The Role of the Cosmographer

Abstract: This article suggests that the most distinctive element of role-playing games is not that they allow players to take on the role of fictional characters but that they represent a historically significant development of humanity's capacity for imagining other worlds. It describes this development as an innovation in cosmographic technology, or interlocking procedures and techniques that enhance our ability to imagine and explore worlds. In other words, the most essential role that a player takes on in a role-playing game is that of cosmographer, or explorer of multiversal possibility. The novel cosmographic development represented by the first RPGs came from a synthesis of two imaginative technologies: the ironic imagination of early speculative fiction and the oracular simulations of wargaming. RPGs draw on technologies for simulating space and time, but most importantly they draw on the oracular technology of using probabilities and dice to propel games into cosmographic territory that the human players could not have imagined unaided. Through the synthesis of these elements RPGs enhance human imaginative capacities offering players the ability to take on the role of cosmographers utilizing powerful technologies to access vast and unexplored swathes of possible worlds.

Keywords: Cosmographer, TRPG, Cosmagraphic Technology, Oracular Simulation

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1. INTRODUCTION

The 2025 Role-Play in Games Conference called on participants to think about the foundations of role-playing in a game, breaking that down by historical, cultural, theoretical, and critical angles. This included "alternative historical trajectories of other critical lines, events or ideas that came together to form role-playing in games as we know it" (Games As Art Center 2025). In this essay I put forward the notion that role-play, in the traditionally understood sense of taking on the role of a fictional character, is neither the most distinctive nor the most important element of role-playing games. Instead, I argue that tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) represent a historically significant development of humanity's capacity for imagining other worlds. I describe this development as an innovation in *cosmographic technology*, or interlocking procedures and techniques that enhance our ability to imagine and explore worlds. In other words, I contend that the most essential role that a player takes on in a role-playing game is that of cosmographer, or explorer of multiversal possibility.

In the first section of the essay I will contextualize my use of the term "cosmography," positioning it in relationship to other uses of the term, Curtis Carbonell's (2019) concept of "realized worlds," and Chloe Germaine's (2025) eco-weird description of "co-worlding" with games. I position cosmography as exploration of a spatialized field of possibility, drawing on Mark JP Wolf's (2012) model of imagined worlds, and considering the limits of our imagination as a horizon which we can expand. In the second section I argue for a definition of games as a cosmographic technology that harnesses play's exploration of the possible, and present role-playing games as a particularly powerful development of that technology. Having developed a model for conceptualizing TRPGs as cosmographic technology, I offer a brief retelling of their origins in that light, describing the particular developments that led to the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* as a synthesis of different streams of cosmographic innovations. In the conclusion of the essay I suggest that this conceptualization of TRPGs provides a fruitful model for understanding their potential as tools for radical social change.

1.1 Cosmography

I describe the exploration of possible worlds as cosmography, a term used in various enough ways that it deserves clarification here. I do not intend to invoke the cosmography of Astrophysics, concerned with matter distribution in the empirically observable universe. Neither am I using the term as a synonym for cosmology, in the sense of a philosophical model of reality like Plato's *Timaeus*. My meaning is closer to Peter Heylyn's 1652 *Cosmography*, in which he describes a fusion of history and geography that promises "universal Comprehension of Naturall and Civill story," in the sense that Heylyn the cosmographer sought to document not just *gaia* but *cosmos* (quoted in Gagné 2021, 39). My aims are both humbler and wider than Heylyn's. Humbler, in that I do not expect any cosmographer to approach "universal Comprehension" of the *cosmos;* this is necessarily so, in that my wider conception of *cosmos* includes not only the actual world but all possible worlds. I might specify *multiversal* cosmography, but wherever and however possible worlds can be said to exist, they must exist in that totality which we can only call the *universe.* In most respects my meaning is closest to that developed by Renaud Gagné (2021), who defines cosmography as "the composition of possible worlds that coexist on a stage of conflicts and alternatives" (2021, 27). Gagné is concerned with the poetics of worlding and conducts a "slow reading" of how Greek cosmographers from Pindar forward composed possible worlds that intersect through the nexus of the land of Hyperborea.

Within role-playing game studies, Curtis Carbonell (2019) has developed a similar approach that describes "realized worlds" as a central feature of "the modern fantastic," a reworking of Michael Saler's (2012) argument that the 20th century's "ironic imagination" gave rise to a new kind of "virtual world." Carbonell centers space as a key concept for understanding TRPGs and describes how the modern fantastic's "geographies of imagination" (Anderson 1991; Said 1997) "combine the imaginary with the real (Carbonell 2019, 24). "Realized" also emphasizes that ironic engagement with worlds involves a *process* of realization, allowing for a powerful synthesis with Deleuze's concept of the virtual as that which "emerges out of 'actual' material life as the 'real'" (2016, 26). The resulting picture is of TRPGs as key tools in the modern fantastic's "inflection of modernity, in which lived spaces oscillate between the real and the imaginary" (Carbonell 2019, 9).

While my cosmographic model does not contradict Carbonell's, it approaches role-playing games from a different disciplinary angle, which produces a different inflection and set of affordances. Like Gagné, Carbonell approaches his subject from the angle of literature, conceptualizing TRPGs as, first and foremost, "literary gametexts" (2019, 3). This emphasis on poetics and composition is where my angle of entry into the subject differs from Gagné and Carbonell. Without denying the validity of this approach, I come to TRPGs from the perspective of anthropology and folklore, considering them first as a kind of verbal performance. While written text clearly forms a key piece of a form sometimes called "pencil and paper" games, I will argue the role-playing game emerges as a set of practices which are only later codified in the formulation of a gametext. This difference leads my conception of cosmography to emphasize the discovery and exploration, rather than the composition, of worlds. A cosmographer is not so much a worldbuilder as a world-hopper.

Although she doesn't use the term cosmography, Chloe Germaine's eco-weird description of "tabletop gameplay as a mode of co-worlding" resonates strongly with my conception of the cosmographic, especially when she speaks of TRPGs' "potential to bring forth as-yet unrealized possibilities from the virtual into the actual" (2025, 182). In drawing on Deleuze's concept of the virtual, Germaine differs from Gagné in one important matter: the ontological question of if and how these worlds exist. Whereas Gagné denies the existence

of Hyperborea outside of the discourses that construct it, like Carbonell Germaine draws on Deleuze's concept of virtuality. Even more than Carbonell, Germaine emphatically asserts with Deleuze that the "virtual is 'fully real,' a realm of reality in which all objects partially exist, and from which actual objects, relations, and situations arise" (Germaine 2025, 185). The difference is more than a philosophical quibble and had real implications for our conception of RPGs.

Emphasizing, as Gagné does, the non-existence of imagined worlds pairs with his emphasis on rhetoric, the individual artist, and cosmography as the *composing* of worlds. Allowing for the existence of imagined worlds opens up new and fruitful ways of thinking and acting with RPGs. As Germaine says, "Games do not simply straddle the real and the imagined, paltry half-and-half things; they provide a passage between the virtual and the actual (2025, 185). Her use of the term "passage" here points towards one important shift: the virtual reality of other worlds raises the question of where these worlds exist, guiding us towards a fruitful spatial model for cosmography. Where Gagné's cosmography is primarily a matter of composing worlds, the cosmographer of virtual worlds explores and discovers worlds rather than composing or creating them. More than a shift in metaphor or image, this spatialized, virtual cosmography has real implications for the ethical and political capacities of TRPGs. Germaine draws attention to the ethical dimension of this difference, noting that connecting the virtual and the actual "allows for thinking through the futural dimension of games. The virtual in games comprises possible forms that do not exist but that could give rise to new, transformed conditions of reality" (2025, 186). I have explored role-playing games' cosmographic potential to catalyze real-world changes elsewhere (Mizer 2025), but like Germaine I argue that they can serve as assistive technology for exploring and realizing better worlds.

1.2 The Atomic Model of Possibility

In seeking to understand how games connect the virtual and actual, I have adapted a model developed by Mark JP Wolf in *Building Imaginary Worlds* (2012). While Wolf uses the model to explain his concept of secondary worlds as a distinct category of robustly described imagined worlds, I find the relationship between the possible and the imagined more fruitful in the context of cosmography. I describe this as an atomic model of the cosmos.

Here I should note that while I find Germaine's invocation of Deleuzean virtuality both compelling and useful, this atomic model works even if it is methodological and conceptual rather than ontological. That is, my primary intent here is to develop a useful way of thinking about other worlds, not to fully defend claims about the existence, non-existence, or virtual existence of other worlds.

That said, the model begins with "Prime Reality," the world where if I stub my toe I feel the pain as a mandatory and direct experience. This world forms the nucleus, as central and defined and ultimately unknowable in the atom as in our experience. The set of all possible worlds surrounds our world like an electron cloud surrounding the nucleus of the real. In this spatialization of possibility, "near" worlds are more similar to our own and "far" worlds are dissimilar. One world over, my shirt is green instead of blue. Further out, the walls of my office are lined with semi-intelligent vines that serve me coffee when I need a break from writing. Between the borders of Prime Reality and the sum total of all possible worlds, the sphere of imagined worlds continues to expand just as it has ever since humans (or, more likely, pre-human hominids) first developed the capacity to imagine worlds different from our own. Here we find Gilgamesh, Izanagi and Izanami, Tolkien's Arda, Gygax's Oerth, and every dream a human has ever had.

1.3 Imaginative Horizons

Presumably, the farthest reaches of possibility space extend beyond human comprehension or ability to imagine. Much closer to the actual, however, lie important regions of the possible that we cannot *currently* imagine. Just as each of us has an outer limit to how far away we can see, just as there is an upper limit to how fast a human can currently move, there exists an *imaginative horizon*, beyond which it is difficult or impossible to effectively imagine. While it might have been theoretically possible for a Haudenosaunee living in the 13th century to imagine the world of N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* series, practically speaking that world existed beyond the imaginative horizon of anyone alive until quite recently.

This cosmographic limitation applies beyond our ability to imagine "fictional worlds." When we say that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, we are referring to our imaginative horizon. As Ursula K. Le Guin, a masterful cosmographer in her own right, said in her 2014 acceptance speech for the Distinguished Contribution to American Letters Award, "We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings." In response to this "capitalist realism," (Fisher 2022) Le Guin calls for those "who can see alternatives to how we live now … realists of a larger reality" (2014). Our challenges in imagining alternative worlds, the shape of our imaginative horizon, are not just natural states, but are in part the result of ideological power structures. The Marxist aesthetics approach of Jennifer Ponce de Léon and Gabriel Rockhill, which they call a "compositional model of ideology," describes capitalism as "a multidimensional world-making mechanism" that "strives to impose its definition of reality as the only one possible, while seeking to destroy, discredit, or render inapprehensible all other worlds and possibilities of world-making" (2020, 2-3). Effective imagination, imagination that can help humans find better ways of being, depends on understanding, utilizing, and advancing cosmographic technologies that can overcome the ideologically sedimented barriers that limit our imaginative horizons. Role-playing games are among such technologies.

2. COSMOGRAPHIC TECHNOLOGY

My use of "technology" here does not refer to video games, or even to particularly material human innovations. The common description of game rules as "mechanics" imply a general understanding of the interlocking systems of play as a kind of technology. Carbonell argues that "an engineering ethos invigorates the mechanics of realized worlds," and describes the "modern fantastic" as combining the technocratic and literary modes (2019, 6). Germaine builds on this by describing role-playing games as operating in three modalities, one of which is as "ludic technologies … that generate potential." (Germaine 2021, 129). Similarly, Ryan, Dixon, and MacCallum-Stewart describe games of emergent narrative as "*narrative machines*—mechanical systems that create narrative experiences" (2020, 179). This more-than-material understanding of technology follows similar usage in some meditative traditions, such as Antonio de Nicolás's (1986) analysis of Ignatian spiritual practice as a technological system. De Nicolás defines a primary technology as "the habituation in the ordering and repetition of certain mental acts and languages to extend the human sensorium as far as the technology is able to reach' (1986, xxi). This approach is consonant with Heidegger's definition of technology as a "mode of revealing" in which he points out the root term *Technē* refers not only to material crafts but to "the arts of the mind" (1977, 13). This understanding of technology synthesizes the aesthetic and the material. Ponce de León and Rockhill describe aesthetics as "the collective composition of a shared sensorium" while affirming that this composition is achieved through material sociohistorical practices (2020, 2).

Although we might call these practices techniques, "cosmographic technology" has the benefit of drawing connections to media theorist Marshall McLuhan's (2003) concept of technologies as enhancement of human capacities. The telescope serves as an extension of our ability to detect energy in the spectrum of visible light, a capacity we call "sight." The hammer serves as an extension of our ability to move objects in space, a capacity we call "strength." Similarly, cosmographic technologies enhance our capacity to explore the possible. In the following section I will argue that this capacity is best described as "play."

2.1 Games as Cosmographic Technology

Classical definitions of play are, as Aaron Trammell (2023) points out, fraught along many lines. Against saccharine, hegemonic portrayals of play as purely liberatory and uplifting, Trammell calls for a reparative understanding of play that "is as painful as it is pleasurable, as individual as it is universal, and as mandatory as it is voluntary" (2023, 8). Jaakko Stenros argues that the distinction between the *activity* of play and the *attitude* of playfulness helps to account for the existence of mandatory and painful play, and describes the "core of play that most conceptualizations agree on" as "playful play" (2015, 93). Surrounding this core are many types of play that might be excluded in some definitions, but that Stenros includes, such as describing bullying (or, to Trammell's point, torture) as one-sided social play. This definition of play includes "all activity done for its own sake" intentionally affording a "wide conceptualization of play" that "lets us explore and discover, see connections and juxtapositions, and improvise and play with the theory of play" (2015, 78-79). In this spirit, I submit a working definition of play that considers play not only a "fundamental condition in human and animal life," but as a fundamental feature of the cosmos: play is autotelic exploration of possibility.

This definition synthesizes Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) emphasis on the autotelic nature of play (i.e., play as that which is done for its own end), the idea that exploration and play might be coterminous (Weisler and McCall 1976) and Sutton-Smith's concept of adaptive variability (1997). Whereas Sutton-Smith's biological definition can identify the evolutionary benefits *of* play, my definition would include evolution *as* play in that the process explores the full range of biological possibility. In other words, I do not conceptualize play as an activity so much as a force or phenomenon, a pneumatic tendency of reality to expand outwards into possibility space. This tendency is not dissimilar from what Teilhard de Chardin describes as "the law of complexification" (2008, 48)

When explaining this concept to my students, I draw two lines on the board. The first line is straight, the second line curves and bends across the chalkboard. When I ask my students which line is more playful, they inevitably choose the curvy line (unless, of course, they are offering a playful response). This is anecdotal evidence of course, but it connects to other definitions of play developed outside the central play studies canon. Germaine, for example, claims that "all play is movement forward and backward," (2025, 191) and draws on Hans Georg Gadamer's portrayal of play "as an impersonal agency," even denying the necessity of a playing subject (Gadamer 1994, 106). A notion of play as movement is compatible with my concept of exploration of possibility. Conceived this way, play is a force or energy expanding outward into possibility space, some territories of which are full of oppression and others liberation. Play is essential to the human way of being in the world, but play is bigger than humanity. Huizinga begins *Homo Ludens* (1950) by reminding us that animals did not wait for humans to teach them play. Anthropologist David Graeber (2014), using a definition similar to my own, of play as autotelic exercise of "an entity's most complex powers or capacities,"

even speculates about the play of electrons. Like sight, like strength, play is a capacity that humans use in particular ways but that is not unique to humanity.

If we are looking for the distinctively human use of play, we find games. Games harness, structure, and direct play's exploration of possibility, like a water wheel redirecting the energy of a river. Games are technologies of play that allow us to perceive further into the possible than other living things seem to. In other words, games are cosmographic technologies that we use to navigate through possibility space.

Our use of cosmographic technologies is distinctive to our way of being in the world, leading to Marx's famous observation that the difference between the worst human architect and the best bee is that the human "raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality" (1887). The architect looks out from prime reality and sees a range of possible worlds that include variants of the structure they might build. To refine and focus their vision, they might use any number of cosmographic technologies. Language itself is a cosmographic technology, a structured play of symbols, that the architect can use to connect others to imagined worlds that include the new building. Language is the foundational technology for nearly all expansion of our imaginative range. In Tolkien's words, "When we can take green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood, we have already an enchanter's power—upon one plane; and the desire to wield that power in the world external to our minds awakes." (2008, 41). Fictional narrative is a development of the language technology, one that allows us to playfully assemble counterfactuals and create linkages between them. We could describe any number of human cultural patterns in this way, but these examples suffice to contextualize my claim that role-playing games are particularly powerful and significant developments of cosmographic technology.

2.2 Role-Playing Games as Cosmographic Technology

It may seem odd to argue that the most distinctive feature of "role-playing" games has little to do with "role-playing," and my reference to the "role" of the cosmographer in the title to this essay is admittedly a dodge. However, in many ways it is an historical accident that emergent tradition of "Midwestern folk art of the 1970s" (Lawrie and Phipps 2019, 12) came to be called "role-playing games." It is possible that this has led us to overemphasize characters and roles in our understanding of these games. A comparable accident occurred in the history of video games when games that emphasized exploration and puzzle were called "adventure" games, largely because the first major example of the genre was called *Colossal Cave Adventure* (Reed et al. 2020). The subject matter of an adventure game does not need to be particularly adventurous, nor does a narrative of adventure make a first-person shooter an adventure game. Similarly, "role-playing" is not necessarily the most distinctive feature of "role-playing games" simply because it is in the title.

The term "role-playing" entered English in 1925 when Jakob Moreno brought his *Rollenspiel* group psychotherapy techniques to the United States (Peterson 2012, 373). Its first application to hobby gaming, in 1973, referred to specific *Diplomacy*-influenced games simulating "hypothetical crisis problems" (Peterson 2012, 457). Dave Arneson and the Twin Cities gamers do not seem to have described their Blackmoor games as "role-playing", and when Arneson and Gygax collaborated in systematizing Blackmoor into the little brown books of 1974 *Dungeons & Dragons*, they used the famously awkward subtitle "Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures." The term "role-playing game" only came to be used in something like its current meaning when developers of other games, such as *Tunnels & Trolls,* needed a term to signal similarity to, but legal distinction from, *Dungeons & Dragons (*Peterson 2012, 556).

Taking on the role of a fictional character is certainly an important aspect of RPGs, but it is hardly a unique feature. Humans have taken on the role of fictional characters for at least as long as theater has existed. Even within the sphere of games, players did not wait for the development of RPGs to take on roles in wargames, improvisational theater games, and any number of other games. Neither is taking on a character role a deciding criterion for inclusion in the fuzzy set (if not the strict definition) of RPGs. In *The Quiet Year* (Alder 2019), for example, players collaboratively imagine a small community of survivors but do not take on the role of any individual characters within the community. True, we might more accurately call *The Quiet Year* a worldbuilding game than a role-playing game, but in everyday language most people are unlikely to pause at the misnomer.

More important than the complicated Venn diagrams of role-taking and various games, it is fairly clear that early role-playing games offered little new assistance or techniques for developing more immersive role-taking or stronger connections between the player and the fictional character. This paucity of role-playing technology in early RPGs is precisely what drove players in the 1990s towards more character-immersive games like *Vampire: The Masquerade* (Bowman 2010). To understand the key innovation of "role-playing games" for the history of games, we must look away from roles and towards cosmography.

3. THE MIDWESTERN SYNTHESIS

The novel cosmographic development represented by the first RPGs came from a synthesis of two imaginative technologies: the ironic imagination of early speculative fiction and the oracular simulations of wargaming. The "ironic imagination" is Michael Saler's term for a fundamental shift in approaches to imagination and worldbuilding which emerged in the speculative fiction of the early 20th century (Saler 2012). The other half of the synthesis comes from wargames' use of the oracular technology of probabilities and dice to propel players into cosmographic territory that they could not have imagined unaided. Through the synthesis of these elements RPGs enhance human imaginative capacities, offering players the ability to take on the role of cosmographers utilizing powerful technologies to access vast and unexplored swathes of possible worlds. Because these two threads of ironic imagination and oracular simulation came together through the experimentation of Midwestern wargamers who were fans of pulp literature, and because it is more fun to have catchy titles for ideas than not, I call this development The Midwestern Synthesis.

3.1 Oracular Simulation

The importance of wargaming for the development of role-playing games is well-established, and Peterson (2012) offers a particularly detailed tracing of rules and mechanics from the *Taktisches Kriegs-Spiel* cabinet that George Leopold von Reisswitz presented to the king of Prussia in 1812. It is easy to pass over the leap in cosmographic technology, however, because it has so fundamentally shaped ways of interacting with other worlds as to become almost invisible. Simply describing this innovation as simulation, as when Peterson describes "the game of the Reisswitz family" the first game "worthy to be deemed a simulation" (2016,10) is to shorthand the innovation so much as to obscure its components. Specifically, *Kriegsspiel* handled space, time, and probability such that it offered access to more fully realized worlds than perhaps any preceding cosmographic technology.

These changes are easier to see if we contrast *Kriegsspiel* with chess and the similar chaturanga-derived games that immediately preceded Reisswitz's innovation. In chess, of course, it would be a category error to ask the scale of representation. A chess board is sixty-

four square units of abstraction. Once Reisswitz departs from this and indicates that the scale is 1:2373 and specifies how far an infantry unit can move in a turn, then suddenly not only space but time leap into existence within the world accessed through the game.

Similarly, in chess there is never any question of what will happen when a black pawn moves into the space occupied by a white knight. In *Kriegsspiel*, an interaction between military units can lead to a number of possible worlds, depending on the roll of the dice. By introducing the probabilistically oracular dice and combat results table, Reisswitz adapts a powerful piece of technology to the imaginative enterprise of simulation, expanding the cosmographic technology of any given *Kriegsspiel* far beyond chess's already quite large possibility space. Even further, the fact that a *Kriegsspiel* scenario can begin in any number of possible world states, compared to the singular origin point of a chess game, means that the wargame provides access to a near-limitless cosmographic territory. Of course, in every one of those worlds, generals lead men to kill each other on the battlefield for the sake of empire. Imagining worlds outside the cosmographic regions of warfare would take very different technology.

3.2 Ironic Imagination

In a middle way between Germaine and Gagné, Michael Saler describes a sort of methodological relativism towards the status of other worlds that emerged over the course of the 20th century. This technology, which Saler calls the ironic imagination, involves "the willing activation of pretense" to act "as-if" imagined worlds are "real" without fully committing to such a stance (2012, 28). This, Saler says, offered "delight without delusion" (2012, 57) to readers of the genre fiction that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century. This approach allowed them to access worlds even beyond those described by the stories they read. The Baker Street Irregulars, for example, playfully imagined themselves in a world where Sherlock Holmes was a real detective and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was only Watson's literary agent (Saler 2012, 104).

The ironic imagination allows a cosmographer to leverage what Wolf calls "world gestalten" (2012, 52), using gaps in a world's description to fill in details and imagine even further into possibility space. Tolkien's maps of Middle-earth, for example, include places not described in *The Lord of the Rings*, inviting readers to speculate about them and thereby explore any number of worlds adjacent to Tolkien's "canonical" world. Treating the world as if it is real aids in this effort; if we think that Arda only exists in Tolkien's mind, we might speculate about what he will publish about it, but are less likely to speculate about details that Tolkien does not provide. Saler points to the importance of pulp authors like Robert E. Howard, H.P. Lovecraft, and Clark Ashton Smith in the development of this imaginative tradition. These very same authors were influential on Gary Gygax, Dave Arneson, and the broader hobby gaming community out of which *Dungeons & Dragons* and role-playing games as we know them emerged.

3.3 From Strategos to Blackmoor

The oracular cosmographic tradition of Reisswitzian Kriegsspiel came to the Twin Cities wargaming scene through David Wesely's adaptation of Totten's *Strategos* into *Strategos N* (Peterson 2016). This quickly led to the development of more free-form games that explored cosmographic territory far outside of the referees' intent when players like Dave Arneson brought the ironic imagination to those campaigns. They began taking seriously the existence of villages placed on the battle map as more than obstacles to navigate units around, straining

the rules of the game by doing things like sending messengers to the villagers or using deconstructed structures to build bridges across rivers (Morgan and Graves 2019).

This cosmography of the ironic imagination led to Wesely's development of the *Braunstein* games, in which players took on the roles of those villagers directly rather than interacting with them through the wargame lens. The resulting expanse of cosmographic territory opened up through this technology led the first game far out of Wesely's control, leading him to what could be described as a kind of cosmographic agoraphobia. In the second *Braunstein* he tightened control of the cosmographic exploration so greatly that the players complained that the magic of the first experience had vanished (Morgan and Graves 2019). Notably, the change was not in how immersively the players inhabited the roles of the characters but in how freely they were able to exercise their role as cosmographers of the possibility space that Wesely had sketched out for them.

Braunstein's cosmographic range was still limited by a few factors: first, both the *Strategos N* and the *Braunstein* games were in "realistic" rather than "fantastic" settings, not fully integrating the ironic imagination's capacity for removing the tether to the actual. Second, although Wesely embraced the asymmetric goals and conflicts of n-player games, the possibility space was largely shaped by conflict between players. The possibility space being explored was the possibility space of the conflict, not primarily the possibility space of the imagined world. Finally, it was limited by Wesely's limited utilization of oracular methods, limiting the imaginative range to what he and the players considered most probable rather than launching them outward into unknown, improbable territory and asking them to make sense of it.

The synthesis of the ironic imagination and oracular cosmography came to the point of exothermic fusion in Dave Arneson's *Blackmoor* games. Arneson approached the oracular wargaming technology of *Chainmail* with a fully ironic imagination, leading his players into distant and unknown cosmographic territory where anything could be around the next corner and the players had no idea what world they were in. The exploration of conflict space was augmented with exploration of the ironically imagined world, and the more richly oracular approach drawn from *Chainmail* allowed for exploring cosmographic territory that neither the player nor the referee could have previously imagined.

In short, this fusion of imaginative technologies allowed for wider-ranging, more collaborative, more intersubjective cosmographic exploration than had ever been accessible. Here was a set of imaginative tools that could be easily operated by almost anyone, with no particular literary or artistic training necessary, a framework offering the promise of near-limitless exploration of possible worlds.

4. CONCLUSION

Like any technology, like play itself, cosmographic exploration of worlds is not inherently liberatory. If TRPGs have the potential to help us discover and realize worlds that reveal new possibilities and ways of becoming, they can also be used to foreclose those same possibilities. Conceptualizing TRPGs as cosmographic technology does not solve the problem of how to use them to bring a better world into being. Indeed, that is only partly necessary; as Raúl Zibechi points out, this new world already exists, "built by indigenous people, peasants, and urban poor on conquered lands, woven into the base of new social relations between human beings." The task at hand, he argues, is to help defend this "series of multiple realities, nascent and fragile" (2012, 20). To the extent that effective praxis succeeds through structuring the exploration of possibility, we might even consider cultural revolution as occurring through a series of cosmographic games showing "that another possible world is actual" (Ponce de

León and Rockhill 2020, 16). Again, calling games cosmographic technology or calling radical worldbuilding a kind of game does not do this work for us, but it does suggest important areas to shore up and provides a framework for understanding how TRPGs relate to that work.

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