

Another Kind of Future/Past: Decolonial and Asiafuturist Imagination in the Philippines from the 19th Century to the Contemporary Tabletop Role-Playing Games of #rpgsea

Abstract: This article explores recent tabletop role-playing games from the Philippines (*The Islands of Sina Una*, *Gubat Banwa*, *Karanduun*, *BALIKBAYAAN*, and *ON THE BONES OF BATALA*) in the context of historical writings from the 19th century by Pedro Paterno and Isabelo de los Reyes. I argue that these 21st century Filipino games are important contributions to an alternative cultural history of role-playing and are embedded in a larger tradition of speculative writing that engages with colonial violence and proposed alternative decolonial and anticolonial visions of the future-past.

Keywords: Philippines, Filipino games, cultural history, decolonialism, Asiafuturism, #rpgsea

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the following, I explore recent tabletop role-playing games from the Philippines in the context of historical writings from the 19th century. I propose that looking at these Filipino games, which are part of the role-playing scene that has gathered under the hashtag #rpgsea¹, can be interpreted as contributions to an *alternative cultural history of role-playing and imaginative play*, which the Role-Play in Games conference has suggested we need to pay increased attention to. In this way, the Filipino games I discuss might be understood as being embedded in a larger tradition of utopian and speculative writing, even if they have until now not been discussed as such, nor have been interpreted from this perspective. I hope this short article can thus contribute to a broader discussion about how current tabletop role-playing games from all over the world relate to both theoretical debates on role-playing in various local gaming communities (see Peterson 2020; Torner 2024; Wee 2024) and to diverse regional traditions of fantastical and speculative storytelling (Oziewicz 2017; Gui 2025).

The first part of what I am going to discuss is very familiar to most scholars in Philippine studies, but probably not well-known to anyone not familiar with the history of the Philippines: the work of two important intellectual figures in 19th and early 20th century Filipino history, Pedro A. Paterno and Isabelo de los Reyes. I will briefly discuss their writings, proposing a new interpretation of their texts as an imaginative writing of a fictive Filipino past. This is supposed to serve as a historical context for the other material I want to discuss, which is probably unknown to most academics working on the Philippines today, but that some scholars of role-playing games might already be familiar with: recent tabletop role-playing games published by Filipino designers on itch.io (and some in print). In analyzing these games, I will attempt to establish a connection between the famous 19th century writers' imaginations and the 21st century visions of the future and the past presented by the role-playing game designers.

By exploring these two very different forms of texts from the late 19th and the early 21st century in the Philippines anew and considering them as speculative historical and

¹ See <https://across-rpgsea.com/> where momatoes, designer of games like *ARC: Doom Tabletop RPG* (2021) and *The Magus* (2021) has curated a selection of games from of the South-east Asian RPG scene.

Asiafuturist writings that “make the past an imaginative resource in and for the present” want to draw attention to their visions of utopian and dystopian futures as examples of “critical dystopia” that represent a “dynamic tension” beyond the “utopic/dystopic” (Moynagh and Cornum 2020, 13). In this way, their versions of (pre-)colonial pasts and decolonial futures can be analyzed as elements of alternative cultural histories of role-playing and imaginative play and as contributions to a decolonization of speculative and utopian fiction. At the same time, in regard to role-playing games, their efforts can be understood as being embedded in current debates about diversity and representation in games and about the best strategies on how to realize “RPGs ... immense potential for diversity” (Burton et al. 2024, 465).

In my present contribution to this, I am particularly interested in how, in the 19th but also in the 21st century “religion” served and still serves as a main vehicle of signifying both colonial domination as well as utopian potentials for alternative visions. I argue that the material I discuss here on the one hand clearly reflects its embeddedness in the modern and global discourse of religion (Hermann 2024), while it at the same time attempts to subvert and re-figure the fundamental parameters of this global discourse to carve out an anti- and decolonial space. In this sense, we might ask: Can we interpret contemporary examples of Filipino tabletop role-playing games as visions of “migrant futures” (as conceptualized by Bahng 2018) and as “BIPOC futurisms” (to use a concept proposed by Mitchell and Chaudhury 2020)?

2. WRITING IMAGINATIVE PASTS IN THE PHILIPPINES IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

Firstly, I want to draw attention to some 19th century Filipino scholarship and historical writings, briefly introducing two historical figures and their work that – as I argue – could be interpreted as a form of imaginative and speculative fiction (for a useful exploration of the broader context of these two figures see Mojares 2006a and Thomas 2012).

Pedro A. Paterno who lived from 1858 to 1911, was a Filipino politician, novelist, and poet. In 1885, he published *Ninay*, the first novel by a native Filipino. Having supported the Spanish side before the Philippine Revolution that began in 1896, in 1899, he managed to become president of the ‘Malolos Congress’ (the constituent assembly of the First Philippine Republic), and during the American colonial government served in the First Philippine Assembly. He is a controversial figure, as he is often regarded as a ‘traitor’ and the quintessential elitist ‘turncoat’ in the context of the Philippine revolution (Reyes 2006).

In the late 19th century, however, Paterno also wrote and published books like *La antigua civilización Tagalog* (in 1887) – *The Ancient Tagalog Civilization* (see Rath 2016) – and *El cristianismo en la antigua civilización tagalog* (in 1892) – *Christianity in the Ancient Tagalog Civilization* –, both of which attempted a reconstruction of a pre-colonial Tagalog ‘high civilization’ and argued that even before the Spaniards arrived in the early sixteenth century, the ancient Tagalogs had been “Spaniards at heart” (Schumacher 1991, 107, see Morrow 2009) and had practiced the religion of “Tagalism” (*Tagalismo*) or “Bathalism” (*Bathalismo*). The latter name Paterno derives from Bathala, the pre-Hispanic Tagalog divinity (Thomas 2012, 76). Historian Megan Thomas describes this in her analysis of Paterno’s writings as follows:

Arguing that pre-Hispanic Tagalog religion was neither animist, “spiritist,” nor pantheist, he wrote that Bathalism was a religion on par with Catholicism, equally inspired by truth. He proved this by finding in Bathalism institutions, concepts, and

figures that paralleled those of Catholicism, including the Catholic idea of God (Bathala) but also equivalents for Catholic saints, priests, cathedrals, heaven, hell, bishops, confession, friar orders, and even for the virgin mother. (Thomas 2012, 77)

Paterno also argued that other great civilizations had been associated with this Tagalog culture, placing the Tagalogs at the center of a universal history in which large pre-Hispanic exchanges between China, India, Egypt, Persia, and the Philippines had been taking place. In this sense, he describes the ancient Tagalog civilization as an important part world history (Thomas 2012).

Contrary to most perspectives at the time (and even today), which interpret Paterno's works mostly as flawed attempts at writing history (Reyes 2006, 89–90), I suggest that we could interpret *La antigua civilización Tagalog* less as an attempt at historical writing, but rather as a playful exploration of an imaginative vision of an alternative past that would allow Filipinos to denounce Catholicism and claim for themselves an ancient civilization on par with European history. In a certain way, this form of writing could then be compared with similar arguments put forth by indigenous writers for example in South America, as in the famous Peruvian *El primer nueva crónica y buen gobierno* from 1615 by Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, which uses a similar rhetorical strategy (see Adorno 2000).

I quickly want to mention a second writer from the late 19th and early 20th century in the Philippines. *Isabelo de los Reyes*, who lived from 1864 to 1938, was a folklorist, journalist, labor activist, and religious leader. Born in Vigan in Northern Luzon, he wrote for and edited numerous periodicals throughout his life. After being exiled to Spain in 1897, he returned to the Philippines in 1901, became very active in politics and was essential in 1902 in the proclamation of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, a Rome-independent, anti-colonial Catholic movement (see Hermann 2021).

In his book *El folk-lore filipino* published in 1889, a “youthful masterwork” as Benedict Anderson (2005, 12) has called it, he was engaged in an “emancipatory project” (Mojares 2006a, 353), establishing parallels and comparisons between Filipino folk-lore and, among others, Nordic, Greek, and Egyptian mythology, as well as the beliefs of ancient and contemporary peoples from various continents, including what he calls the “Hottentots”, “Guaranos” (of Paraguay), “Californians”, “Romans”, “Iroquois”, and “Chinese” (see Thomas 2012, 119). In addition, he argues that superstitious ‘backward’ beliefs might have been introduced to the Philippines by the Spanish (Mojares 2006). All of this, as Filipino historian Resil B. Mojares has shown (2006a, 354), contributes to a “de-exorcization” and “de-primitivization” of de los Reyes’ 19th century Filipino present, in which he also attempts to overcome a fundamental distinction at work in the Philippines:

Folklore – comparative folklore – enabled him [de los Reyes] to bridge the deepest chasm in colonial society, which lay not between colonized and colonizers – they all lived in the lowlands, they were all Catholics, and they dealt with one another all the time. It was the abyss between all of these people and those whom we would today call “tribal minorities”: [...] men, women and children facing a future of – possibly violent – assimilation, even extermination. (Anderson 2005, 17)

In the introduction to *El folk-lore* this perspective is apparent, as de los Reyes even describes himself as “hermano de los selváticos, aetas, igorrotos y tinguianes” (brother of the forest

peoples, the Aeta, the Igorots and the Tinguians) (de los Reyes 1889, 19; see Anderson 2005, 17).

In 1909, in the same vein as Paterno, de los Reyes published a book under the title *La religión antigua de los Filipinos* (The ancient religion of the Filipinos), comparing various religions with his idea of pre-colonial Philippines religion, surveying the religions of ethnic groups in the Philippines, and arguing for a pre-Hispanic monotheism (see Mojares 2006a, 320–322).

While both Paterno and de los Reyes are of course well known to scholars of Philippine history, their writings have often been dismissed and ridiculed, and only recently have been reconsidered as important contributions (Reyes 2006, Bolata and Santiago 2025). Already their contemporaries in the late 19th century were (perhaps understandably) very critical of their work. The later national hero of the Philippines, José Rizal, in a letter to his friend, the German scholar Ferdinand Blumentritt, described himself at a loss of words when reading Paterno's writings on Bathala, which he could only comment on with a 'loopy line' (see Morrow 2009). Others called Paterno a plagiarist, an impostor, and a buffoon (see Mojares 2006a, 15).

However, if we are interested in alternative cultural histories of imaginative play², maybe a different form of interpretation becomes possible, one that is a bit more charitable (and more playful) towards our understanding of the respective projects of these Filipino intellectuals in the last decades of the 19th century. *What if we understand them not as attempts to provide a rigorous and factual history of the Philippines but rather as attempts, in the midst of the cruelty of the colonial situation, to envision a different past, enabling another and different future?*

In writing their different pasts, I argue, Pedro Paterno and de los Reyes were imagining a utopian, decolonial future, and were providing resources for an imagining of anti-colonial resistance and subversion.

I want now to turn to a possibly surprising parallel between what I see as the playful work being done in the texts of Paterno and de los Reyes and the work performed by contemporary Filipino writers in a similar vein, but in a quite different aesthetic medium: the design of tabletop role-playing games.

3. THE 21ST CENTURY SPECULATIVE FICTION OF #RPGSEA: A CONTRIBUTION TO AN ALTERNATIVE CULTURAL HISTORY OF ROLE-PLAY?

From a certain perspective, the contemporary diverse 21st century landscape of tabletop role-playing games is a late result of a now over fifty-year history that began the 1970s when *Dungeons & Dragons*, first published in 1974, basically invented a new form of play (Peterson 2024). Bringing together the traditions of wargaming and fantasy literature with the idea of players embodying an individual character that experiences a variety of adventures, a new aesthetic (and artistic) medium took form (Peterson 2012, xvii; see Feige 2020)

Over the last 10 years, tabletop role-playing games have once more seen an expansive mainstream success, fueled by the release of the fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 2014, but equally by the emergence of a broad and diverse scene of independent game designers

² The concept of "imaginative play" serves both as a critical term for the Bonn Lab for Analog Games and Imaginative Play which I am directing in Bonn and as a lens to engage with forms of analog play that involve forms of "pretend play" and in particular of "pre-tensive shared reality" (Kapitany et al. 2022). For a more detailed description see Hermann 2025, 189–191.

(White 2020; Berge 2021; Bisogno 2022). Most attention, however, is still paid to designers from North America and Europe, overlooking the ways in which (independent) tabletop role-playing game design scenes have established themselves in other parts of the world.

One of the reasons that make tabletop role-playing games a particularly attractive medium for game designers in more marginalized situations, as for example in the Philippines, is that such games are often distributed as PDF booklets or books on digital platforms like itch.io, and thus the cost of both production and distribution is very low, as all that is needed to participate in semi-professional tabletop role-playing game design is a computer with layout software like In-Design or Affinity Publisher. It is not surprising therefore, that the last 10 years have also seen a rise to more prominence of, for example, Southeast Asian game designers, who have rallied under the hashtag #rpgsea. In addition to these economic reasons for the emerging game design scenes in (Southeast) Asian countries (as well as in Latin America, where hashtags like #rpglatam have been coined) there is also social connection and community building facilitated through events like Session Zero Online (in January 2021) and a resulting vibrant playtesting community on Discord, contributing to various regional scenes.

This has highlighted games that develop unique and original approaches, engage with larger trends in the indie tabletop role-playing game design space, but also often negotiate questions of how to (or not) incorporate cultural elements of different Southeast Asian contexts into the settings and game mechanics. While many of the #rpgsea tabletop role-playing games do not understand themselves as specifically “Southeast Asian”, a number of them do contain direct references to local and regional cultural material and can be analyzed in regard to how they created specific “cultural languages of role-playing” (e.g. Ilieva 2023). In particular, some of the games explicitly draw on e.g. Filipino religion, folklore, myth, and legend to make innovative contributions to the often-limited mythological repertoire of many European and North American tabletop role-playing games.

Shortly discussing five such examples below, I want to argue that contemporary game designers in the Philippines are both continuing and re-working the 19th century tradition of imaginative and speculative writing I presented above, engaging with the (colonial) past and envisioning other futures. In this continuation and re-working, an alternative cultural history of imaginative play and (tabletop) role-play emerges that could serve as a complementary (or even corrective) perspective to existing histories of tabletop role-playing games. In addition, I particularly want to highlight the role that religion plays in these examples.

The first game (or game supplement) is *The Islands of Sina Una*, published by Hit Points Press in 2021. “Sina Una” means “those who came first”. This is a campaign setting book for the fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, designed by a team of Filipinos in the diaspora (mostly in the USA) and in the Philippines themselves. It tries to bring a semi-fictional world inspired by Filipino mythology and culture to fantasy role-playing. The authors describe their endeavor as follows:

The Islands of Sina Una [...] pulls from the precolonial mythology and culture of the Philippines. [...] Filipino mythology is largely forgotten, with much of it passed down solely through oral tradition and subsequently lost to colonization. For the team behind this book, *The Islands of Sina Una* serves as a way to rediscover and reforge that missing link to the past – to connect with our ancestors and share their stories with generations to come. (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 8)

As is common with such supplements, *Sina Una* provides the players with new options to create characters that they will direct through island adventures. These characters are described as follows:

Your character is tied to both the people around them and the spirits of the world they travel [...]. Some of this is extrapolated from real-life historical accounts [...]. At the end of it all, though, *The Islands of Sina Una* is a fictional fantasy setting, and seeing your own identity in the characters you play is a cathartic and important part of the book's goals. (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 17)

Reading the book, it quickly becomes apparent that religion is central to the stories that the authors expect to be played and experienced in this fictional version of the pre-colonial Philippines. Under the heading "Spirits and Religion", the book describes "Animism", "Souls, Death, and the Afterlife", and the "Gods of the Islands" (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 19–45). "Bathala" for example, the Tagalog deity that Pedro Paterno was writing about in the 19th century, is described as follows: "Bathala is the creator of all things and god of the sky. Though he holds great power, he is respected, rather than feared." (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 23)

In this sense, I argue, *Sina Una* can be seen as being embedded in the same tradition of reimagining the Philippine past that Paterno and de los Reyes contributed to establishing. In a similar way, the authors of *Sina Una* use the past as a resource for telling stories that focus on cultural identity, belonging, and an appropriation of the past for shaping a decolonial future.

Sina Una also provides new options for *Dungeons & Dragons* character classes. All classes from the *Player's Handbook* are provided with new subclass options like the Barbarian's "Path of the Black River", the Monk's "Way of Kaluluwa", or the Sorcerer's "Diwata Bloodline". The book also introduces two a fully new and original classes, called the "Babaylan" and the "Headhunter". The Babaylan is described as follows:

Babaylan are mediums, channeling the power and wisdom of the spirits through offerings and communion. Accompanied by a patron spirit companion known as an abayan, babaylan serve as leaders, protectors, and healers for their communities. (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 164).

In this sense, *Sina Una* establishes an imagined version of pre-colonial Filipino religion in game terms. Recognizable throughout the book are the resonances of the descriptions for example in de los Reyes 19th century works, who describes the "Babailan" as "cunning and very clever" priestesses (*astutas y muy listas*; de los Reyes 1889, 163).

Equally, the Headhunters are described as

trained to commune with the spirits of their ancestors, and it is via this connection that they hone their martial skill. Through rites and omens, they receive knowledge of those to pursue; from those that they send to the afterlife, they learn ways to hone their tools of combat. (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 170)

These mystical fighters also resonate with the pre-colonial past imagined and described by Paterno and de los Reyes. For the designers and writers of *Sina Una*, the additional game

options they provide are closely connected with their vision of pre-colonial religion (and magic). They write:

Spirits are also the source of magic in the islands. [...] [C]lerics and the shamanistic babaylan [...] commune with powerful spirits directly, who in return for offerings grant these individuals access to fearsome divine magic. (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 8–9).

In line with this description, the cleric subclass of the “Volcano Domain” is presented as follows:

Standing high above the land for all to see, the volcano casts a large and reaching shadow. [...] Its lava can birth new land. To see only its destruction is to be ruled by fear, and to see only its domain over growth, is naive. Clerics of the volcano domain are ruled by neither, and channel the raw force that the volcano commands in either form it takes. (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 179)

Equally, the Babaylan class already mentioned above, popularly called “Philippine shamans”, are described as “intermediaries between the spirit realm and the mortal world” (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 165). Their power is presented as follows:

Most babaylan begin their training as an apprentice, shadowing an elder babaylan to learn the rituals and practice of the role. Once this training has been completed, the individual is conferred a personal spirit guide known as an abayan. [...] It is through this bond with their abayan that babaylan can channel magic, drawing energy from both nature and ancestral spirits and manifesting it in spectacular feats of healing, divination, and even divine combat. (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 165)

Considering all these descriptions, it can be recognized that one central way in which the pre-colonial past is (re)imagined in *Sina Una* is through a focus on religious themes, together with explorations of magic and ritual. In this way, a certain vision of a pre-colonial Philippines becomes fictionalized in the setting of *Sina Una* and is thus prepared as additional material for tabletop role-playing and for the creation of future-oriented narratives of the past that the players using this material are supposed to create.

There are many more details regarding the role of religion and Filipino mythology in *Sina Una* that could be discussed. But the creators of the project also provide additional context for the way in which the project is invested in the creators’ own negotiations of identity. In the Foreword, the creation of *The Islands of Sina Una* is not only recounted by the project’s co-director as a transformative experience. He also writes:

In all my life, I have always referred to myself as anything but just Filipino. I was Filipino-American. I was Filipino-Chinese. [...] But working on this book, and learning about my culture, I have since stopped. I am Filipino. With no shame, with no second guessing. This is what *Sina Una* has done for me. (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 5)

For him, the creation of a pre-colonial, utopian, and fantastic version of the Philippines provides a space in which one can not only read about the past but also experience it through play, and thus create memories of a fantastical past which never was. This can lead to the creation of utopian stories that, at least according to the authors of this game book, can have an identity-affirming and cathartic effect.

A second tabletop-roleplaying game set in a world inspired by “Precolonial Philippine/Southeast Asian Life and Society” (Saveedra 2024, 632), *Gubat Banwa*, is much less peaceful. In the First (Legacy) edition, version 1.61 (the game has been released in many different versions and states of completion), it describes itself as a “tactical combat and war drama Tabletop Roleplaying Game of warrior-braves surviving in a war-torn land inspired by Precolonial Philippines” (Saavedra 2024, 636). Its author, Joaquin Kyle Saavedra (tagamantra.itch.io), is a Filipino writer of speculative fiction novels and tabletop role-playing games in both Filipino and English. In his work, he draws upon Filipino Folklore, Legends, Culture, History, and Myth, turning them into gameable materials.

The game is set in the archipelago of the “Sword Isles” (Saveedra 2024, 42) and in an earlier version described itself as an “unapologetic Heroic Fantasy game that rises and is based on pre-colonial Philippine sensibility, mythology, and history” (version 1.3, Saveedra 2023, 46–47). Again, in much of this fictionalized setting, echoes of the 19th century tradition of Paterno and de los Reyes can be felt and can sometimes be explicitly recognized. For example, in the chapter on the “Faiths of the Sword Isles”, he describes one aspect as follows:

ANITO

The most prevalent religion amongst the isles, so embedded it is into daily life that it is hardly considered a religion, and thought of more as a way of life. Anito translates to worship. Anito is the faith in the inherent divinity of nature. (Saveedra 2023, 695).

Compare this with a quote from the above-mentioned book by de los Reyes, *La religión antigua de los Filipinos*, in which the “anitos” play a central role: “The true foundation of Filipino Religion, as with that of all Malays, is the cult of the souls of ancestors, called *Anitos* [...]” (*El verdadero fondo de la Religión filipina, como el de la de todos los malayos, es el culto de las almas de los antepasados, que llamaban Anitos* [...]; de los Reyes 1909, 39).

What is on display here, as in *Sina Una*, is an imagination of pre-colonial Filipino religion, that Paterno and de los Reyes, among others, significantly shaped in the late 19th and early 20th century, and that current tabletop role-playing game designers are continuing to make use of. These understandings (and innovative re-interpretations) of the tradition of Philippines speculative writing I am trying to identify here have to be traced if one wants to identify some constitutive elements of a continuing project decolonial speculation that could provide a contribution to an alternative cultural history of role-play.

At the same time, Saavedra, the designer of *Gubat Banwa*, has been constantly struggling with, reworking, and redescribing the ways in which the game relates to its inspirations and the past. Describing it as “Inspired By Southeast Asia”, he claims that

Gubat Banwa is a fantasy setting, but it seeks to re-evaluate and revamp what “Fantasy” means. It starts its foundations and assumptions upon Southeast Asian folklore and experience, instead of any fantasy literature or pop-fantasy crafted by many Western Fantasy conventions. If you wish to play *Gubat Banwa*, you must center Southeast

Asia. Old Fantasy conventions might be found here, but only because of the inherent similarities of Southeast Asian stories with other stories. It is important to remember that *Gubat Banwa* is not Southeast Asia. It is inspired by it, and in turn uplifts it, but it is not it. This is an important dichotomy. (Saavedra 2024, 647)

This section towards the end of the book is preceded by instructions to the players at the beginning of the text:

Let's get two very important things clear: *this game centers us* and *this game's setting is not Southeast Asia*.

This game is explicitly written with us in mind, us being Filipinos and other Southeast Asian people. Thus, it centers us. The "default" is a broad-nosed, five foot tall, genderless brown person. (Or better yet, remove the notion of a default.) It centers our experiences, our ideals. Our traditions, our weird cakes, our weird smells. It's about us. You are welcome to play our roles: that is what an RPG is, after all. *But be respectful, because even we respect ourselves*. Treat us like people. This game is about us.

Secondly, this game is *not Southeast Asia*. It is not *just Precolonial Philippines*. It is its own fantasy setting. *It is a Fantasy intensely inspired by the refulgent and diluvial cultures and stories of Southeast Asia*.

It is a *mythic reconstruction of a grand Southeast Asia of Hindu-Buddhist Empires, Islam Sultanates, and indigenous kingdoms and communities*. A work of pure love for something that has been torn away from us. I am Pilipinhon, which means much of the writing is influenced by Philippines, but much of my research into Precolonial Philippines has been the *joyful eradication of the "Filipino" identity* to find a more whole and complete view of *Southeast Asia*, where our differences don't divide us but unite, where the *waters don't separate but connect*. (Saavedra 2024, 6; emphasis in the original).

Reading through the various iterations of *Gubat Banwa*, the ways the author constantly wrestles with the challenge of how to imagine another kind of future-past become apparent. In stressing that the game is a "Fantasy" that is inspired by Southeast Asia, but "*is not Southeast Asia*", he references similar forms of identity negotiations as the designers involved in *Sina Una*, but at the same time highlights that for him, the main point is reflecting on a "*joyful eradication of the "Filipino" identity*", which allows for a recovery of a view of Southeast Asia and the Philippines before the emergence of modern national identities (see Mojares 2006b; 2009).

The same author and designer, Saavedra, has also published the game *Karanduun: Make God Bleed*. In its currently available version (2.2, published online in 2021), it is described in the book's PDF as follows:

Karanduun is a modern Filipino Epic RPG about worthless heroes dismantling God, whatever cycle of oppression that must be. [...] The prevailing tone of *Karanduun* is struggling against oppression while having the strength and abilities of a to-be epic hero, a modern twist on the ancient Filipino Epic. [...] *Karanduun's own setting, SANSINUKOB, the Center of All Creation, [is] in the middle of the Neverending*

Ocean, wherein an infinite number of other universes float. In the midst of this, there is no hope, for Bathala is dead. As the first few sprouts of heavenly flowers choke abandoned glass towers, little gods dance upon the shadows cast by acid light, and disenfranchised people begin to hope for a sword against the veil. (Saavedra 2021, 5)

After establishing this theme of oppression, resistance, and the death of God, the background history of the game setting is explained as follows:

In the Isle of the Pearlescent Archipelago, those men [...] bringing with them their Tortured God, colonized the northern isles in the name of *DYOSVETA, the Abusive Father*. The first of the Trinity. The people of the Archipelago toiled for 500 years, but they looked to BATALA for reassurance. A hundred years later, the Easterners rebelled, with the ancient Karanduun *Wielder of Gods* and the *Great Supremo of the Brotherhood*, they overthrew the *Captain-Generalcy of San Lazaranya* and called themselves the great *Republic of Lazaranyas*.

Of course, that didn't last long until the imperialist *Gunmetal Republic*, with their huge machines of war and spirit-driven mecha, conquered the isles. [...] For 250 grueling and cruel years, we were subjected to the torture under the second of the Trinity, *YEZU, the Idiot Son*.

Eventually, the undead Ghost Chrysanthemum Empire of Kikuyurei launched their own invasion against us, led by *SHINSEINA YUREI, the Holiest Ghost*. The third of the Holy Trinity. [...]

This was when they killed BATALA. [...] [T]hey launched an attack against BATALANGMAYKAPAL, creator of the universe, and killed Them. [...]

The Pearlescent Archipelago toiled under joint Holy Trinity rule for fifty years [...] With that done [...] they forged ahead [...].

In their absence, they installed a puppet kingdom [...]. But the people upon the Throne are corrupt, and answer directly to the Holy Trinity.

[...] Only a few things can be seen as good things in this history: there are rebels against the puppet kaharian who fight for the good of their people [...].

Additionally, those rebels have friends with the Jambaran Sultanate, who through help from some ancient primordial deity, has managed to stave off the attacks of god. Thus was the islands of the Southwest given the name: The Unconquered Isles. (Saavedra 2021, 13; emphasis in the original)

Once again, this description takes up many elements of the tradition in which Paterno and de los Reyes wrote in the late 19th century, and once more features "Bathala" (or "BATALA"). However, this time, the setting is not pre-colonial, but rather post-colonial. Those familiar with the history of the Philippines will easily recognize in this description the successive waves of colonization by Spain, the US, and Japan over the last 500 years, as well as the southern predominantly Muslim island of Mindanao, here described as successfully withstanding colonial rule.

In his reimagination of Philippine history as role-playing game setting material, Saavedra draws on the tradition I have indicated, but he radically transforms the colonial history into a parodistic and subversive take on the terrible effects of colonial rule. It is the tabletop role-playing game as a biting social commentary, a decolonial project that effectively ascribes cruelty and stupidity to the Christian conquerors, while accusing the post-colonial (Filipino) governments as corrupt.

In *Karanduun*, players take on the roles of, as the book calls it “worthless heroes that resist against the worthless and broken rule of corrupt lords” (Saavedra 2021, 7; emphasis in the original). In this sense, and there is much more in the over 170 pages of the book, *Karanduun* creates a fantastical, utopian, as well as dystopian space in which the colonial history of the Philippines provides the inspiration for a fictional game world, in which players take on the roles of anti-colonial heroes struggling to survive.

I want to only quickly mention two other examples. Firstly, the game *BALIKBAYAAN: Returning Home* by Rae Nedjadi, in which player take on the role of mythological “elementals” – “beings made of the strange stuff between magic and nature, reality and fantasy, hope and fear” – in a cyberpunk future (Nedjadi 2019, 2). Nedjadi writes:

Bring your dystopic post-Cyberpunk fantasies to life, revel in supernatural Filipino folklore, and dance along the threads between magic and technology. (Nedjadi 2019, back cover).

The future the game describes is decidedly post-colonial, as the elementals played were formerly enslaved by colonial masters who harnessed their power to conquer the stars and build colonies on other worlds. Now some of the elementals who had been bound to machines have returned to a destroyed earth.

The character types – the different elementals – are based on elements of Filipino mythology and folklore, like for example the “Tikbalang”, described as providing “high-risk manual labor”, formerly being put to work as “bodyguards, laborers, muscle, protection” or the deadly “Aswang”, used as “trackers, hunters, assassins, and infiltrators” (Nedjadi 2019, 17, 19). Both of these once again take up elements of popular Filipino folklore already made popular in 19th century writings.

Another game, by Ar-Em Bañas, is *ON THE BONES OF BATALA*, “a folk- horror tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) inspired by the pre- and colonial histories, cultures, and folklore of the Tagalog region in the Philippines” (Bañas 2025, 12). Its setting is described as the “Rotting Isles of the Bones of BATALA” (Bañas 2025, 12), where the player characters’ “ancestors built settlements upon the corpse of BATALA” (Bañas 2025, 105).

In a similar way to *Karanduun*, colonial history provides the background for an fantastical reimagination of the past and the cruelty of colonial violence, where during the cataclysmic event known as “the Arrival”, “God-Giants [...] wrested power from BATALA” HIMSELF” (Bañas 2025, 25). The player characters are described as “descend[ing] from survivors of the Arrival, your very existence a defiance against the realm that seeks to destroy you” (Bañas 2025, 26).

As with some of the other games discussed here, the text of *ON THE BONES OF BATALA* contains reflections on the way that designing the game has impacted the designer and is related to their understanding of both the violent colonial past and possible decolonial futures:

[T]his game is an expression of my grief as I researched about colonial violence, trauma, and its manifestations in my family tree, the Tagalog region, and across the Philippine archipelago.

I share this grief with you with open hands, in the hope that we could sit together and mourn what we have lost. It is my hope that just as Kamatayan and the Katauhan venture through SANDAIGDIGAN in search of truth and liberation, we too can find the strength to pick up the pieces. Together, may we find a semblance of relief and solidarity in these Rotting Isles. (Bañas 2025, 11)

Once more, *ON THE BONES OF BATALA*, just like *The Islands of Sina Una*, *Gubat Banwa*, *Karanduun*, and *BALIKBAYAAN*, through game design engages in reflections on colonial violence and the formations of modern Southeast Asian and Filipino identities.

4. CONCLUSION

The short analyses of the material presented have allowed me to try to make the argument, I hope, that there is a line to be drawn from the 19th century writings of Filipino intellectuals like Paterno and de los Reyes, which I reframe as instances of speculative fiction – or even of imaginative play –, to the tabletop role-playing games designed and produced by 21st century Filipino game designers.

Through this investigation, what becomes visible is that if we are interested in writing *alternative cultural histories of role-playing games and imaginative play*, we need to not only analyze current games, but also explore the local literary and cultural traditions they draw upon. What becomes visible then, as I have argued, is that games like some of those currently gathered around the #rpgsea hashtag, can be understood as embedded in longer traditions of speculative fiction, of imaginations of another kind of future-past.

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