Review: *Playing at the World*

Popular abstract: Jon Peterson's *Playing at the World* is an ambitious history of the early developments of *Dungeons & Dragons*, arguably the first and most popular role-playing game.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Jon Peterson's Playing at the World [1] is the most detailed history of the birth period and origins of *Dungeons & Dragons* ever written. It seeks to map out the myriad influences of both game design and fantasy fiction that led to its creation through a humongous amount of background research, intertextual references, and a transmedial viewpoint. Its size is ambitious, and Peterson has been able to draw from a huge number of primary sources, such as fanzines with minuscule circulation numbers. Just having been able to gather most of these sources can be considered a cultural achievement on its own: strictly by the number of primary sources, Peterson's work can be considered a monumental undertaking and if not for some problems, the work can be considered an instant classic and a must-have for anyone doing research on – or just interested in – the birth stages of modern roleplaying.

At 698 pages (counting an inclusive index and a respectable reference list), *Playing at the World* tries to encompass every aspect of the birth stages of *D&D*. However, this ambition is marred by the book's inability to distinguish between facts of major and minor import; these are often blended together with extensive lists of sources and explanations, mangling seemingly minor details into major roles and disguising facts of major importance between those of minor substance. Likewise, as we will discuss below, the text suffers from a selective fact bias, and portions of it need to be taken with a pinch of salt. The book's credibility suffers at points in which certain sources seem to have been privileged over others to construct a specific narrative.

2. THE PRE-HISTORICS OF ROLE-PLAYING

The book's ambition is evident from the first chapter, which provides us with an incredibly vivid presentation on early wargaming and the predecessors of modern *D&D* in the form of fantasy wargaming and *Chainmail*. Unfortunately, the chapter has its weak points whenever Peterson discusses the birth of the medieval setting. The problems are further illuminated in the second chapter on the medieval fantasy genre: the choices

display omissions and subjectivity that can, due to the amount of references, pass as facts to an unsuspecting reader (detailed below).

Fortunately, the book kicks into full gear in the third chapter on the creation of the ruleset. To track the birth sources of *D&D*, it reaches into the far past for the origins, starting with the first known board games, progressing into the development of *Das Kriegsspiel*, and then tracking the development of wargames in painstaking detail from the late 18th century to the emergence of *Chainmail* and finally *D&D*. Attention is drawn to specific innovations that emerged during this period, when military training simulations spawned the first commercial wargames, with a particularly prolonged aside dedicated to probability as a mathematical discipline. Maps receive their own section, as do specific elements of the combat system, the level progression system, and even dungeon logistics.

In the fourth chapter, the book jumps again into the past to discuss how the playing of the role was born, this time starting with Jakob Moreno's psychodrama, and then covering a variety of activities with elements of role-play during the mid-part of the 20th century. Especially of interest is a discussion on how the early science fiction fandom produced examples of collaborative storytelling and role-play, spawning the Society for Creative Anachronism in 1963. We are also treated to the most complete descriptions of Dave Wesely's seminal series of Braunstein game sessions in print.

In the final chapter, having tracked the different strains of inspiration that led to its birth, the book covers the years 1974-1977 and more or less everything that happened around the game during the time. Through fanzines, magazines and some private letters, Peterson documents the game's reception and spread, the first Gen Cons after release, and further development of the game, such as the emergence of the Thief class. This is also the time when the role-playing game industry began to take form, and the first competitors to Tactical Studies Rules were born. Though the early years of *D&D* are well-trodden ground and largely a matter of historical record, Peterson has managed to unearth a trove of

previously unknown information. Also discussed is Dave Arneson's departure from *D&D*, though Peterson wisely sticks to nonpartisan reporting and eschews the sensationalism easily invited by the topic.

3. AMBITIOUS BUT PROBLEMATIC

Peterson's approach distinguishes his work from countless other studies through simple detail-orientedness: the sheer number of original sources cited in the book is staggering. Ranging from detailed descriptions of the creative processes behind the popular wargames of the 1950's such as Tactics to analyzing game adverts in the wargaming magazine General in the 1960's, the take on the early history is a jubilee for the detail-minded enthusiasts of early gaming. Including rare gems such as D&D inventor Gary Gygax's early wargaming adverts and original hand-drawn Gen Con 1 floor plans, the amount of facts is breathtaking. Unfortunately, this is also where the problem of oversaturation begins. Peterson tends to sidetrack without hesitation, presenting secondary facts and details with gusto, and backtracking once again, giving further details – that are further removed from the topic – without ever stopping to evaluate the importance of the presented information, and leaving the readers with a huge amount of unrelated trivia.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the information provided is not all reliable. For example, the claim "For the purposes of this study, the first notable commercial romance came from Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894)." The statement is quite ironic: indeed, "for the purposes of this study" it can be said that Stevenson wrote the "first notable commercial romance," (pp. 85) but in the real world, while Stevenson's Treasure Island (1883) and The *Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde* (1886) are important and notable, for example Alexandre Dumas' *Les Trois Mousquetaires* (1844) and *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* (1845-1946) had been notable successes in the field nearly half a century earlier (both were translated into English in 1846). Omissions such as these can be considered simple mistakes, but there remains a lingering suspicion, as Stevenson is included otherwise as the perfect candidate for displaying the closeness of gaming and literary fiction: "Robert Louis Stevenson, author of The Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886), was a wargaming pioneer in his own right" (pp. 16) and "As Stevenson wrote the final sections of that famous novel [...] inhis life-long struggle against tuberculosis, he played war games in the attic of his chalet" (pp. 86). Quite admirably, the roles of Robert E. Howard's pulp fiction as well as Jack Vance's Dying Earth

setting are emphasized. However, a glaring example of the book's cavalier attitude about sources is the recommendation of L. Sprague de Camp's heavily criticized and extremely problematic *Dark Valley Destiny* (1983) as a biography of Robert E. Howard and dismissal of all others as guilty of "hagiographic excess" (pp. 94). Even though not in the primary focus of the book, the recommendation shows a problematic subjectivity in source material selection.

In other similar cases, the reader is left puzzled and bemused: Does the reader have to check every fact without being able to trust any of the provided background? The text feels as if every single idea and tidbit has been included without verification, especially if they fit the idea of finding bridges between gaming and other arts. Such errors, though minor, have the effect of casting doubt on the material that is not trivially verifiable. Though many of the zines used to compile the book are from various university archives, still more are from private collections.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Playing at the World is, without any doubt, the most ambitious project produced on the origins of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Despite the problems discussed earlier, it can be considered a cultural achievement both in its scope and in its attention to detail. For a games scholar or a transmedial academic, the book can be a treasure trove of information – as long as the reader remembers to check all claims and to note whenever there seems to be a gap in information framed by walls of text on other details.

Playing at the World is at its strongest when dissecting specific evolutions within gaming that led to *D&D*. In these sections, even the digressions – such as listing all popular fiction that had had magical sleep spells or lightning bolts – are enjoyable, and the actual meat of the text, including the entire third and fourth chapters on rules mechanics and roles and immersion are a delight to read, certain to provide readers with an abundance of interesting facts and tidbits. It is in these sections that Peterson seems to be at his freest and most comfortable, and the text feels natural and free-flowing – not overcoming the problems of the book but at justifying its position as the most exhaustive treatment of the history of *D&D*.

REFERENCES

Peterson, J. 2012. *Playing at the World*. Unreason Press, San Diego.