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On Tabletop Roleplaying Games and Fictioning

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By [Simon O'Sullivan \(https://vector-bsfa.com/2022/12/21/on-tabletop-rolepaying-games-and-fictioning#bio\)](https://vector-bsfa.com/2022/12/21/on-tabletop-rolepaying-games-and-fictioning#bio)



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What is at stake with tabletop roleplaying games? That is, besides the entertainment they offer (or besides their status as games)? Although I no longer play them as immersively as I once did (the phase of truly being in those worlds was relatively short, perhaps four years from age twelve or so to sixteen), they have had a determining effect on my imaginary and, I think, on the various life choices I have made (in many ways the art and ‘theory’ worlds I have lived in and moved through seem—in retrospect—a logical progression from those other worlds, albeit these latter worlds are more ‘worldly’ if sometimes less vivid). That said, I have recently taken on the role of a Games Master for my own two sons and have now watched them enter into what always seemed to me another space-

time. Put simply they too have become caught up in exploring these other parallel worlds. Indeed, I remember clearly when, as it were, the penny dropped. When the two of them suddenly realised that this was not simply a game, but something else altogether.[1] Something much stranger, but also more magical. It was as if they had gone through a gate and, with that, had entered more fully into the characters (and the landscapes) they were playing. Since then, the eldest of them has been hooked and the refrain that I once spoke is now on their lips: *Dungeons and Dragons* (which is what we were playing) is not simply a game. It's a way of life. Quite an over-the-top statement, but for a time it really was as if this were the case for me (as it is for them now). There is much more I could say here about their adventures. About how easy it is for them and their friends to enter these worlds, switch perspectives and so forth (and then also deeply experience various emotions within the game). About the importance of preparation, of setting a context, in order to allow this other kind of inhabitation to effectively take place (although I am also often surprised at how few 'props' are needed for the shift in perspective to be made).[2] And then also about how these games relate to other games—that are also more than games—that they play 'outside'[3] (what is now called LARPing, although, for them, there are not necessarily any costumes or other props, besides that which is found lying around).[4] Some of those observations and reflections might appear in some other writing—some fiction perhaps?—that is, in a more appropriate form to what is happening in those worlds and with those children (and in my own late childhood) especially when on the cusp of adolescence (which, it seems to me, is when our imaginaries are predominantly formed).

In fact, my own experiences with roleplaying games was also split between live play—out on the moors in the North of England in my case—and then playing various tabletop roleplaying games themselves which, in many ways—when I first encountered them—somehow extended that live play and, again, made it more vivid (despite it coming after and being one step removed from the live play). I remember like it was yesterday the first actual tabletop roleplaying experience, which was *Dungeons and Dragons*. This was the most important game, though others followed.[5] The slight puzzlement about what we were doing (the game was initiated by an older boy) and then the moment it all fell into place—again, the penny dropped. I was hooked. Or we were. For this history I am briefly laying out is not just about me but about my twin brother too. We both entered that world—as we did many others—together.[6] There is also much more to say about this, but it is not just my own story and so I leave it to one side—except to draw something important from this determining factor: there were always two of us (at least) and so there was always already a community and a discourse happening around these experiences and this world creation.[7] The experience of roleplaying was precisely shared (I will, in fact, return to this).

Enough biography. I want, if I can, to move a little deeper in, to shift, perhaps, from the realm of memories and images into something more theoretical. Or, as I said at the beginning of this essay, to think about the importance of these games beyond the games themselves. So, first of all, I mentioned 'world creation' above and, clearly, with tabletop roleplaying games there is a kind of world making that goes on beyond fiction per se. In these games one is actually living 'in' the fiction to some extent (or, at least, shuttling between the fiction and the reality outside of this). Certainly, as a character in the game one is making decisions that determine outcomes. In fact, even here things are a little more complex as there are two positions to occupy. One is the Games Master who has initially built or, really, written the world—even if they are using a pre-prepared scenario, they need to add detail, narrate the encounters, bring the world to life (I should also say here that my experience was that these worlds were always more successful when written by the Games Master). And then there are the players who then enter into that world and, with that, continue the world building or give it another dimension.

In passing it is interesting—for me at least—that universally it was my twin brother who would function as Game Master whereas I would be the player (or one of them). I think this determines a certain take on the imagination. A focus on construction and a generosity in building a world for another (and then, presumably, the satisfaction of seeing that world being interacted with). And then

the other position, more oblivious to the scaffolding and the ‘behind the scenes’ work and so forth. More a sense—and perspective—of just being thrown in. In fact, both are—of course—needed, and, in fact, the two make the game, which is to say without the Game Master there is no world, or if there is, it is one that is chaotic, too spontaneous; and without the players the Game Master has simply penned a fiction.[8] These worlds need building *and* animating. They need to be invented and then believed in—interacted with ‘as if’ real—in order that everything can take off and, with that, become something that is greater than its parts.

So, there is already something interesting in play here—something to bring to the table (!) in relation to current debates around world making (within art and theory worlds). Or, put differently, there is here a situation in which worlds are created and then lived out, at least to a certain extent, by others. The worlds at stake are co-produced in this sense. This certainly resonates—but, I think, also adds something—to, for example, Donna Haraway’s interest in ‘string figures’ and communities of world building (Haraway 2016). Although Haraway does look to art practices and collaborative workshops too, it does seem to me that these are often a pale imitation of these other experiences of gaming (I’m aware that some of this is to do with my own history—and of what went ‘in’ at a certain age). It’s certainly the case that art, as I’ve already mentioned, can extend certain images and logics apparent in these roleplaying worlds[9]—but, I think, it can also detract from, or dampen down, what are often the most interesting—and intense—aspects (the sense of immersion—or, simply of play for example—perhaps also the lack of judgement that’s more typically involved in art practice).

I have written elsewhere—with David Burrows—about how art scenes are often a pale imitation of other music and club scenes (which is another of the worlds I inhabited after tabletop roleplaying games) (Burrows and O’Sullivan 2019: 164-66). And, for example, that the intense and exciting experiences art can offer are not as intense or exciting—for me—as those I have had in the spaces and places of club culture and, especially the ‘free party’ scene (although it is perhaps also the case that art practice can extend certain characteristics of these experiences—develop them in interesting ways; this seems to be especially the case with collectives and performance). A similar point might be made in relation to tabletop roleplaying games which are also more all-encompassing (although, again, age—pre-adolescence—has a role to play here). At any rate, the point here is that tabletop roleplaying games bring something different to theory/art debates around world building. Or, more simply, they bring a different kind of world making to the fore, one that is then occupied, or imaginatively lived out if I can put it like that (it’s also in this sense that they foreground the idea of the ‘fiction of the self’ insofar as they enable the taking on of other fictions).[10]

One thing that is especially apparent here is that this is the building of a world within a world. Tabletop roleplaying games involve the instantiation of a different world within this one. There is a kind of anamorphic logic at work in how the game can suddenly foreground another reality from within this one—and how a more ‘dominant’ reality can then background itself (the penny drops moment I have referred to a couple of times above).[11] In fact, perhaps this tells us something about what a world, actually is. Certainly, it is not as if roleplaying involves the building of an actual world (although LARPing can involve ‘real’ costumes and props). But then, on the other hand, what is an actual world? It might well be that a certain material reality is required, but there is also an imaginative component to a world. Certain images, and, of course, a belief in that world that goes with this (or, put slightly differently, any given world needs a subject that goes along with it and, as it were, fully inhabits it). There is also, crucially, an emotional aspect to this. For a world to be made it needs also to be felt.

We might usefully turn here to those accounts of reality that attend to its ‘constructed’ nature. For the writer William Burroughs, for example, reality was a kind of script that could be cut in to (see Burroughs 2005). Burroughs demonstrated that as well as the imaginary (and the emotions in and of the body) reality is also produced through language (or through the symbolic to turn to a psychoanalytic register). We can also track this logic of editing further forwards to Burroughs

experiments with audio cut-ups and then to artists like Genesis Breyer P-Orridge and Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth where the cut-up is applied to TV (so audio-visual material) and, indeed, becomes a mode of life (see P-Orridge 1992). We can also turn in the other direction and look further back where the cut-up method dovetails with magickal practice per se (as, for example the various practices of Austin Osman Spare [Spare 2007]). Again, it's not exactly that a material reality is altered—although there might be aspects of that reality that is changed—and more that a symbolic and imaginary (and emotional) change can take place. Or, to repeat a point I made above, a different fiction is taken on.

And then there are also those other accounts of world building we get with philosophers like Alain Badiou (see Badiou 2009 and my discussion in O'Sullivan 2012)—or any of the more recent writings on world making, especially those which follow a more abstract and conceptual—or diagrammatic—logic (there seems to be a particular attention to this within certain theory worlds at the moment, which is to say, at the moment when our present world seems increasingly bankrupt).[12] Certainly, here there is an emphasis on how a world might be made from within this world.

It is here, I think, that some of the logics and experiences of roleplaying games might be brought more specifically to bear. They might flesh out some of the architecture of these abstract world building enterprises. Indeed, any world that is built within this world also needs to be inhabited or lived somehow. It is not as if an abstract idea of a world can all of a sudden be materialised. It needs also to be imaginatively (and emotionally) engaged with. Indeed—again as Burrows and I have suggested elsewhere—the production of new and different social imaginaries seems a crucial part of any utopian/liberating project or world building exercise. It is certainly within the realms of art—broadly conceived—that we see explorations of and experiments with these other imaginaries (our own work focussed on Science Fiction and the more non-human imaginaries in play there [see Burrow and O'Sullivan 2018: 275-93]). But with role playing games there is an even closer occupation of a different imaginative space, and, again, an accompanying emotional aspect. This can happen, of course, with reading fiction, but with role playing games two other things are also in play. First, one is more fully 'in' the fiction. As I described it to my two boys, one becomes a character in the book. And second, this experience is shared. Again, one might say that a reading experience is also shared, between presumed author/narrator and reader. Nevertheless, there is something more co-constituting within role-play. Something more than simply the reader constructing the text. At stake is both a more vivid—and present—world within this one, but also an agency with that world (and even a sense of freedom that can come with this).

Alongside this there is also the way these games emphasise the importance of perspective (and the shuttling between different perspectives)[13] and, with that demonstrate the fact that there are always worlds within worlds.[14] This is even more the case with recent tabletop roleplaying games and, especially, those written by communities and/or as part of an art practice. I'm thinking here of David Blandy's *The World After* (2019) that allows for all sorts of non-human avatars and, more generally, foregrounds multispecies role-play (so allows a closer relation to non-human imaginaries). Role playing games can allow for more radical experiments in shifting perspectives in this sense (and thus for more radical world building).

Of course, there is also the more complex—and urgent—business of making actual worlds. Real struggles to change material reality. It is these, really, that need to be brought in to encounter with any abstract reasoning about world construction (and here, crucially, it is the question of agency that needs closest attention). But it seems to me that tabletop roleplaying games might also provide some insight here, not so much into the material production (or simply the abstract working out) but, once again, in foregrounding the importance of the imaginary in the inhabiting of another world and the importance of emotions in engaging with it (so, a kind of in-between—or diagonal—between the material and the abstract). Roleplaying games also demonstrate the ability we have, at least to some

extent, to take on other fictions more generally. We might say in this respect—and to bastardise Marx a little—that hitherto the philosophers have only talked about building worlds in various ways. The point, however, is to play them.[15]

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[1] I think this 'penny drops' moment is akin to what Pete Wolfendale and Timothy Franklin suggest is the 'depth' aspect of what they call the tabletop roleplaying game aesthetic. In their essay Wolfendale and Franklin make a convincing case that although this aesthetic might have similarities with others—painting, theatre, literature—it is the way in which it is uniquely collaborative and dynamic that singles it out, or, in their words: 'We experience this depth when we see the consequences of our choices spiral out of our control, producing interesting and unforeseen results, suggesting new and exciting ways in which the world can be filled in' (Wolfendale and Franklin 2012: 219). Their essay develops some of the same themes and insights as my own and, indeed, attends to the world building character of tabletop roleplaying games. If I have not referenced it throughout it is only because I came across it after I had written my own draft.

[2] Might it also be that these games worked especially well in the pre-internet age (insofar as there was less competition, for example, from social media)? Certainly, in the 1980s for example there was a vibrant 'underground' culture of game design and playing (alongside mail order self-publicised zines and such like). On the other hand, it also seems to be the case that the internet has opened up the possibilities, not only in multi-user online gaming, but also in the proliferation and availability of all kinds of self-published and fringe tabletop roleplaying games. As in other areas—I'm thinking especially of art writing and artist's books—ubiquitous digitalisation has also brought about renewed attention on small presses and self-publication (this relates to what has been called the 'long tail theory' of the internet and the increasing availability of 'niche' products).

[3] There are also the computer games they play—screens being a ubiquitous element to all aspects of their lives—and in which another kind of world building and role playing (to a certain extent anyway) is at stake. A recent contemporary example here that begins to dovetail with *Dungeons and Dragons* is *Elden Ring*. In relation to the intersections and interferences between screen-based games and contemporary art practice see Jamie Sutcliffe's curated show 'Trouble in Outer Heaven: Portable Ops Plus', at Southwark Park Galleries in 2021 and his accompanying essay 'Vocal Cord Parasite' (Sutcliffe 2021a). I will need to leave it to others to track through the thematics and implications of these kinds of games—in relation to play, fiction and reality—but it certainly seems to me that virtual reality, and even more so augmented reality, radically reorients the idea of fictioning (understood here as the instantiation of fictions within the real), and that we will increasingly see what might be called the 'gamification' of reality that arises from the implementation of these 'new' technologies.

[4] There is another definition of LARPing that connects my comments in this essay—about tabletop roleplaying games and fictioning—with QAnon and a wider politics of post-truth. Here a LARPer is a term from 4chan for an apparent ‘insider’ who is party to privileged information:

Q embodied this practice, or perhaps even perfected it. The acronym refers to ‘live action role playing,’ but on /pol/, it has a more specialized meaning: a LARPer is someone who pretends to be a well-placed source with confidential information about current events, which they then leak to the anons. (Bellincat 2021: n.p.)

As the article from where the above quote is taken suggests, Q—who ‘drops’ information—is then not an individual, but a plot device that keeps the fiction going.

[5] One in particular is worth mentioning here, *Traveller*, which was the Science Fiction equivalent of *Dungeons and Dragons* and, as such, involved more explicit world building (in terms of the flora and fauna, level of technological development, and so forth of a given planet).

[6] And, as such, what I write here is indebted to those shared experiences and our ongoing conversations.

[7] In relation to this—and, indeed, the footnote above—I should also say that the following comments are indebted to a wider ‘community of interest’. Although this is true for any academic (or para-academic) essay—the idea of a single author as origin of ideas is certainly a myth (as partly implied by the present essay)—I want to acknowledge the various conversations and discussions I have had around tabletop roleplaying games and world-building, especially as the games themselves foreground this kind of collaborative and distributed knowledge production (if I can put it like that). See also footnote 9 below.

[8] And the business of being a twin—of having your ‘double’ occupy the other position—also raises interesting questions and insights as regards the shuttling between different perspectives which is partly what these games seem to allow.

[9] There are cases where the intersections between roleplaying games and art practice is successful or, more particularly, cases when art practice involves a perspective on—and mobilisation of—some of the logics and themes of roleplaying games. See for example Lesley Guy’s work on roleplaying games and collective art practices and as part of the collective *Totaler* (Guy forthcoming). See also *Blue Mountain Arcturus*’ (Allan Hughes and Mark Rohtmaa-Jackson) games and miniatures and the essay by them ‘Citadel of Chaos’ (Hughes and Rohtmaa-Jackson 2022) which is a reflection on their work in an exhibition (which was itself a take on Joanne Tatham and Tom O’Sullivan’s collaborative art practice), also curated by them, ‘Polymorph Other’, Queen’s Hall Arts Centre, Hexham, 2019 (and which develops an especially interesting idea of the ‘wargaming table’ as a magical set-up and what they call an ‘inconsistent technology of representation’). A further roleplaying game on display at that group exhibition was Timothy Linward and Pete Wolfendale’s *Dice Cult* (2018), a very strange—mythopoetic—roleplaying game rule book which, in this context, brings a further resonance between role playing games and philosophical investigation (see also my comments above—in footnote 1—on Wolfendale’s philosophical reflections on roleplaying games (and their particular aesthetic), written with Timothy Franklin [Wolfendale and Franklin 2012]).

[10] For an interesting example of this role play and imaginative occupation of another reality see the ongoing ‘Mythogeography’ project of Phil Smith and his collaborators. At stake here is ‘walking as method’, but also an idea of treating the world as a game space (hence the set of ‘rules’ and protocols in, for example, *A Plymouth Pantheon* by Crab and Bee (Smith and Billingham 2019). See also the games of the art collective *Inventory* (playing football on the Strand in London) that—like Smith’s

project—themselves look back to the ‘ludic experiments’ of the Situationists (‘The situationist game is distinguished from the classic notion of games by its radical negation of the element of competition and of separation from everyday life’ [Debord 1957]).

[11] Might this also be understood as a kind of magical function of tabletop roleplaying games? In relation to this see the various writings and curatorial projects of Jamie Sutcliffe which, as well as anything else, also show the resonances between gaming and art and magic (Sutcliffe is part of Strange Attractor publishing and has himself edited a collection of texts on *Magic* [Sutcliffe 2021b]). Another interesting connection here is that Phil Hine, leading exponent of chaos magick in the UK, was also an avid *Dungeons and Dragons* player and, indeed, contributed an article to *White Dwarf*—the key *Dungeons and Dragons* magazine—in the 1980s on sigil magick.

[12] See for example Patricia Reed’s itemisation of what constitutes a world (‘Worlds are composed of contents, the identification of those contents, and by the configuration of content-relations within—semantically, operationally and axiologically’) and what it means to inhabit a world (‘worlds are made concrete through manners of doing and saying that affirm a coherence between its contents and the identities of its contents, as well as content-relations therein’) (Reed 2020: 1). Reed calls for us to learn ‘inadaptation’ towards the mono (but small) world we currently inhabit—and then, also, to ‘to think referential frameworks for an unconcretized otherworld (an affirmative labour, for which inductive modes of knowing are inadequate because there are no memories available from a world that has yet to be inhabited)’ (Reed 2020: 5). This is part of Reed’s larger project—carried out across recent writings—to affirm ‘the difference between the making of a common world vs. the making of worlds in common’ (Reed 2020: 5).

[13] And in this sense role-play might also have resonances with what Viveiros de Castro says about perspectivism (see Viveiros de Castro 2014).

[14] In fact, following some neuroscientific accounts it seems as if its more accurate to say that we are always inhabiting a model—or even that we are a model within a model (see Metzinger 2009). Tabletop roleplaying games thus also demonstrate a particular logic—about nested fictions—that is always already at work. We are always already involved in role play—or, put differently there is always something else playing us.

[15] Or, perhaps, make a device that allows this engagement? I explore the idea of a device in a set of complimentary essays to this one (O’Sullivan 2024).

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