of drugs.

Rather than attempting a top-down approach to seize drugs from teens and kids, the idea became to reinforce parents and to get them invested in preventing their children from using drugs. Though this strategy started with Dogoloff in the late 1970s it can be seen prevalently in the 1980s. The influence of the Reagan administration and non-profit anti-drug groups helped push the onus of policing drugs down to the parental and familial levels. One organization that tried to bolster this same strategy was the Partnership for a Drug Free America (PDFA). The organization is best known for its “This Is Your Brain on Drugs” fried egg PSA.<sup>16</sup> The non-profit also produced several other potent anti-drug ads that were more focused on driving parents. Most importantly the “I Learned It by Watching You” ad. This public service announcement opens a teenager listening to music in his room when his father walks in with a wooden box, presumably containing marijuana and paraphernalia. The father confronts his son and the confrontation culminates with the father asking, “Who taught you how to do this stuff?” and the famous line “You alright! I learned it by watching you!” The PSA finally closes with a black screen featuring the PDFA logo and narration that says, “Parents who use drugs have children who use drugs.”<sup>17</sup> While this ad has been parodied and referenced jokingly throughout the last three decades since its airing, the message is powerful. The ad asserts that parents are responsible not only for their own actions related to drugs, but also for their children’s actions.

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 150.

<sup>16</sup> Schultz, E. “This Is Your Ad War on Drugs.” *Advertising Age* 85, no. 6 (2014): 18–21.

<sup>17</sup> Moreau, “I Learned It by Watching YOU !,” 1987.

Another moral panic from the same period was focused around protecting children from violent and sexually explicit music. One afternoon Tipper Gore, wife of senator Al Gore, discovered her young daughter listening to Prince's *Darling Nikki* when she heard the lyrics "I met her in the hotel lobby masturbating in a magazine," she was shocked by the graphic sexual imagery evoked by the lyrics and started her personal crusade.<sup>18</sup>

Tipper Gore along with wives of other prominent congressmen banded together and demanded a senate hearing to discuss what could be done to avoid the exposure of children to music that was sexually explicit or violent. They formed the PMRC which sought to curb the influence of these explicit songs on children. This culminated in 1985 when the senate hearing took place. Tipper Gore and other members of the PMRC gave testimony before the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation committee. They outline the "Filthy Fifteen" which was a list of fifteen songs that they felt were dangerous to youth because of their violent or sexual nature. Among these songs were Prince's *Darling Nikki* and the music video for Twisted Sister's *We're Not Gonna Take It*. These songs, the PMRC members argued, exposed children to distasteful and dangerous themes. Opposing views came from Dee Snider of Twisted Sister as well as Frank Zappa and John Denver. These artists all decried the idea of censorship for music, arguing that it was parent's jobs to decide what music their children could listen to. As Fontenot and Harris assert "The PMRC had succeeded in melding entertainment with politics to such a degree that the Congressional hearings became must-see TV."<sup>19</sup> In addition to the use of media to push their agenda through the carefully orchestrated senate hearing, the PMRC also appeared on "*Donahue, Good Morning America, The CBS Morning Show, NBC's Today, Entertainment*

---

<sup>18</sup> Fontenot, Maria, and Chad Harriss. "Building a Better PIG: A Historical Survey of the PMRC and Its Tactics." *Media, Culture & Society* 32, no. 4 (July 1, 2010): 565–80, 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

*Tonight* and the evening news on all three major networks.”<sup>20</sup> This use of media, particularly television to propagate the views of the moral entrepreneurs was used by the most successful parent’s movements of the period.

The fusion of traditional family values and new media campaigns that sought to spread the dogma of these groups made moral crusaders like the PMRC, and anti-drug groups successful. Through their understanding of the ability for television to disseminate their views these groups were able to stoke the flames of moral panic in order to further their agendas and achieve their goals of “protecting children” as they saw it. This use of television as a medium to affect change by parental groups was emerging as a popular strategy. BADD and Patricia Pulling specifically would attempt to use television to the same effect as the PMRC and the Partnership for a Drug Free America, however BADD would not have the same lasting impact of the other groups.

### **How *D&D* Became Dangerous**

A group of college aged men and one woman sit around a table rolling dice. One plays a nimble thief, another plays a fighter clad in metal armor wielding a hefty sword, and the last plays holy man. They scour dungeons and caverns throughout the land looking for riches and glory. Eventually the thief sees a glimmer in a pit and jumps in without caution but finds himself impaled on golden-encrusted spikes at the bottom of the pit.<sup>21</sup> This is a scene from the made for TV movie *Mazes and Monsters*, but it could easily be a story told by any number of *D&D* players.

From its creation in 1974 the game brought together people to play regularly. A typical “campaign,” a name retained from *D&D*’s roots in war gaming, lasted for anywhere between a

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Stern, Steven. *Mazes and Monsters*. CBS, 1982.

couple months to several years during which players would retain characters and attempt to create an immersive world. While Patricia Pulling and BADD would later claim that the magic of the game was based in real world witchcraft, the game instead relied heavily on works by contemporary fantasy writers such as Jack Vance, and independent fantasy and science fiction author cited by Gary Gygax as an influence for the creation of *D&D*.<sup>22</sup> The magic system from his novels would be known as Vance-ian magic and is largely how the concept of magic worked in the first several editions of the game.<sup>23</sup> This discrepancy between the perceived roots of the game's mechanics and the actual mechanics of the games will continue to be apparent upon further analysis of the way it was portrayed by groups like BADD.

While panics like the parental music advisory label were secular, the movement against *D&D* was explicitly religious. From figures like Patricia Pulling who sought to create a coalition of agitated evangelicals to fight *D&D* to Jack Chick who wrote the now infamous (at least within gaming circles) "Dark Dungeons," the people who acted against *D&D* were mostly religious.<sup>24</sup> The tract became infamous through the work of people like Michael Stackpole and other pro-gaming voices that would come to the forefront of the discussion of *D&D* in the early 1990s. Chick's depiction of *D&D* makes Pulling's assertions seem tame by comparison. In Chick's tract *D&D* is a literal cult where the leader has the main character commit murder to gain her powers as a witch.<sup>25</sup> *D&D* players insisted that this analysis had absolutely no bearing on the actual game whatsoever. Chick's assertions, they argued, were simply ludicrous and reactionary. Regardless, Chick's point of view, as a conservative Christian whose tracts took on every topic from drugs to homosexuality, paint a literal picture of what at least some fundamentalist

---

<sup>22</sup> Gygax, Gary. "Jack Vance & The D&D Game," 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Gygax, Gary. *Dungeon Master's Guide*. TSR, Inc., 1979, 225.

<sup>24</sup> Chick, Jack. "Dark Dungeons," 1984. [https://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0046/0046\\_01.asp](https://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0046/0046_01.asp).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*.

evangelicals believed about the game. BADD activists like Patricia Pulling and other *D&D* detractors focused on the religious issues associated with the game.

Some secular anti-gaming activists did exist. These activists centered their critique of the game on the idea of immersion. First promoted by William Dear following the disappearance of Dallas Egbert in 1979, this theory held that *D&D* and other similar games would draw young people in and make them unable to distinguish fact from fantasy.<sup>26</sup> Egbert's involvement with *D&D* fueled this idea. The fictionalization of Egbert's disappearance can be seen in *Mazes and Monsters* which debuted as a made for TV movie in 1982.<sup>27</sup> This quick turnaround from real life occurrences to the media circus perpetuated by William Dear, a detective hired to find Egbert, to the film in the span of a few short years shows a degree of fascination with the subject. It is a riveting premise – that a person can be sucked into a game and lose the ability to discern between a Gorrabil and a mugger, but this film and the 1981 book which it was adapted from wildly distort the story of Egbert's disappearance in order to make it more entertaining, but in doing so create a narrative which the arguments of anti-gaming parent activists can support and use to further their agendas.

Another prominent actor in the fight against *D&D* was Dr. Thomas Radecki. Radecki led the Coalition on Television Violence and was focused on removing most violent images from the TV screens of America.<sup>28</sup> He sought to stamp out overtly violent images in part because of their impact on children and in doing so he used outright false statistics in some cases and cherry-picked statistics in others. For instance, he once stated that one in four Hollywood films

---

<sup>26</sup> Hall, "Into the Dragon's Lair; Detective William Dear's Story of a Student Suicide."

<sup>27</sup> Stern, *Mazes and Monsters*.

<sup>28</sup> "Friday People: Putting Violence in Place / Profile of Thomas Radecki, Research Director of US National Coalition on Television Violence."

contained a rape scene, which was provably false.<sup>29</sup> His links with BADD and Patricia Pulling ran deep. He appointed her to help him lead the Coalition on Television Violence.<sup>30</sup> In addition to this, Radecki supported Pulling's claims, putting his weight as a psychiatrist behind them and giving her more legitimacy in the eyes of some. He was a proponent of the game immersion theory and at one point cited a letter from the fictional film *Mazes and Monsters* to show that *D&D* had directly caused the death of a player.<sup>31</sup> Radecki also appeared in the *60 Minutes* episode on *Dungeons & Dragons* on which he explained that the game's violence was disturbing for children and could cause them to act out violently with their peers or turn toward self-inflicted violence.<sup>32</sup> While Radecki's took issue with the way the game conditioned youths to accept violence, many of his contemporaries in BADD had overtly religious motivations.

Groups like BADD believed that *D&D* was an instrument of the occult. Their members feared the game would draw children and adolescents toward Satanic practices in the same way others alleged metal music did. As stated, both in her own book and the works published by BADD, Patricia Pulling believed that the corrupting nature of these games came from the dungeon master being a person of power and the use of satanic and occult rituals found in the games' rulebooks. The latter half of the nearly forty-page pamphlet constructed by Pulling and her fellow activists simply compares the effects of *AD&D* spells with real world occult practices to illustrate supposed ties between the game and the occult.<sup>33</sup> This sentiment is best expressed in a quote that the pamphlet pulled from another work. In Gary North's *None Dare Call It*

---

<sup>29</sup> Stackpole, "The Pulling Report."

<sup>30</sup> Buckman, "Anti-Occult Leader Dies at 49; Patricia Pulling Was Founder of BADD."

<sup>31</sup> Hicks, *In Pursuit of Satan*.

<sup>32</sup> CBS, *60 Minutes on Dungeons and Dragons*.

<sup>33</sup> Dempsey, Pulling, and Dempsey, "Dungeons And Dragons: Witchcraft, Suicide, Violence," 18-30.



*Witchcraft* he states, “these games are the most magnificently packaged, most profitably marketed, most thoroughly researched introduction to the occult in man’s recorded history.”<sup>34</sup>

BADD activists would use this assumption that *D&D* was actual witchcraft to demand that the game be banned from schools. They asserted that *D&D* was witchcraft and that witchcraft is a religion because of religious protections that practicing wicca receive. They then go on to assert that since *D&D* is witchcraft and schools are not allowed to impose religion, that *D&D* should be banned in schools.<sup>35</sup> Pulling’s crusade did see some successes, for instance administrators in Putnam, Connecticut banned *D&D* in their district in 1985 following the suicide of a student who played the game and a subsequent 500-person petition to ban the game.<sup>36</sup> The people who signed this petition, undoubtably saw the game intrinsically linked to teen suicide. Other groups sought to tie disparate events and trends like teen suicide and corruption of youth to new religious movements in the United States. The emergence and embracing of so-called “New Age” religions in the mid-twentieth century threatened the hold that Christian fundamentalists, like Patricia Pulling and Jack Chick had on the religious foundations of America. This fear of anti-religious pushback can be seen clearly in the assertions made by another anti-gaming activist Texe Marrs in his book *Ravaged by The New Age: Satan’s Plan to Destroy Kids*.<sup>37</sup> While Mr. Marrs is more forthright in his crusade against competing theologies, groups like BADD were less overt in their attempt to reassert the religious status quo, but as Laycock concluded in his book that was indeed the way that *D&D* became dangerous.<sup>38</sup>

Laycock asserts that the competing fantasy that Dungeons and Dragons provided was a material

---

<sup>34</sup> North, Gary. *None Dare Call It Witchcraft*. New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1976.

<sup>35</sup> Dempsey, Pulling, and Dempsey, “Dungeons And Dragons: Witchcraft, Suicide, Violence,” 5.

<sup>36</sup> AP, “Putnam’s High School Drops Dungeons and Dragons Game.”

<sup>37</sup> Marrs, Texe. *Ravaged by the New Age: Satan’s Plan to Destroy Kids*. 2nd printing edition. Austin, Tex.: Living Truth Publishers, 1988.

<sup>38</sup> Laycock, Joseph, *Dangerous Games*.

threat to the religious foundations of evangelical groups and that their opposition to the game stemmed from a need to control fantasy.

In the long fight to assert control over the leisure activities of the country's youth, moral entrepreneurs like Patricia Pulling managed to make gains. By convincing other parents to fear the destruction that games like *D&D* could wreak on the lives and immortal souls of their children she and other activists were able to affect some change including the banning of *D&D* by some specific school districts. While Pulling and Radeki were able to make some advances for their causes here, it is undisputable that their cause did not receive the same support as other Parental Interest Groups (PIGs) of the period. This is in part due to the narrow nature of their panic; however, it should also be interpreted as a matter of interest on the part of parents. While the saying goes that sex sells, sex also scares.

### **Blue Ribbon PIGs**

In order to properly understand the ways in which the family crisis of the 1980s manifested itself, an analysis of the methods and outcomes of the organizations which pushed for social and political change in the name of protecting children is necessary. While BADD members, particularly Patricia Pulling, broadcasted their views on television shows such as *Geraldo* and *60 Minutes* they were unable to have the same lasting impact as the PMRC, which utilized shows like *Donahue* and *Good Morning America*. Both groups utilized the medium of television but had extremely different outcomes. This difference comes mainly from the difference in political power and capital that each group had.

Patricia Pulling was a housewife turned cult "expert" during her crusade to make the world safer for children.<sup>39</sup> Her organization worked to distribute literature and inform both

---

<sup>39</sup> Buckman, "Anti-Occult Leader Dies at 49; Patricia Pulling Was Founder of BADD."

parents and law enforcement of the dangers of *D&D*. Their inability to affect large scale change came from the fact that they were unable to organize concerted effort to lobby for changes in legislation. The reason that there is a parental warning label on an album today with explicit language and not the *D&D* 5<sup>th</sup> Edition starter set is because of the vast differences in power and resources available to these two groups. While BADD had Dr. Thomas Radeki giving his interpretation of the risks of *D&D* on *60 Minutes*, the PMRC was able to utilize a more legitimized platform in the Senate.

While the PMRC's most valuable asset was their access to the Senate they did utilize television to push their cause forward, but their use of these programs was to bring more attention to their most effective demonstration. They were able to make a senate hearing on the way music affects young people into "must-see TV."<sup>40</sup> The proponents of this viewpoint such as Tipper Gore utilized the political capital they wielded as "Washington Wives" to push their agenda in front of the legislative body of the United States. If Patricia Pulling was married to a congressman rather than to Irving Pulling, the outcome of her organization's efforts could have been wildly different. While I was unable to find evidence of lobbying from BADD, there was an interesting find in Senator Bob Dole's archive at the University of Kansas. In the files on documents pertaining to cults that were kept by his staff, there is a folder on *Dungeons & Dragons*. The only file in this folder is a news clipping from the Washington Post discussing the game and an advertisement for youths to play the game at a local church. This suggests that while the game may have been on either Senator Dole's, or his staff's, radar it was not of the same level of importance as a group like the Moonies, which have several folders and hundreds of pages of documentation. The vast difference in amount of documentation also suggests that

---

<sup>40</sup> Fontenot and Harriss, "Building a Better PIG." 13.

there was not a concerted effort to reach out and ban or regulate these games through legislation. The failure to promote the views and end goals of BADD to a legitimized power structure such as the US Senate was one of the chief failures of BADD's leadership and one of the reasons they were unable to achieve the same success of a group like the PMRC.

### **BADD Tidings – The Downfall of Patricia Pulling**

In 1989, independent fantasy author and game designer Michael Stackpole wrote an article entitled "Game Hysteria and the Truth" which he followed up in 1990 with "The Pulling Report". Both of these works served to debunk the myths that surrounded *D&D* and other roleplaying games that had been built by groups like BADD. To understand the downfall of BADD, it is important to understand these two articles. After "The Pulling Report" was published Patricia Pulling left BADD in 1990.<sup>41</sup> These two articles are full of criticism of Pulling's methods, her misrepresentation of facts and her misrepresentation of her credentials as an investigator. By analyzing some of Stackpole's main points the way that BADD fell from relevance can be better understood.

BADD's main pillar, it's most damning evidence against *D&D*, was that games like it caused youth to commit suicide at a rate higher than their peers. Whether they utilized the satanic or occult reasoning that these games cause youths to form into small cults devoted to the game or the immersion argument, suicide was always their most compelling evidence against the game. In "Game Hysteria and the Truth," Stackpole cites several sources including a study from the Centers for Disease Control which indicated that suicide among teens was no more common in those who played *D&D* than those that did not, as well as a source from the American Association of Suicidology which corroborated the claim.<sup>42</sup> He goes on to say that "there is no

---

<sup>41</sup> Tresca, *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games*, 64.

<sup>42</sup> Stackpole, "Role Playing Games and Satanism."

causal link between games and suicide any more than there is a link between breathing and suicide. Suicide is a desperate act of a very sick individual and to trivialize their condition by suggesting a game could push them over edge is cruel and unfeeling.”<sup>43</sup> Stackpole also goes on to lambast Pulling’s time as an expert witness, calling her the “Exxon Valdez of ignorance,” as far as games are concerned.<sup>44</sup> In her book Pulling lists several RPGs and says that they are all derivatives of *D&D*, but Stackpole illustrates the major differences between several of these games. In his analysis it becomes clear to the reader that Pulling’s understanding of the medium that she is crusading against is lacking.

The next section of the article further demonstrates this ignorance or misunderstanding. Stackpole compares Pulling’s explanation of how *D&D* is played in *Devil’s Web* with an essay written in 1985 by a former *D&D* player Darren Moliter. Through this comparison the reader is able to see that she or her ghost writer appear to have gotten all of their information about *D&D* from this essay. The sections which are presented in Stackpole’s writing show similar sentence structure and suggest that this was Pulling’s sole source on the game. This is not the only argument that Stackpole presents here however. Stackpole asserts that while the Moliter essay is an accurate description, Pulling’s rewriting of the way the game is played twist certain things out of context, for instance they present the total time that a player might play with the same character as “36-48 hours of work” without mentioning that most gamers engage in sessions between one and two hours long and that many, as Stackpole puts it “don’t make gaming a full time job.”

“The Pulling Report” focused more closely on Pulling specifically, Stackpole utilizes this article to more closely analyze her past as an “expert” on the occult and the evidence that she

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

produced to support her claims that *D&D* was dangerous. Stackpole mentions that her first foray into investigating the occult came after her lawsuit against the principal of Bink's school was thrown out by the court. Pulling filed the lawsuit because she asserted that *D&D* was the cause of Bink's death and that the principal, Robert A Bracey III, was responsible for not stopping the game or noticing Bink's distressed attitude.<sup>45</sup> Stackpole then goes on to debunk Pulling's 1987 claim that she had "been a private investigator for 6 years" by citing Robert D. Hicks, a law enforcement analyst from Virginia, who said that she had only received her private investigator license in 1987. Stackpole also points to the fact that if she had been a private investigator for "six years," at the time of making the claim, then it would have predated Bink's death by nearly six months.<sup>46</sup>

Stackpole then goes on to deeply analyze a profiling questionnaire that BADD distributed to police departments to tell if a teen had been the victim of recruitment by Satanism. The simplest and most easily debunkable part of this profile is Pulling's argument that any child from any economic or social background between the ages of 11 and 17 is open to recruitment by Satanists. Stackpole shows that Pulling has never provided evidence to support this claim. She even has difficulty nailing down the number of Satanists in a given community, which is illustrated in her being quoted as saying that Richmond, Virginia was 8% Satanists because "4% of the adults, and 4% of the children and teens" were involved with Satan worship.

Stackpole's indictment of Pulling's crusade was not simply a debunking of Patricia Pulling's credentials and claims. Stackpole's criticism of Pulling served two functions. Firstly, he refuted her claims about gaming to shift the conversation away from the Satanism and suicide, but more importantly his articles gave players a chance to rally. RPG enthusiasts began to not

---

<sup>45</sup> Stackpole, "The Pulling Report."

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

only enjoy their hobby together but felt the need to protect it. Patricia Pulling and her supporters created an “other” that gamers could fight against which allowed them to form more tightly knit communities.<sup>47</sup> The formation of these strong communities built around gaming came together was not in spite of, but because of the moral panic which surrounded the game. As Laycock mentions in his book, part of the increase in sales in the 1980s was among curious teens and young adults who wanted to see what the outrage was about. The increase in the number of people playing the games, coupled with the fierce opposition that some gaming communities faced, not from BADD, but local church groups that had been influenced by people like Patricia Pulling drew together gamers to defend their hobbies against the threat that anti-gaming groups posed. As illustrated by Waldron, “gamers Will Flatt and Pierre Savoie established CAR-PGA, the Committee for the Advancement of Role Playing Games in 1988 to provide legal and personal support for gamers targeted in the moral panic.”<sup>48</sup> Waldron also mentions that in past eras of moral panic, such as the scare associated with comics in the 1940’s the enthusiasts of these media toned down their public enjoyment of the hobby, but roleplaying game enthusiasts, such as the publishers of independent gaming magazines *Dragon*, *Dungeon*, and *Critical Miss* sought to publicly speak out against the panic. These magazines published stories of specific gamers who had been targeted by religious groups and gave the community at large a way to rally against the panic.<sup>49</sup>

BADD and groups like it, paradoxically increased the popularity of RPGs, and the fervor with which fans defended it. Their brand of moral panic served only to stir up the most impressionable of parental concerns. Unlike the PMRC which was able to utilize their political

---

<sup>47</sup> Waldron, “Role-Playing Games and the Christian Right.”

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Waldron, “Role-Playing Games and the Christian Right.”

capital to enact change, Pulling and others in BADD were only able to influence certain individual parents and local groups. School districts banned the game, and certain parent's disallowed it in their households, but the lasting impact of legislation seemed out of reach for BADD.

After she stepped down as the head of BADD in 1990, Patricia Pulling remained out of the media spotlight which she had been in for the last several years from her television appearances and the publishing of her book. She passed away in 1997 leaving little lasting impact on the way that children and teens interact with roleplaying games.<sup>50</sup> While the organization did continue for a while after her departure, there is very little evidence that BADD had any sort of direct impact on the conversation surrounding *D&D* after 1990.

### **Conclusion**

Groups such as the PMRC and the PFDA were able to capitalize on the air waves to mobilize support and their political capital to move their agendas forward in legislatures, BADD was unable to do so. While Patricia Pulling was unable to push for these lasting changes, the broader moment of family crisis did allow her to gain a platform. If not for these other groups parents would not have been likely to believe in her arguments. The New Christian Right and other religious fundamentalists saw the game as a threat to fantasy, as Laycock demonstrates, but other parents believed in the more secular arguments put forth by Radeki and Pulling during the period. The family crisis of the 1980s catalyzed the deep analysis of youth entertainment for harmful messages and influences and allowed the moral panic around *Dungeons & Dragons* to gain traction.

---

<sup>50</sup> Buckman, "Anti-Occult Leader Dies at 49; Patricia Pulling Was Founder of BADD."



While anti-*D&D* advocates were able to gain a national platform for their relatively small group the lasting impacts of their work is not visible in a more contemporary context. Well, it is not visible in the way one would expect. The most enduring impact was the cohesion they created in gaming groups. The communities formed to defend their hobby were a direct response to the anti-gaming rhetoric of Patricia Pulling and her organization. By attacking the game, they also implicitly attacked the player base of the game who galvanized a more cohesive community in gaming circles.<sup>51</sup> Along with Michael Stackpole's report in 1990, other gamers would step forward to defend their hobby from accusations of Satanism and witchcraft. In a 1992 interview with the Waterloo Record in Ontario one gamer said that "I would guess that the suicide rate among *D&D* players is actually lower," and "the people I knew who played *D&D* graduated from college and went on to successful careers."<sup>52</sup> These sentiments became much more present in discussions of the game in the coming years. With people like Michael Stackpole leading the charge many other players of RPGs came out in support of their hobby and to refute the claims made by BADD. This trend continues to the present day when the idea that the hobby could be a Satanic cult is a joke made by many gamers today. The game has become more popular today than ever and the main lasting impact of Patricia Pulling appears to have been creating a larger, more tightly knit group of people who enjoy the game.

---

<sup>51</sup> Waldron, "Role-Playing Games and the Christian Right."

<sup>52</sup> Socha, "The Game with the Bad Name."

## Works Cited

### Primary:

- AP. "Putnam's High School Drops Dungeons and Dragons Game." *New York Times, Late Edition*. October 9, 1985, sec. B.
- Buckman, Jenifer. "Anti-Occult Leader Dies at 49; Patricia Pulling Was Founder of BADD." *Richmond Times Dispatch*. September 19, 1997. <https://advance-lexis-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/document/?pdmfid=1516831&crd=c26f7e1e-662f-4e66-8d69-9b193685164a&pddocfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fnews%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A3SD5-FB90-0094-D4F7-00000-00&pddocid=urn%3AcontentItem%3A3SD5-FB90-0094-D4F7-00000-00&pdcontentcomponentid=152567&pdteaserkey=sr1&pditab=allpods&ecomp=3fyk&earg=sr1&prid=5d1f1a0f-9ec8-48de-aa21-3750e9a69ac3>.
- CBS. *60 Minutes on Dungeons and Dragons*, 1985.  
[http://archive.org/details/60\\_minutes\\_on\\_dungeons\\_and\\_dragons](http://archive.org/details/60_minutes_on_dungeons_and_dragons).
- Chick, Jack. "Dark Dungeons," 1984. [https://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0046/0046\\_01.asp](https://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0046/0046_01.asp).
- Dempsey, Mary, Pat Pulling, and Pat Dempsey. "Dungeons And Dragons: Witchcraft, Suicide, Violence." *Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons*, 1989 1985. archive.org.  
[https://archive.org/details/dungeons\\_and\\_dragons-witchcraft\\_suicide\\_violence/page/n0](https://archive.org/details/dungeons_and_dragons-witchcraft_suicide_violence/page/n0).
- "Friday People: Putting Violence in Place / Profile of Thomas Radecki, Research Director of US National Coalition on Television Violence." *The Guardian*. November 29, 1985.  
<https://advance-lexis-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/document/?pdmfid=1516831&crd=80e15d0b-a132-4f7e-a6b8-92b1623ed931&pddocfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fnews%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A40H4-D3G0-00VY-62T3-00000-00&pddocid=urn%3AcontentItem%3A40H4-D3G0-00VY-62T3-00000-00&pdcontentcomponentid=138620&pdteaserkey=sr0&pditab=allpods&ecomp=3fyk&earg=sr0&prid=ea0173f1-e9a1-4df9-a383-634c869cc891>.
- Gygax, Gary. *Dungeon Master's Guide*. TSR, Inc., 1979.
- Hall, Carla. "Into the Dragon's Lair; Detective William Dear's Story of a Student Suicide." *The Washinton Post*, November 28, 1984. <https://advance-lexis-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/document/?pdmfid=1516831&crd=64c31aeb-587c-49dd-a2b4-5a3875f51ead&pddocfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fnews%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A3S8G-JVW0-0009-X3FD-00000-00&pddocid=urn%3AcontentItem%3A3S8G-JVW0-0009-X3FD-00000-00&pdcontentcomponentid=8075&pdteaserkey=sr1&pditab=allpods&ecomp=3fyk&earg=sr1&prid=d797d5fc-4ed6-429f-b100-219c5e4e394c>.
- Marrs, Texe. *Ravaged by the New Age: Satan's Plan to Destroy Kids*. 2nd printing edition. Austin, Tex.: Living Truth Publishers, 1988.
- Moreau, Joseph. "'I Learned It by Watching YOU!': The Partnership for a Drug-Free America and the Attack on Use Education in the 1980s." *Journal of Social History* 49, no. 3 (2016): 710–737. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shv062>.
- North, Gary. *None Dare Call It Witchcraft*. New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1976.
- Pulling, Pat, and Kathy Cawthon. *The Devil's Web: Who Is Stalking Your Children for Satan?* Lafayette: Vital Issues Pr, 1989.

- Socha, Miles. "The Game with the Bad Name : Dungeons and Dragons' Reputation Not Based on Fact, Players Insist: [Final Edition]." *Kitchener - Waterloo Record; Kitchener, Ont.* June 5, 1992, sec. Lifestyles.
- Stackpole, Michael. "Game Hysteria and the Truth," 1989. [https://web.archive.org/web/20070630223913/http://www.featherlessbiped.com/6696/RP\\_GSATAN/rpgsatan.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20070630223913/http://www.featherlessbiped.com/6696/RP_GSATAN/rpgsatan.htm).
- . "The Pulling Report," 1990. [http://www.rpgstudies.net/stackpole/pulling\\_report.html](http://www.rpgstudies.net/stackpole/pulling_report.html).
- Stern, Steven. *Mazes and Monsters*. CBS, 1982. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FpcL-fQNPfQ>.

### Secondary:

- Becker, Howard Saul. *Outsiders; Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: Free Press, 1963.
- BuCenter for Disease Control. "QuickStats: Suicide Rates for Teens Aged 15–19 Years, by Sex — United States, 1975–2015." [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/66/wr/mm6630a6.htm), August 3, 2018. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/66/wr/mm6630a6.htm>.
- Fontenot, Maria, and Chad Harriss. "Building a Better PIG: A Historical Survey of the PMRC and Its Tactics." *Media, Culture & Society* 32, no. 4 (July 1, 2010): 565–80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443710367692>.
- Hicks, Robert D. *In Pursuit of Satan: The Police and the Occult*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2003.
- Laycock, Joseph. *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015.
- Massing, Michael. *The Fix*. New Ed edition. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Self, Robert O. *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s*. First edition. New York: Hill and Wang, 2012.
- Tresca, Michael J. *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, 2010.
- Waldron, David. "Role-Playing Games and the Christian Right: Community Formation in Response to a Moral Panic." *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 9, no. 1 (2005): 3–3. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jrpc.9.1.003>.