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In this month's issue:

- [The third eye](#)
- [Die hard III](#)
- [The truth: on sale now](#)

The third eye

By Pat Reeder

It is time to address a plague which is sweeping the land, and I don't mean the Ebola virus, although it is certainly gnawing at my insides. It's a malady that I call "Skeptic But." No, that's not the sore backside I get from sitting in front of the computer, pounding out these columns. It's a mental virus which breaks out every time a reporter does a story on some unfounded paranormal claim and turns to a proponent of it to describe how he or she came to believe in such a ridiculous premise. The answer invariably goes something like this:

"I'm a SKEPTIC, BUT Madame Olga told me so much about myself, she proved she has psychic powers!" Or, "I'm the world's biggest SKEPTIC, BUT all the stories about UFO abductions are so similar, there just must be something to them!" Or, "I've always been a SKEPTIC, BUT if there's no such thing as ghosts, how do you explain that 'Casper' movie?"

The May 26th "House & Garden" section of the Dallas *Morning News* brought us the latest load of Skeptic Buts, in an article called "True Believers." It's about feng shui, the ancient Chinese art of decorating your house to balance the cosmic energy flow of your life. A man couldn't find a wife until he added a door from the kitchen to the dining room to prevent positive energy from escaping and Shazam! within three months, he met his fiancée! The fact that he had been actively looking for a fiancée for months had nothing to do with it (He says, "I am really quite a SKEPTICAL person, BUT. . . just because you don't physically see something like ch'i doesn't mean it doesn't exist."). A house wouldn't sell because it was too close to the street, until some small mirrors were put up to reflect the noise and negative vibes away from the house. The possibility that it had been on the market for months and was finally purchased by someone who didn't want a large front yard to mow was not considered. Then, there's the woman who added mirrors to help energy flow into the "dark spots" of her home, and fixed the cracks in her steps to prevent details of her life from symbolically falling through them. Shortly afterward, orders picked up at her business. How would you explain THAT?! "Busy season?" you might guess. No, it had to be the feng shui! For, as the woman points out, "I'm a SKEPTICAL person, BUT the results were pretty breathtaking."

I hate to have to be the one to break this to all those self-proclaimed "skeptics," but sometimes, things just happen, and there is no mystical connection between them. For instance, believe it or not, it's entirely possible that you might have gotten married even if there wasn't a door between your kitchen and dining room. Please, don't get me wrong. If you want to believe this nonsense, go right ahead. It might even make your home more enjoyable (who wouldn't like an

extra mirror, or a couple of houseplants, or a door between the kitchen and dining room, to save having to carry the dinner dishes through the garage?).

But if you're going to make irrational connections between random events, or believe, as one woman does, that her house hasn't been robbed because she tied red ribbons on the doors (are there also locks and burglar alarms on those doors, or is that beside the point?), then PLEASE, STOP CALLING YOURSELF A SKEPTIC!!! No good reporter would allow a man to declare, "I'm a woman, but I disagree with the women's movement." Or let a white man get away with saying, "I am African-American, but I disagree with the civil rights movement." So why do they continue to allocate newsprint and air time to people who say, "I am a SKEPTIC, BUT I believe in . . . (UFO abductions, poltergeists, palm readers, trance channelers, psychic surgery, O.J.'s alibi, shoving broccoli up your nostrils to cure acne, or any other illogical and ridiculous thing for which there is no evidence whatsoever)"? If you simply must proclaim belief in such tripe, then try prefacing your sentence with this phrase: "I used to be a SKEPTIC, BUT then I cast aside logic and started believing in . . . etc."

I have a brain, so I don't pretend to speak for astrologers. And I am hereby demanding that all you people who either don't have a brain, or don't want to use the one you've got, quit claiming to be skeptics. I'm warning you all: if this doesn't halt, I'm calling the ACLU and filing a defamation suit!



The May 23rd "Today" section of the *Morning News* carried a feature that almost redeems them for the "True Believers" piece (it was originally written for the *Washington Post*, though, if that tells you anything). It's a feature on the growing acceptance of the belief in alien abduction tales. In it, we learn that "abductees" believe these stories must be true, because so many of the details of their stories are similar. They never seem to notice that they have other things in common, as well: that their stories are strikingly similar to images in hundreds of sci-fi movies and TV shows that everyone has grown up watching; that many of them never realized they were abductees until they underwent "hypnotherapy" sessions with the totally uncredentialed Bud Hopkins (Hey, Bud, I'll make you a deal: you stop conducting hypnotherapy sessions, and I'll stop putting on a lab coat, going down to the local emergency room, and dispensing worthless medical advice to unsuspecting victims); and that most recently, they have all started gathering in "support groups," where the details of their stories can become even more co-mingled and solidified, with no pesky interference from outsiders, like their psychiatrists.

The article also includes an excellent sidebar on sleep paralysis, an age-old mental condition which has been responsible for tales of demon visitations going back centuries. Of course, abduction believers respond that this does not account for why people seem to disappear for awhile (Do they? Like who, Travis Walton?) or have bruises they can't account for (I have two bruises now, one on my arm and one on my leg, and I can't for the life of me remember where I got them. Oh, I know: I must have been abducted and probed by intergalactic space aliens! I'm a SKEPTIC, BUT how can you argue with unexplained bruises, hmmmmmmmm?!).

Speaking of UFO abductees and attacks on skeptics, our old pal, Whitley Streiber, was a guest on Tom Snyder's show recently, and as always, had some interesting and outrageous things to say. He said he doesn't write these "Communion" books to be popular; in fact, he and his wife now "have the social life of dead bugs." I nearly fell off the couch laughing when he said it was particularly hard on his son, because, "Things like this can be difficult on a teenager."
"Things like this?!" I can see it now: "Daaaaad! Not the aliens again! Oh God, this is sooooo embarrassing!"

The best part of the show came during the phone calls, when fellow believers again excoriated us evil skeptics for not accepting Whitley's sci-fi tales as gospel truth. Whitley and the callers are just so frustrated with us! Why, he had marks on his body! "Isn't that enough to convince those skeptics?!" one woman huffed. Whitney sighed that it apparently was not, and added (I'm quoting from memory here), "If I wasn't subjected to a rectal probe, then how come I was so sore, I couldn't sit down for two days?"

Frankly, I wouldn't touch that question with a ten-foot pole. But I wouldn't be surprised if it was just a bad case of

Skeptic Butt.

[\[back to top\]](#)

Die hard III

The urban legend of “Good Times Virus”

By Mike Sullivan

The growing world of computer on-line services have proven to be a fertile environment for one of the 20th century's most pernicious infections: the urban legend. The nearly instant and effortless forwarding of messages from one computer user to another makes the spread of urban legends impossible to track and even harder to debunk. Worse, it seems the refutation of any particular legend never gets nearly the wide distribution as the original tale did.

As so it is in this case: the so-called “Good Times Virus,” which has infected the e-mail systems, message areas, and more significantly, the minds of millions of computer users since last year. This one may have a better chance of being permanently exterminated than most hoaxes of the kind, however, because of an unusual public refutation made by some reputable computer security agencies.

The “Good Times Virus” hoax started in either late November or early December of 1994, most probably on the America Online (AOL) computer service. From there, it spread at the speed of e-mail (which is to say nearly instantly and exponentially), and with the near-perfect reproduction quality which computers produce. Before long, the e-mail systems of private companies were being bogged down with the “Good Times Virus” messages.

Many well-meaning but fairly technologically illiterate MIS managers passed it along without first checking it out, thus lending the whole story more credence as it wound its way through the corporate message systems of firms that should certainly know better: AT&T, CitiBank, NBC, Hughes Aircraft, and Dallas' own Texas Instruments and EDS; as well as government agencies including the Department of Defense, FCC, and NASA.

At the risk that this issue of *The Skeptic* might fall into the hands of someone who won't read this entire article, see only the following excerpt, and resurrect the whole mess, I will reproduce here one of the most popular strains of the “Good Times Virus” tale for the benefit of our readers, complete with typos and grammatical errors —

PLEASE READ THIS CAREFULLY!

There is a new computer virus that is being sent across the Internet. If you receive an email message with the subject line "Good Times," DO NOT read the message. DELETE it immediately. Please read the messages below.

Some miscreant is sending email under the title "good times" nation-wide. If you get anything like this, DON'T DOWNLOAD THE FILE! It has a virus that rewrites your hard drive, obliterating anything on it. Please be careful and forward this mail to anyone you care about. Thought you might like to know...

The FCC released a warning last Wednesday concerning a matter of major importance to any regular user of the Internet. Apparently, a new computer virus has been engineered by a user of America Online that is unparalleled in its destructive capability. Other, more well-known viruses such as Stoned, Airwolf, and Michaelangelo pale in comparison to the prospects of this newest creation by a warped mentality.

What makes this virus so terrifying, said the FCC, is the fact that no program needs to be exchanged for a new computer to be infected. It can be spread through the existing e-mail systems of the InterNet. Once a computer is infected, one of several things can happen. If the computer contains a hard drive, that will most likely be destroyed. If the program is not

stopped, the computer's processor will be placed in an nth-complexity infinite binary loop, which can severely damage the processor if left running that way too long. Unfortunately, most novice computer users will not realize what is happening until it is far too late.

Luckily, there is one sure means of detecting what is now known as the "Good Times" virus. It always travels to new computers the same way in a test e-mail message with the subject line reading simply "Good Times."

Avoiding infection is easy once the file has been received - not reading it. The act of loading the file into the mail server's ASCII buffer causes the "Good Times" mainline program to initialize and execute. The program is highly intelligent - it will send copies of itself to everyone whose e-mail address is contained in a received-mail file or a sent-mail file, if it can find one. It will then trash the computer it is running on. The bottom line here is - if you receive a file with the subject line "Good Times," delete it immediately! Do not read it! Rest assured that whoever's name was on the "From:" line was surely struck by the virus. Warn your friends and local system users of this newest threat to the InterNet! It could save them a lot of time and money."

Please pass this on...especially to anyone you know that uses "America Online" regularly.

Hoax hallmarks:

As any student of urban legends will quickly note, this hoax has all the key features of a well-designed urban legend. To mention just a few:

- Imminent danger: Forward the message on quickly (without taking time to check it out first) in order to "warn" others of the impending disaster!
- Scent of truth: Snippets of story line that "sound" like they *could* be true! Who would make up a story like this and name government agencies if it weren't true?
- Appeal to altruism: You would be doing your friends a big favor by forwarding this message to them *right away*!
- Vague specificity: Phrases like "last Wednesday," "new virus," "the FCC," etc., make the more credulous readers think that this is a real warning about a real danger.
- Cloaked in technicalities: Gee, this *must* be a sophisticated virus if it causes your processor to go into "an nth-complexity infinite binary loop," whatever that is. I've never heard that term before, but it sure *sounds* like a technical term and a very bad thing!

Anyone who understands the first thing (well, okay, maybe the *second* thing) about how e-mail systems and computer viruses work will realize immediately that the kind of virus described by the "Good Times" hoax is a technical impossibility. There is simply no way for a text message without an executable component to infect a system, let alone permanently damage your computer.

Secondly, there is no set of instructions that can be fed to a modern processor chip that will harm it in any way . . . it's a *chip*, for crying out loud! It wouldn't care what series of instructions it was given; it would plow through them happily by the hour without suffering any ill effect. So the technical details of the "Good Times Virus" hoax are preposterous on their face. What is amazing about this episode is that so many people who *should* know that fell for the hoax and kept it circulating far longer than it should have been.

A real virus?

Is the "Good Times Virus" a *real* virus? Yes, but in a totally different way than is described in the hoax message. As one Internet user commented:

"It's an opportunistic self-replicating e-mail virus which tricks its host into replicating it, sometimes adding as many as 200,000 copies at a go. It works by finding hosts with defective parsing apparatus which prevents them from understanding that a piece of e-mail which says there is an e-mail virus and then asking them to re-mail the message to all their friends is the virus itself." Clay Shirky (clays@panix.com)

Well put indeed. In a way, the “Good Times Virus” hoax acts like a Trojan Horse-type virus . . . entering the target system under the guise of a well-intended warning, and then replicating itself by their inability to stop the spread of infection by clicking the “Delete” button instead of the “Forward to. . .” button.

Just to give closure to the story, here is the text of the refutation of the hoax by one prominent computer security agency: the U.S. Department of Energy's Computer Incident Advisory Capability (CIAC). They tried to kill off the “Good Times Virus” urban legend in their December 8, 1994, issue, just a week or two after the hoax was first circulating —

THE "Good Times" VIRUS IS AN URBAN LEGEND

In the early part of December, CIAC started to receive information requests about a supposed "virus" which could be contracted via America OnLine, simply by reading a message...

THIS IS A HOAX. Upon investigation, CIAC has determined that this message originated from both a user of America Online and a student at a university at approximately the same time, and it was meant to be a hoax.

CIAC has also seen other variations of this hoax, the main one is that any electronic mail message with the subject line of "xxx-1" will infect your computer.

This rumor has been spreading very widely. This spread is due mainly to the fact that many people have seen a message with "Good Times" in the header. They delete the message without reading it, thus believing that they have saved themselves from being attacked. These first-hand reports give a false sense of credibility to the alert message.

There has been one confirmation of a person who received a message with "xxx-1" in the header, but an empty message body. Then, (in a panic, because he had heard the alert), he checked his PC for viruses (the first time he checked his machine in months) and found a pre-existing virus on his machine. He incorrectly came to the conclusion that the E-mail message gave him the virus (this particular virus could NOT POSSIBLY have spread via an E-mail message). This person then spread his alert.

As of this date, there are no known viruses which can infect merely through reading a mail message. For a virus to spread some program must be executed. Reading a mail message does not execute the mail message. Yes, Trojans have been found as executable attachments to mail messages, the most notorious being the IBM VM Christmas Card Trojan of 1987, also the TERM MODULE Worm (reference CIAC Bulletin B-7) and the GAME2 MODULE Worm (CIAC Bulletin B-12). But this is not the case for this particular "virus" alert.

If you encounter this message being distributed on any mailing lists, simply ignore it or send a follow-up message stating that this is a false rumor.

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As of mid-April, the hoax was still running. I personally got a “warning” about the “Good Times Virus” from a well-meaning friend on CompuServe on April 25th! I admonished him and asked him to copy my debunking message to all those he originally sent the “warning” to, which he did. But these things are hard to kill! I'm sure we'll still be getting “Good Times” messages years from now, just as we still hear of long-debunked urban legends of Craig Shergold, headlight-out gang killings and infamous “Blue Star” continue to circulate. Let's hope “Good Times Virus” doesn't make it into the Hoax Hall of Fame by outwitting all the efforts of rationalists to exterminate it.

[\[back to top\]](#)

The truth: on sale now!

By Jeff Freeman

Stories of *Dungeons & Dragons* satanic-suicides have died off in recent years as we discovered other things to worry about. While the topic was still hot (between 1979 and 1992), the AP and UPI circulated 111 articles mentioning fantasy role-playing games. According to an article by Paul Cardwell Jr., published in *The Skeptical Inquirer* (Winter, 1994), eighty of those reports were largely anti-game.

Little wonder that many people still have this idea that “D&D” (misused as a generic term for “fantasy role-playing game” even though it is a trademark of TSR Hobbies, Inc.) is an occultist lure. The charges are still that FRPG causes suicide, promotes violence, is Satanic/Occult and causes participants to murder their parents. This isn't the media-hype of the mid-1980s, either. *Recent* articles, though far less common than in the mid-80s, have alluded to one or more of the above charges. Recently D&D-occultism has been brandished in otherwise sound articles about *Magic: The Gathering* (a “spell-card” game), such as the July 27, 1994, article in the *Washington Post* which referred to D&D as “an infamous tool for occultists.”

February 16, 1995, the U.S. Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals must have confused talk-show sensationalism with scientific inquiry when it upheld the lower court decision that an Oklahoma state prison warden was justified in banning role-playing games on the basis that they “encourage aggressive behavior through role-playing and the game characters may be used as tattoo [sic] patterns.” I'm not sure what the tattoo-pattern thing is all about, but James L. Carroll and Paul M. Carolin's study published in *Psychological Reports* (June, 1989) as well as Armando Simón's published in *Psychology in the School* (October, 1987) well established that gamers are not “more violent” than non-gamers. On the contrary, the findings of Suzanne Abyeta and James Forest as reported in *Psychological Reports* (Number 69, 1991) indicate that gamers as a group have *fewer* criminal tendencies.

In the Vancouver *Sun*, June 10, 1994 Phil Davidson blames the murder of a street-sweeper in Spain on a “fantasy adventure board game.” Possibly he relied on an article by Harold Glasgow (which popped up in a NEXIS search the day prior) in lieu of actual research. According to these reports, the perpetrators were playing a game in which the object was to kill a certain number of a certain type of people. An LTE running a week later (and read by far fewer people than the original article) casts doubt on that exposition by pointing out a number of inconsistencies. The perpetrators aren't accused of killing anyone else; they weren't members of the university game club; there's no evidence they ever even played any FRPGs ; and there's no such “fantasy adventure board game” anyway. This is just the sort of “D&D murder” that would have made *Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons'* Trophy List back when Pat Pulling was actively slamming D&D.

Pat Robertson runs an anti-game commercial during *The 700 Club's* broadcast nearly every day. Respondents are offered a misinformative flyer that quotes Pat Pulling of BADD as a bona fide “expert.” It references a hoax that occurred when *The 700 Club* invited Paul Sanchez on their show under the pretense that he was a former employee of TSR Hobbies, Inc. The pamphlet suggests the game ditch the references to real-world mythology (which Pat Robertson finds “occultic”) and use instead a fictitious “game mythology ” (not mentioned is that this was done in 1989). The flyer outlines a couple cases of “D&D suicide” and “D&D murder.” An accompanying tract addressing “The New Age,” claims that playing D&D leads to demonic possession and “is a sin against God.” Not only is it full of falsehoods, the text is nearly ten years old. When I wrote CBN and documented each untruth line by line, I received a thank you, the suggestion to pray for them and three months of junk-mail for other *700 Club* projects.

FRPG and suicide

First the good news: If fantasy role playing games are in any way related to suicide, it's a positive connection. The American Association of Suicidology; Centers for Disease Control and Health & Welfare (Canada) have conducted extensive investigations into teen suicide in general and found no link to D&D. Furthermore, Dr. S. Kenneth Schonbert of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York found not a single case (in a meticulous study of over seven hundred adolescent suicides) in which FRPG was a factor. A survey of psychological autopsies of adolescent suicides in all major American cities (conducted by The Associated Gifted and Creative Children of California) did not locate a single case in which D&D or any other FRPG was a determinant.

Though all of the above studies were conducted nearly ten years ago, just last week I received a letter from U.S.

Representative Dick Armey stating that “studies” had shown D&D was harmful and that parents shouldn't let their kids play. No reply yet to the question, “What studies?”

The suicides listed among BADD's “Trophy List” are most often referred to when anti-game groups are challenged for evidence of D&D-suicide. What we find from that list is that sometimes teens commit suicide, whether they play D&D or not. Overall, however, we find a suicide *rate* for gamers some ten-times below the national average.

Part of that is due to “teen suicide statistic” abuse. Most of the “teen suicide” is committed by “teens” in the 20 to 24 year age range. Indeed, much of the suicide among that group is in the military. Yet in the mid-80s when BADD compiled its list of anecdotal evidence, FRPG was almost exclusively the domain of white suburban teens and college students. Moreover, the oft-repeated claim that “teen suicide has increased 300% since 1955” is in itself misleading. In 1955 when a teen committed suicide the parents were blamed by family, friends and all of society. Sympathetic family doctors might record a suicide as “accidental death.” Relatively few groups were actively compiling statistics on teen suicide. As the blame for teen suicide shifted from Freudian “bad-parenting.” to chemical imbalances or even society in general and greater effort was made to collect accurate suicide statistics, the teen suicide *rate* increased. That this was an increase in the *actual* frequency of teen suicide by 300% seems unlikely. Consider that D&D was released in 1972, but did not gain really wide popularity until Random House began distributing it in 1979. According to a report released by the CDC in 1986, the teen suicide rate peaked in the late-1970s and then declined for nearly 10 years. If there is a link, it's a rigorously positive one.

Part of it may well be that. Role-playing games mandate social interaction. Unlike reading, watching TV, playing video-games, etc., RPG demands that a group of three or more people sit around a table and actually talk to one another. Social interaction, however, is not the hallmark of potential suicide.

FRPG and murder

The evidence that FRPG is in some way related to murder is every bit as substantial as the evidence D&D causes suicide. That is, no more tangible than the evidence of UFO abductions, Elvis-sightings and homeopathic medical successes. While studies as extensive as were done for the suicide allegations haven't been conducted, we must remember that these charges come from the very same people who claimed D&D caused suicide. Also we must recall that this charge did not even emerge until the previous “suicide” claim had been utterly refuted. Furthermore, The Committee for the Advancement of Role-Playing Games has investigated every single case that *Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons* ever advanced and debunked them one by one. Details on the vast majority of any documented case (and many of BADD's cases are not sufficiently documented to even verify that a death occurred) have been there for any half-serious investigator to discover all along, which might explain why most of BADD's press-clippings come from small-town papers and Christian newsletters. BADD's work in documenting D&D-murder was no more fit than their D&D-suicide evidence. In over 20 years of searching, there has never been found a single documented case of either suicide or murder in which D&D was a significant element.

The most famous case of “D&D Murder” aired in the made-for-TV movie *Cruel Doubt*. Two teens supposedly juiced-up on LSD allegedly killed their purportedly abusive parents for a \$2-million inheritance. A nonexistent “game scenario” was blamed. Though this game scenario was never introduced in court, the jury didn't buy the “D&D defense” and no such game-scenario has ever been published anyway (according to TSR Hobbies, Inc. and scores of gaming enthusiasts on the internet). The “true-crime” novel concluded that this was a D&D-murder. This leap is almost as grand as Mr. Davidson's aforementioned *Washington Post* article, but at least the novelist can retreat behind the shield of entertainment.

The made-for-TV movie based on that “true crime” novel likewise blamed the game. In the movie, “quotes” were read from the rule book that the book doesn't contain, the scenario *really* did exist and “satanic pictures” that aren't actually in the rule book were shown as though the book *actually* contained those illustrations. It's the sort of pick-up truck tampering and wrong-size gas-spewing-cap trickery we expect from reputable TV news-magazines, not from “based on a true story” TV-movie producers.

Other reports of “D&D Murder” are every bit as dubious. Many are based on no more than an over-zealous cult-cop concluding that “D&D did it,” quoted by a home-grown reporter and thus entered into the journalists' scriptural NEXIS

archives. Most don't even have that. A LEXIS search reveals that no jury at the appellate level has *ever* found any validity in the “D&D-defense.”

D&D occultism

Of course the real beef that fundamentalists have with D&D is that it contains the word “magic” throughout the rule book. Characters in the game cast spells and are not, according to the game world's imaginary gods, fictitiously “sinning.” We can pretend that wizards cast spells such as the pharaoh's magicians in *The Ten Commandments* but we must never pretend that it isn't a sin.

Then there is the fact that the game-world has different “gods” than the real world to begin with. Perchance these are folks who want to evangelize every corner of the real world and every corner of every fantasy world as well. They want to convince all the imaginary characters worshipping imaginary gods that Christ is the one true way to salvation, oblivious of the fact that imaginary characters aren't going to gain any immortality (or even mortality) by such devotion anyway. Then they toss out the accusation that *gamers* might confuse fantasy with reality.

The D&D defamation emerges from the same grim camp of extremists who denounce *Care Bears* and *Smurfs* for their “magic powers” and who postulate, perhaps, that Papa Smurf is a Satanic cult leader.

Of course the mainstream doesn't and will not ever buy such a delightful load of gibberish. For the mainstream, the charge is secularized to “D&D causes suicide and murder,” backed up with anecdotal accounts that delude journalists and cops into creating still more “evidence” of FRPG's evil. *Why* does it cause suicide and murder? Because it is a Satanic lure! *Why* is it a Satanic lure? Because it causes suicide and murder!

Get the picture?

The opprobrious anti-game tracts that a number of fundamentalist Christian organizations produced in the late 1980s are basically the same sort of “Satan's Coming!” hate-trash that attacks Mormons, Masons, Jews, Catholics and every other Not-A-Real-True-Christian group there ever was. Quotes are pulled from the rule books and misrepresented so that the substantially ignorant will think the *players* are trying to cast spells, the players themselves are worshipping pagan gods, swearing oaths to Beelzebub, under some sort of mind-control by a David Koresh-like figure known as the “Dungeon Master,” etc. The accusation is rather like maintaining that watching *Forest Gump* not only teaches one how to be a shrimp-boat captain, but also that it will *compel* one to shrimp. Movie actors playing the role of bad guys are *actually* sinning. Authors of novels with bad-guys (let alone the demons that show up in pop-Christian novels like *This Present Darkness*) are in danger of demonic possession themselves. Such authors are, after all, describing the actions and reactions of evil characters doing evil things . . . *just* like D&D!

Most fundamentalist Christians wouldn't even agree with such extremism. Certainly not if they knew that the game rule books don't contain recipes for poisons, directions for casting spells, demon-summoning mumbo-jumbo, etc. as the anti-game tracts are so fond of claiming. Casting a spell in D&D often amounts to saying, “Bob, my character casts a *light-spell* now.” Just as piloting a starship in the *Traveller* role-playing game doesn't require substantive knowledge of hyperspace (or for that matter, that *hyperspace* even exist), the player says that his character is trying it and the game referee tells him what happens. Bob might say “The room is filled with a glow,” or perhaps, “The starship leaps into hyperspace and in two weeks you'll arrive at Sol.”

One-man bands

I've nearly completed a survey of twenty-three organizations promoting various causes. Actually most of them are one-Ph.D. “organizations” publishing The Truth in pamphlets at 20 for \$5. (One cannot fault the formula. The one-man organization is the very foundation of such mega-corporations as CBN/*The 700 Club*, et al.) Many also offer a newsletter and “maybe I'd be interested in a reference book for just \$29.95?” The cause they are promoting is uniformly Christian Fundamentalism cloaked in the mantle of, say, family-advocacy or crime-fighter or suicide prevention. Write them with almost any question and you'll receive an offer for an “informative” handbook, flyers, posters and for \$1,000 they might conduct a seminar at your local church. The bottom line is that if you want to save your teen from suicide, yourself from being murdered, your marriage from falling apart, your soul from eternal hellfire, etc. then you *must*

become a Real True (fundamentalist) Christian. Voting a straight Republican ticket is just an added bonus.

I wrote them all and asked for information on “a role-playing fantasy game called *Dungeons & Dragons*.”

Eleven have responded so far. Only one simply replied with “Sorry, no info.” and suggested I try the local Christian bookstore. All of the other respondents have either replied with anti-game flyers or referred me to one of the other anti-game groups. I have material, therefore, from thirteen of the original twenty-three groups. One is neutral, twelve of them are anti-game. If they didn't tell me it was dangerous and sinful, they referred me to someone who would. They all seem to know one another, yet not a single one of them seems even vaguely aware of any legitimate product-safety or mental health organizations.

Not one righteous Christian referred me to the Consumer Product Safety Commission or Centers for Disease Control, Intentional Injuries Section. None referred me to the American Association of Suicidology. I didn't even receive a referral to the local *library* (though there were several suggestions to visit the local Christian bookstore). The Truth About D&D (“and other fantasy games,” they say) is that it causes suicide. It causes Murder. It is Satanic and leads to horrific occult crimes.

This is a *truth* that suicide professionals don't know. Numerous studies have failed to reveal it. Criminologists and law enforcement officers, though they deal with crime *day* in and day out have no idea that FRPG is related. Coroners in every major city in the U.S., reviewing case after case of suicide, somehow failed to notice FRPG was a factor. The entire Psychiatric industry is without a clue.

But these fundamentalist organizations not only *know* The Truth, they have it on video for just \$19.95!

Jeff Freeman is the Texas state coordinator for CAR-PGa (a role-playing game research and information network), and a confessed news junkie. He lives in Carrollton with his wife and two young boys.

[\[back to top\]](#)