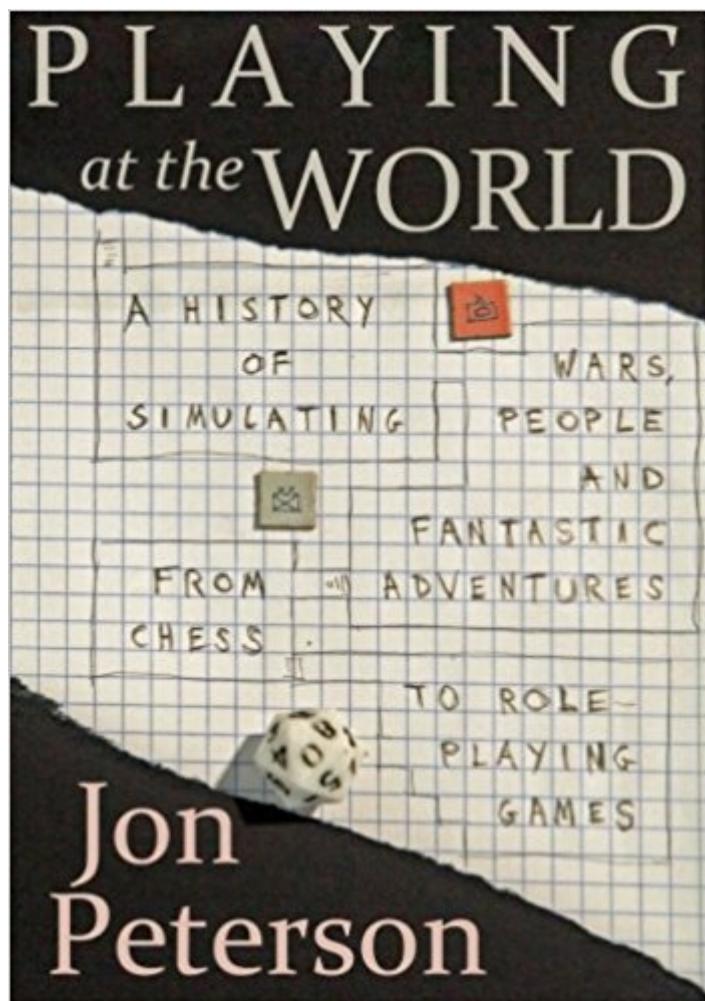


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# Playing At The World



## Synopsis

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 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.

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## Customer Reviews

"A must-read for gaming geeks." - *Wired*"Highly recommended for role-playing game enthusiasts." - *Games Magazine*

"The first serious history of the development of Dungeons & Dragons... there's much here to fascinate even readers with only a cursory interest in the game." - *Village Voice*

"Playing at the World is a must for gaming and popular culture history collections." - *Midwest Book Review*

"Playing at the World is the best book I've ever read about games and gaming - not the personalities that play, but the history of games. The author is an absolutely meticulous researcher, and you will learn more about where role-playing games came from than you ever knew before - because I did, and I was there at the beginning, and I still learned more!" - Tim Kask, early TSR employee and original editor of *Dragon* magazine

"If you are a roleplayer, or a gaming historian, or a fan of D&D, you have to read this book. That simple." - Jeff Grub, former TSR staff designer, author of *Manual of the Planes*

"I'm a bit embarrassed thinking of how many times I've talked about the

history of D&D, thinking "I knew the story - now I realize how little I knew. Playing at the World applies a higher standard of research than any other work on the history of role-playing games I've seen. Check out this awesome book!" - Peter Adkison, founder and former CEO of Wizards of the Coast, owner of Gen Con "At long last, the cultural phenomenon of Dungeons & Dragons gets the in-depth historical study it deserves in Jon Peterson's Playing at the World. Here, compellingly told, is the fascinating story of the prehistory and origins of the first and greatest role-playing game, and how a group of unlikely American nerd-gods imagined something new and brought it into the world." - Lawrence Schick, editor Deities & Demigods, author of White Plume Mountain and Heroic Worlds

There's been a lot of talk about this book recently, so I checked it out... and I'm glad I did! If you're at all curious, I recommend downloading the free Kindle sample because it's easily 200 pages of reading for free. My guess is that it'll convince you to buy the full book- it's simply an amazing release. Meticulously researched, fascinating and unbiased, this has been my favorite read of the past few years, no exaggeration. Peterson lays out the origins of the hobby in exhaustive detail, while keeping it interesting and fresh through hundreds of pages. He covers pretty much every angle you could ask for: early wargaming history, rules iterations, popular fiction influences, you name it. For me, the most pleasant surprise was how interesting each and every topic was, as presented by Peterson. I have never been much interested in pulp fiction from the 50s, nor did I ever think I would care about hundred-year-old Prussian war simulations. And yet, the author writes about it all with such fervor and ecstatic detail, you can't help but get sucked in and fascinated. The only reservation I have is that the physical copy is quite unwieldy: it's a massive brick of text and the layout could have been much cleaner. I found the large page size and tiny margins to be a bit imposing, and the Kindle version was a lot easier on the eyes. But I feel guilty even mentioning this, because the actual content is so far past amazing that it's worth the eyestrain, I promise. I seriously cannot recommend this book enough.

For me, for better and worse, there has almost always been D&D. In a sense, Dungeons and Dragons has been grafted by doing it, Lamarck-like, into my DNA. Though I haven't played it since I was 15, and though I think it a flawed and problematic stew of player self-aggrandizement and referee rule-mayhem, I can't escape it. It's family. Like a deranged grandfather who refuses to die, but whose life story basically makes me, qua me, possible, I am a descendant of D&D. I probably first set my hands on the "basic set" of D&D within a year of its publication in 1977. In a

box with flimsy game manual, strange dice, and a few odd geomorphic maps, this thing came into my hands full-born. Why bother where it came from? This was when I was no older than 12, after all. That's too early for genealogy. The key tacit assumption of my game-playing experience, grown from a life in playing and refereeing role playing games is after all that, whatever I think about it, because I lived it from earliest age, D&D is a thing without history. Indeed I know it to BE history. After D&D comes everything I find more interesting or challenging, games of imagination from the table top horrors of Call of Cthulhu to the digital worlds of Fallout. D&D's presence in the world APPEARS, in this sense, self-explanatory. D&D was, when I came upon it, a handful of tools, which I first took out for creative test-work, accompanied by a willing band of equally unprepared friends. These would propel me to some of my strongest and warmest, and certainly most long-lasting, personal relationships. It would also afford me creative opportunities that surely would not have thrived in the absence of such an imaginative toolset. D&D was the first push towards a life in the empathetic arts in a sense, a discipline I recognize in my passive struggling appreciation for theater and cinema today, but also as I actively pursue them as a social scientist, speaker and writer. This is because D&D is not simply a call to ego (which it is) but a call to empathy (which it became). The magic of D&D isn't simply that you pick up a sword in your mind and slay things, but that the person you occupy in the process has aspirations, however primitive and acquisitive in nature, and the ability to LEARN and ADVANCE. This is way beyond folk-story telling. It's something new. It was THIS that would be bequeathed to its better and more sober descendants: a GAME where ANYTHING was possible and the details would be sorted out as you go. A game where story-telling allowed the fantasist in you to live, for a while, in the skin of another person and live not just a moment, but the hints of a full life, with failures that continue to haunt you and successes you brag about later. As a referee (or GM), D&D gave me the opportunity to write worlds and richly entertain those who entered them. It is the perfect game from someone who would later become a failed playwright. That I would adopt and later help to invent - whole new worlds of role-playing games, matters little. What matters, is that there was ALWAYS D&D. Despise it, revere it, reflect on its impact on my development as a person, it always WAS. But of course: it wasn't. Not always. Jon Peterson's "Playing at the World" takes this last revelation seriously. If D&D at some point wasn't, then it wasn't inevitable. While human beings have been role playing since they marched out of Africa, early fire users did not set aside their Thursday nights with a set of formal rules to adjudicate their fantasies and folk tales. They

didn't throw dice to tell a story. And surely, even if they had, they wouldn't pick a Tolkien-addled, but judiciously balanced, system for experiencing imaginary worlds. Only D&D would do that! and so late in our civilization it is history. It simply can't be taken for granted it MUST be explained! Flight may have been inevitable in the development of human technology, after all, but the rise of the bicycle, and its most adventurous engineers, are no small part of the trip from an Ohio garage to Kitty Hawk. The details matter about both the innovation, and to understand the habits of the technology that would both hinder and advance human beings in the air for decades. The same thing goes for the weird adventure of inventing role playing games. Why 1970? Why fantasy? What game technologies made it possible or hindered its advance? In the absence of serious history, it is simply impossible to answer these questions. Enter Jon Peterson. Peterson's book, an intense and lengthy work of bizarre and doting historical effort, seeks to do the following: 1) Explain why D&D, in its first formulation, appeared as it did, when it did. 2) Explain why the game emerged to simulate fantasy (i.e. Tolkien-esque) adventure, rather than some other imaginative world. 3) Explain why the rules of that game would take the (arguably problematic) forms that it did. 4) Explain why it found an immediate and willing audience when, for all purposes, such a game had never meaningfully existed before. The answers that Peterson provides are a labyrinth of history, geeky detail, and exhaustive analysis of a mail-based social world. Should you read it? I dunno. I did; 632 pages later, I'm not sure I understand any better my own relationship to role play, though I do better appreciate its fabulous novelty in the sense that it is a contingent rather than necessary product of middle class history. As such, it makes me better revere its innovators. So what does the book actually try to do? Taking a studiously historical approach to the history of D&D, Peterson's book limits its explanation to only this: explaining the existence of the 1st edition 3-book publication of D&D in 1974, along with its most immediate supplements (i.e. Blackmoor, Greyhawk, Eldritch Wizardry, and Gods, Demi-Gods and Heroes) ending around 1975. In the process, Peterson refuses to use later reflections or oral narratives to sort the facts (i.e. stuff someone says Gary Gygax told them one time at a convention). Instead, he burrows into the deep history of the hobby, mostly using the sprawling record of fanzines that filled the gaming community network in the 1960s. Only primary written narrative would suffice in Peterson's effort; half-remembered conversations were ignored. This means Peterson distances himself from the dark wrangling over ownership and copyright, along with crisis in ownership and the solvency of key firms, which emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s. All

Peterson wants to explain is why D&D exists, on its own historical terms, not that of people who contended its legacy afterwards. The book is meticulously footnoted and fastidiously documented. The implications for this approach are that Peterson does nothing more or less than explain the product that I laid my hands on in 1978. And he does so convincingly. In the process, he leaves the tumultuous history of role playing games that would FOLLOW in the late 1970-s and 1980s, from The Fantasy Trip to Runequest to Call of Cthulhu, to another author. His interest is GENESIS, and so he goes deep into the genetic code of gaming itself, starting with nothing less than the creation of Chess in ancient India (!) but mostly focusing on wargames of central Europe, table top miniatures of the 1950s and 60s, and gaming conventions in the early 1970s. As such, Peterson makes the history of D&D a study of the history of wargaming, because D&D is so closely tied to the *kreisspiel* of German pre-modernity, that even a casual player would have to be stubborn not to recognize D&D's roots in the "hit&run" tables from the innovations of table top German impresarios of the 1700s. This game's roots are in places most role players would only recognize when seeing them in exacting detail. Peterson paints such portraits of detail by plumbing apparently incongruous genealogies, poring over the minutes of clubs dedicated to naval wargaming, the Society for Creative Anachronism (!) and of even stranger communities of fantasy immersion. This is a book of history, which rises and falls on the tedium and insight that footnotes provide the diligent reader. This is not the screed of a casual fan or a kiss-and-tell about dysfunctions of the industry: it's a meticulously detailed blow-by-blow about the birth of the modern role-playing hobby. The book is broken down into a largely non-chronological set of chapters as a result. In chapter 1, Peterson reveals all you need to know about an especially eager upper Midwest gaming community in the US to demonstrate that D&D is an outgrowth of a small and widespread geeky international tribe, but centered on a very local set of wargaming people in Lake Geneva and Minneapolis. In Chapter 2, he provides us as good a history of fantasy fiction as you are likely to get in a succinct 120 pages. That account should make you recognize that "fantasy", a novel creation in itself, was the most likely setting for any early role play. Chapter 3 explains how the rules of D&D emerged, and in the process provides one of the best single histories of wargaming I have ever read. It provides a lovingly detailed history of German *kreisspiel* and a brief survey of America's troubled Avalon Hill. Chapter 4 muses on the very emergence of a game set around roles and character immersion, with some interesting antecedents in games like Diplomacy and the experiments in Game Theory being advanced for nuclear conflict at the RAND corporation. There are important epilogues and other details but basically

that it is it the book is incredible and startling detail is located in four lengthy empirical chapters. Revelations of note: 1) Peterson toys with a great many definitions of D&D and role playing but never does better than with the words that:

“ANYTHING CAN BE ATTEMPTED” The advisability of an attempt is another thing. Those words come from the rule book David Wesley’s Napoleonic war rules “Strategos” written in 1967, but they are rooted in 18th century freeform kreigspeil traditions that rely heavily on a referee to adjudicate a free-flowing situation. Surely this is the core of any role playing game worth a damn. Anything can be attempted. 2) D&D comes from the world of tabletop miniatures but probably never used them in its initial years at all, largely resting on paper and pencil adjudication until AFTER the lead figure industry caught up with demand. 3)

“Fantasy” fiction in its swords and sorcery version - turns out to be about as historically deep as the NFL. If it weren’t for Conan, and the various intellectual pirates who rewrote him over the decades, this brand of fiction would not precede Tolkien by very much. On the other hand, Lovecraft is given due in Peterson’s book not just for content but for innovating a mode of publishing that ALLOWED modern fantasy to emerge after Dunsanay. 4) The early emergence of a meta-game beyond the dungeon, where players could build castles, throw parties, hire henchmen, and count their spoils between adventures. Long before D&D formally existed, it was realized that the lives of characters OUTSIDE the dungeon is the only thing that made their advancement INSIDE especially interesting. 5) The tension between Monty Hall gaming and the “Tomb of Horrors” (whose specific genesis is hinted at in early Gygax monstrosities as Gencon). The balances between unchallenging, rewarding and punitive experiences are timeless ones, and rest at the very birth of the hobby. Minor revelations are so many that I dare not attempt to cover them all. But for me, the interesting nuggets included: A) The importance and persistence of H.G. Wells detailed rules for battle with miniature soldiers B) The troubled history of table-top miniatures as a simulation in official military circles C) The importance of Diplomacy as a wildly popular international play-by-mail phenomenon prior to the internet. D) The importance of naval wargaming (a major area of innovation for David Arneson prior to D&D) for the roots of Hit Points and other fussy systems in play E) The sad history of the family of Wilhelm von Tschischwitz, originator of many of the basic concepts of wargaming we know now (Combat results tables!) F) The early struggle between systems that would distinguish being affected/damaged from how much one is affected/damaged. But for those interested in these kinds of weeds.

you'd just have to read the book, which is as dense as it is physically heavy (I couldn't find a digital copy). Finally, the book emphasizes several timeless quarrels that anyone who has played games will recognize: 1) Realism versus playability, an argument known to early modern table-top generals in 18th century Vienna as much as it is to Euro-game advocates versus grognards at Origins in Ohio every year. 2) Simulating versus being the character in a role playing or game, the implications of which haunt anyone who has tried to play someone stupider or smarter than they are. 3) Tension between homebrew innovators and game creators and sellers, including the welcoming and rejection of game innovations by fans and their relationship to "official" rules sponsored by capitalist and for-profit companies. 4) Having or not having a referee. This tug-of-war is so old it sits at the very roots of arguments in wargaming centuries ago. Should you read this monster? Most fantasy readers will LOVE chapter 2, which chronicles the rise of the Gray Mouser and Conan and the rest of that stuff. Game geeks among us will certainly enjoy Chapter 3, as I did, because it shows the deep history of gaming itself. Chapter 4 is perhaps the least accessible part of the history, with its meditation on the other forms of "role play" that were brewing in the 1950s and 1960s. Ironically, only a very few of us may actually find the main topic of the book itself interesting: why does D&D exist? But, as I've tried to stress, it's that last question alone that can open windows onto more interesting explorations. We can only learn how our hobby ticks if we make the following assumption: it might not. Then where would we be?

Jon Peterson has written a definitive history of the origins and history of role-playing cum Dungeons & Dragons. The author is definitely a gamer, and it shows through the detailed investigation and analysis. Jon recognized that there were personalities and political realities involved, but he did not focus on them. Jon takes the reader back to the nineteenth Century to trace the origins of war gaming and ultimately to role-playing. I loved this book. A great read! Buy it today! In service, Rich

In depth, scholarly examination of the rise of fantasy gaming. The author takes the time to look at as many influences as he can in such a way as to know he actually examined them thoroughly himself. I haven't finished it yet but I'm enjoying it through Ch 3 right now.

For someone who really wants an in-depth history, and not something trivial, on the subject of role-playing games, this is it. It is framed around Dungeon & Dragons I would say, but the accounts tread through all of history, tracing the game back to roots such as the war games played in the 19th

century. Not a skimpy book, and worth the money.

This is a fascinating look at the development of role-playing games from their origin in war-gaming, focusing particularly on the seminal Dungeons & Dragons. In his astoundingly thorough piece of research, Jon Peterson considers all the influences and factors that led to the creation of D&D, and the subsequent rapid growth in this style of gaming. The book would have benefited from another copy-editing pass, as it still contains a number of typos and infelicities of expression, but this is a minor criticism of an impressive book that I enthusiastically recommend to anyone interested in the history of role-playing games.

This book is absolutely fascinating to me. I was always curious about the origins of role playing games and this book is extremely thorough! Curious as to why the fantasy genre was the first and still most popular genre for RPGs? This book will tell you. Curious about how the rules evolved ? It's in there. Highly recommended!

I am totally loving this book. Yes, it is very long, but I marvel at his level of research. I cannot fathom how long it must have taken him to research and write, and I for one fully appreciate the effort. A history of Dungeons & Dragons, which was such an important influence on popular culture, gaming culture, etc. that came after it.

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