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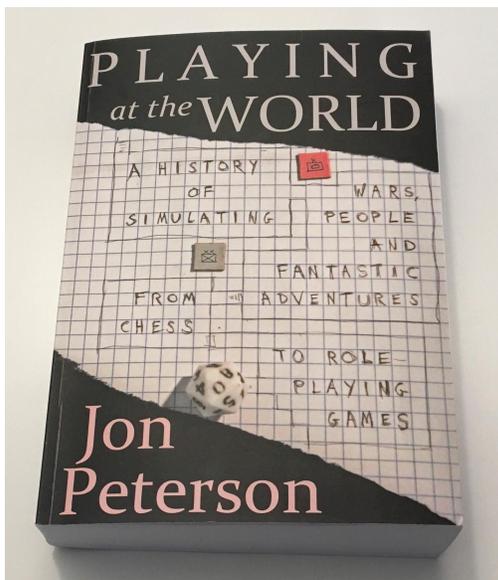
By Jon Peterson

Unreason Press 2012

Review by Paul Le Long

Stop reading this review and just go out right now and buy this book.

Honestly, itøs brilliant. Quite simply a must read. Trust me.

Essentially, the book is a history of Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), the first-ever role playing game (RPG) released by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in 1974. There are five chapters (plus introduction and epilogue) and the first and last deal with D&D. The background of Gygax and company, their history in the US wargaming hobby and the first steps towards designing the game. In the last chapter, we follow Gygax in the first three years following D&Døs release and his interactions with the new RPG fan-base.

Chapters 2-4 trace the influences on Gygax and his game. First, we have fantasy as a genre and here we are in the territory not just of Tolkein but the pulp magazines of the ʹ20s and ʹ30s and their successors. Lovecraft, Ashton Smith, Howard, Leiber, plus all the SF, Fantasy and weird fiction that they inspired and which in turn inspired Gary Gygax.

Chapter 3 is the one readers of this blog will be most interested in ó a history of wargaming from Chess through games in the 18ᵗʰ and 19ᵗʰ centuries, the various Kriegspiels designed to be played by princes and generals, right up to the civilian wargames of the 20ᵗʰ century. We see the development of miniatures games and board wargames ó Featherstone, Bath, Scruby, Avalon Hill, SPI -- they are all here. Why? Because the designers of D&D were wargamers (as were the early adopters of RPGs) and the concepts evolved directly from wargaming. Indeed, it is not clear to me that Gygax realised in 1974 that he had produced something that went beyond wargaming.

Chapter 4 is about roleplaying and immersion. Here we have organisations like the RAND Corporation designing proto-RPGs to model Cold War geopolitics, Tony Bath running his famous Hyborian miniatures campaign, games of postal Diplomacy and early story-telling games like Midgard which was all the rage in 1960s West Coast SF hipster circles. The Epilogue provides a very interesting overview of the development of RPG computer games and gamebooks.

Peterson draws all the disparate strands together very clearly to allow the reader to see the genesis and evolution of the RPG hobby and illustrating the interconnectedness of RPGs, wargaming, speculative fiction and story-telling. There is a huge amount of detail here – 632 pages of text plus appendices, densely footnoted (several hundred footnotes in every chapter); the depth of scholarship on show here is impressive. Indeed, this work could and should have been a PhD thesis – that illustrates how deep the research is.

Nevertheless, despite the length and the depth of the book, it is a fascinating read. Some take-away highlights for me:

- Had Gygax and Arneson not designed D&D in 1974, Tony Bath might well have done it anyway.
- The ground-breaking nature of Charles Roberts' first board wargames in the US.
- The sometimes antagonistic relationship between Scruby and Featherstone and Featherstone and Bath and the aloof attitude of Featherstone toward fantasy and immersive play.
- The importance of the game Diplomacy and Avalon Hill's magazine *The General* in bringing together wargamers in the US.
- How RPGs evolved organically from wargames – for example, the Braunstein Napoleonic games run by Dave Wesley in the late 1960s in which players took on the roles of commanders in a Napoleonic wargame.
- The nagging doubt that Gygax thought he had designed a wargame rather than a different type of game altogether.
- The photograph of a 20-sided die – a Roman die from the 1st century AD.

Those are just my subjective highlights. There is so much content in this book. If you are interested in RPGs, then this is an absolute must. For the uber-geek there is even in-depth examination of the evolution of game mechanisms.

For the wargamer who isn't into RPGs, there is still a huge amount of content in here for you – the entire history of wargaming, for one thing, plus quite extensive coverage of professional wargaming during the Cold War and lots of interesting data on some luminaries of the hobby – Scruby, Bath, Featherstone, Fletcher Pratt's naval wargame, HG Wells and his game, as well as an in-depth treatment of Robert Louis Stevenson's wargame. Also the Brontes, Bel Geddes, Sachs and many many more.

In my view, a must-read.

The invention of role-playing games serves as a touchstone for exploring the ways that the literary concept of character, the lure of fantastic adventure and the principles of gaming combined into the signature cultural innovation of the late twentieth century. Back to top. Rent Playing at the World 1st edition (978-0615642048) today, or search our site for other textbooks by Jon Peterson. Every textbook comes with a 21-day "Any Reason" guarantee. Published by Unreason Press. The invention of role-playing games serves as a touchstone for exploring the ways that the literary concept of character, the lure of fantastic adventure and the principles of gaming combined into the signature cultural innovation of the late twentieth century. ...more. Get A Copy. My second issue with Playing at the World is the chopped-up chronology. If this had truly been "A History...from Chess to Role-Playing Games" as the cover indicated, then I would have expected this to have followed a strict chronological order. Instead, we begin with 20th century wargaming, right where Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson first create Dungeons & Dragons, then dive deep, deep into Dungeons & Dragons specifics (for example, an entire sub-chapter on just its class system alone). Playing at the world: a history of simulating wars, people, and fantastic adventures from chess to role-playing games. (2012) by Jon Peterson. San Diego, CA: Unreason Press. ISBN: 978-0615642048. Abstract: This is a book review of Jon Peterson's (2012) book Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People, and Fantastic Adventures from Chess to Role-Playing Games. The encyclopedic Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventures from Chess to Role-playing Games is an important step toward a history of games that encompasses domains beyond technology and business. But even though it comes as a timely intervention, it is difficult to imagine the book's specific audience.

The invention of role-playing games serves as a touchstone for exploring the ways that the literary concept of character, the lure of fantastic adventure and the principles of gaming combined into the signature cultural innovation of the late twentieth century. Read more

Abstract: Explore the conceptual origins of wargames and role-playing games in this unprecedented history of simulating the real and the impossible. From a vast survey of primary sources ranging from eighteenth-century strategists to modern hobbyists, Playing at the World distills the story of how gamers first decided ficti Playing at the World is first and fore- most 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, cover- ing 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 devel- opment of D&D. The next three chap- ters each explore in great detai

Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventures, from Chess to Role-playing Games. Jon Peterson. Unreason Press, 2012 - Computer games - 698 pages. Â From a vast survey of primary sources ranging from eighteenth-century strategists to modern hobbyists, Playing at the World distills the story of how gamers first decided fictional battles with boards and dice, and how they moved from simulating wars to simulating people. The invention of role-playing games serves as a touchstone for exploring the ways that the literary concept of character, the lure of fantastic adventure and the principles of gaming combined into the signature cultural innovation of the late twentieth century. What people are saying - Write a review. Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People, and Fantastic Adventures: From Chess to Role-Playing Games Jon Peterson San Diego: Unreason Press LLC, 2012. Introduction, contents, images. 698 pp. $34.95 paper. Â 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-play- ing 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. Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventures from Chess to Role-Playing Games (Image: Unreason Press). Share. share. Â Peterson: I wrote Playing at the World because I wanted to turn the way we thought about the gaming culture of the late twentieth century upside down. I wanted to show these games not as fads or disposable products of pop culture, but instead as a legitimate part of intellectual history, heirs to a tradition that stretches back centuries and involves many great thinkers and innovators. I wanted to show how the techniques of simulation invented for wargaming expanded beyond just modeling conflict and narrowed into simulating individual people â€" and then into simulating things that are not real