

most important question when studying STAs in virtual environments is whether a particular player is capable of transitioning from a virtual space to the real world.

Although some of the essays in *Vice City Virtue* are less lively and even a little clunky compared to others, essays like Young and Whitty's are well worth exploring. Recent concerns about the potential dangers of video games following the December 2012 mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut demonstrate how relevant and valuable studies such as *Vice City Virtue* are. Debates about media content are often framed in moral terms, and studies such as these help complicate putative common-sense notions that media violence causes real-world violence.

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Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People, and Fantastic Adventures: From Chess to Role-Playing Games

Jon Peterson

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Introduction, contents, images. 698 pp.
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Jon Peterson's *Playing at the World* traces the history of the practices, ideas, and cultural forces that led to Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson's invention of the role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D). As the subtitle implies, the book has a broad scope, but it also includes astonishing lev-

els of details about the evolution of the role-playing game.

Peterson begins the book with a look at the first edition of D&D. He notes that the game's lengthy subtitle, "Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures," hints at the origins of the game. *Playing at the World* is first and foremost a history, and as a work of history that explores these origins, it impresses the reader with its breadth and depth.

The book has five chapters and an epilogue. Chapter 1 briefly surveys the history of American war gaming, covering the twenty years from Avalon Hill's pioneering war game *Tactics* (1954) to the release of *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974). This chapter is the most accessible in the book; it has a clear narrative that covers the key historical events in the development of D&D. The next three chapters each explore in great detail a theme important to understanding the history of role-playing games. Chapter 2 traces the history of the medieval fantasy genre (such as the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and Robert Howard) and its rise to popularity in the middle of the twentieth century. Chapter 3 tells the history of war games, from the countless chess variants that led to Prussian *kriegspiel* in the early nineteenth century to the emergence of modern war games in the midtwentieth century. Chapter 4 examines the history of enacting fictional roles and characters. These three chapters provide copious details and testify to the author's years of dedicated research. Chapter 5 resumes the more narrative approach of chapter 1 and describes audiences' reactions to *Dungeons & Dragons*. The epilogue discusses

D&D's influence on early video gaming and concludes the book.

I do not know how long Peterson spent writing this book, but the amount of research is staggering. In this respect, the book is an invaluable resource for scholars interested in the history and origins of games. However, the middle chapters' depth and detail will likely deter casual readers. On page 303, Peterson writes: "Readers in whom this justification does not spark an eagerness to explore the minutiae, however, should not hesitate to skim over the technical detail in the rest of this chapter." Reading this I laughed to myself, thinking this warning would have been better placed some two hundred pages earlier. The outer chapters are the most narratively driven, and I believe Peterson could use these three sections to create an abridged version better-suited to the casual reader. But this complaint is minor and should be taken as such.

A key theme of simulation runs through the book. Peterson shows how game designers began the pursuit of "realism" in the early nineteenth century, which led to two design methods that still figure large in role-playing games. The first method focuses on the game system: the rules that create the simulation. Peterson emphasizes the critical role the development of cartography and statistics played in enabling these simulations. The development of cartography pushed game design away from abstract boards of squares towards more realistic looking maps: "With a consistent scale, a game ceases to be an abstraction like the game of chess, and begins to evolve toward something entirely novel: a simulation" (p. 220). Statistics became a tool for deciding

game events, which "brought the mind of the player into a much more persuasive simulation" (p. 237).

The second, more surprising method of simulation discussed by Peterson involves the use of an umpire or referee. This dates back to early Prussian *kriegspiel*, where players would give the referee general instructions for their troops and the referee would decide the outcome. Many war games copied this form, and in D&D the role of the dungeon master became a crucial one. Having a human referee infinitely increased the number of possible actions in a game, injected increased imagination and improvisation into the game, and therefore made possible more "realistic" simulation. Peterson's emphasis on the development of the referee is a valuable contribution to the study of the past and present of games.

A subtler theme of the book addresses the critical roles of iteration, borrowing, and downright copying in the creative act of developing these games. Questions about game design, copyright, and intellectual property run throughout the book, and although Peterson only touches on these topics when they directly apply to D&D, his work is timely in that it highlights the conflicts between creativity and intellectual property. Peterson's book shows how much D&D built on preexisting war-game and fantasy-genre conventions; the game's novelty lay in its combination of these preexisting game elements. Reading this book I had to wonder: could Dungeons & Dragons, an invaluable cultural contribution, have been created today? Given our increasingly litigious attitude towards copyright and intellectual property, I highly doubt it.

Lastly, I want to emphasize that *Playing at the World* is a work of history. Peterson explores a critical question for game studies—what it means to simulate something—but he is writing from outside that academic community. He makes liberal use of terms like “simulation,” “realism,” and “immersion,” all of which are problematic and contested ideas in game studies. Some readers may see this as a detriment, but to my mind, the lack of deep theoretical arguments in an already

dense book is a bit of a blessing. There is still a vast wealth of material here for game scholars and historians alike. For game scholars particularly, who frequently focus on the new at the expense of the old, this book is a must-read. Even at its most dense and arcane, the book is fascinating, and Peterson’s dry wit makes it all the more enjoyable.

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