



In the September 1981 issue (#53) of DRAGON™ magazine, I editorialized against “assassin” and “killer” games, expressing my fears for potential tragedy to players and potential damage to the image of the hobby of role-playing gaming. Unfortunately, those fears are being realized.

On the evening of December 5, 1981, a student at California State University at Long Beach was shot by campus police during a game of “Assassin.” According to the Los Angeles Times Service and United Press International, Mike Reagan and a companion, Julia Gissel, both 19 years old, were seen by campus police getting out of a car, carrying what appeared to be rifles. (In actuality, the “rifles” were simulated M-16s that used rubber-band ammunition.)

Sgt. Stephan King of the university police observed the couple moving along a walkway rattling doors, and shouted, “Freeze, police!” The woman stopped, but Reagan turned around, assumed a squatting position and pointed the toy gun at King. The sergeant fired his *real* gun three times, wounding Reagan in the chest and leg. Reagan was admitted to the intensive care unit of a Long Beach hospital and listed in guarded condition, but was released from intensive care and listed in stable condition as of December 9. University officials said King apparently believed the couple were burglars. There had recently been more than a dozen break-ins in the area where the shooting occurred.

In retrospect, yes, the policeman was wrong, the couple were not a pair of burglars, and their guns were not real. But what would you have had the policeman do? Wait to see if he gets hit by a burst of slugs or just a rubber band? I’m sure proponents of “Assassin” or “Killer” or any of the other so-called “live” role-playing games (and I still disagree with that term: “live” role-playing as opposed to what, dead role-playing?), would say that the area should have been declared off limits to the players because of the high crime rate, or that Reagan should not have acted as if he were going to fire when ordered to freeze. And they’d be right. But might not Reagan have assumed that the order to freeze was coming from *his* “assassin”? Can one foresee every possible circumstance in advance and write every contingency into the rules of the game?

My point is, simulation of acts of violence will inevitably be interpreted as the real thing by those not aware that the action is *only* simulation. That’s why someone holding up a bank with a plastic replica of a pistol may be charged with armed robbery, even though no real weapon was used in the crime. It is the *perception* of the simulation that matters.

Beyond the potential for tragedy (I will not even go into the reports I’ve received of idiotic antics like climbing out third-floor windows on ropes made of bed-sheets to avoid “assassination” — stupidity is stupidity, no matter what the context), there is the problem of how the non-gaming public perceives this type of game and those who play it. At St. Ambrose College in Davenport, Iowa, an assassin-type game (they call it “Godfather”) has been organized. A St. Ambrose professor, John Greenwood, has sponsored a resolution circulated among faculty members that criticizes the game, and a Davenport newspaper reported, “...he (Greenwood) thinks it (Godfather) can easily get out of hand — much like the ‘Dungeons and Dragons’ game.” It’s bad enough that Mr. Greenwood apparently has a misconception about the D&D® game in the first place, but now it is being reinforced in a negative manner with the “Godfather” game, and further he is being quoted by the media as equating the two.

Now, the only result of a D&D game “getting out of hand” I can think of is oversleeping the next morning from playing late into the night. And certainly no one is going to mistake a group of people sitting at a card table rolling dice and talking for doing anything more than playing a game. But since both “conventional” games (those played with paper, pencil, dice and imagination) and these...these...these *things* involving players running around with rubber-band guns are viewed the same by people with good intentions but not all the facts, I’m afraid some day you’ll hear, “Fantasy role-playing? Oh, yeah, some kid in California was playing that and got shot, didn’t he? They don’t allow that dragons and dungeons stuff at my son’s school....”

Dragon ^{T.M.}

Vol. VI, No. 8 February 1982

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DRAGON magazine is published monthly by Dragon Publishing, a division of TSR Hobbies, Inc. Subscription orders and change-of-address notices should be sent to Dragon Publishing, P.O. Box 110, Lake Geneva WI 53147. Telephone (414) 248-8044.

DRAGON magazine is available at hundreds of hobby stores and bookstores throughout the United States and Canada, and through a limited number of overseas outlets. Subscription rates are as follows, with all payments to be made in advance: \$24 for 12 issues sent to a U.S. or Canadian address; \$50 U.S. for 12 issues sent via surface mail or \$95 for 12 issues sent via air mail to any other country.

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The issue of expiration for each subscription is printed on the mailing label for each subscriber's copy of the magazine. Changes of address for the delivery of subscriptions must be received at least 30 days prior to the effective date of the change in order to insure uninterrupted delivery.

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Second class postage paid at Lake Geneva, Wis., and at additional mailing offices.