Tabletop Role-Playing Games, the Modern Fantastic, and Analog 'Realized' Worlds

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Tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) harness the flows of modernity within their fantasy spaces. If that statement is not agreeable, then one can at least take notice that the broad category of "role-playing games" has been subjected to a considerable amount of critical commentary in the past decade. Monographs by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Jennifer Cover examine tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) beyond Gary Alan Fine's seminal sociological study *Shared Fantasy* (1983) and Lawrence Schick's early history of the industry, *Heroic Worlds* (1991).[1] Jon Peterson's *Playing at the World*

1. For representative academic monographs, see Daniel Mackay. The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2001; Gary Alan Fine. Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds. 2nd Ed. University of Chicago Press, 2002; Sarah Lynne Bowman. The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity. Jefferson, North Carolina; London: McFarland, 2010; Michael J. Tresca. The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2010; Jennifer Grouling Cover. The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games. Jefferson, N.C; McFarland, 2010. Brad King and John Borland. Dungeons & Dreamers: A Story of How Computer Games Created a Global Community. 2nd edition. Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2014. For books written in the popular sphere, see Mark Barrowcliffe. The Elfish Gene: Dungeons, Dragons and Growing Up Strange. Soho Press, 2009; Ethan Gilsdorf. Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks: An Epic Quest For Reality Among Role Players, Online Gamers, And Other Dwellers Of Imaginary Realms. Guilford, Conn.: Lyons Press, 2010; David M. Ewalt. Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and The People Who Play It. Reprint edition. New York: Scribner, 2014. Ewalt. For anthologies, see: J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler, eds. Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy

(2012) and Shannon Appelcline's *Designers and Dragons* (2015) both offer expansive histories of TRPGs.[2] What ties these works together is fantasy's seminal role in opening horizons of possibility for new technological-driven world creation and subject formation. Game texts that outline analog TRPG procedures, be they paper or available on PDF through DriveThruRPG, DMsGuild.com, and/or Kickstarter, continue to deliver foundations for the creation of realized worlds.

As historian Michael Saler argues, the late 19th century's imaginary, spectacular texts—like that of H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887), Robert Louis Stephenson's *Treasure Island* (1883), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897)—set the stage for later works that created the first virtual worlds: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 221B Baker Street, H.P. Lovecraft's redacted Cthulhu Mythos, and J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth.[3] For Saler, these 'virtual' worlds allowed fans to engage them far beyond their authors' control through letters to editors, clubs, amateur journalism, conventions, walking tours, etc., thereby infusing a supposed pessimistic Weberian modernity with a much needed ironic enchantment. Today, the Internet has drastically expanded the reach of such worlds full of imaginary elements. Saler postulates that "we are all geeks now,"[4] and the virtual worlds of analog TRPGs are an important part of the modern conception of the "fantastic."

This article offers the term 'realized worlds' as a descriptor for the rise of these fantasy spaces, explaining how these new spaces

Games. McFarland, 2006; Evan Torner and William J. White, eds. Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing. McFarland, 2012; Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, eds. Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2010 which broadly explore how role-playing works across varying media.

2. Jon Peterson. Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, Peoples and Fantastic Adventures, from Chess to Role-Playing Games. San Diego, CA: Unreason Press, 2012; Shannon Appelcline. Designers & Dragons. [4 part series] 2nd edition. Silver Spring, MD: Evil Hat Productions, 2015.
3. Michael Saler. As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary PreHistory of Virtual Reality. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
4. Saler, p. 3.

invigorate the discourses of *posthumanism* — the conception of the thinking subject beyond the constraints of Cartesian dualism— before detailing a few seminal TRPG realized worlds that create these spaces. Analog/digital fantastic spaces proliferating in today's highly technologized culture intervene in the discourse of posthumanism by shifting the focus from *bodies* to *spaces*. Our nature as technologized persons increasingly relies on the creation and consumption of such game settings, offering systems and spaces of narrative in addition to the narratives themselves. More narrowly, it places importance on the actual historiography of game texts with respect to the fantasy destinations we often now choose to visit. Complex campaign settings are at the forefront of my study, particularly those of the wildly influential TRPG *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*). Such spaces begin as game texts, a backdrop for the deployment of analog game systems, and expand to become imagination engines for other media: books, TV shows, video games, larps, and memes. Realized worlds through TRPGs offer a new mode of cultural production and consumption beyond the literary and the cinematic, one that is increasingly defining contemporary technologized culture through the mode of play.

MODERN FANTASTIC AND POSTHUMANIZATION

Posthumanization is a process of subject formation that mixes the analog and digital. Discourses of trans- and posthumanism have been in motion since Donna Haraway argued that the cyborg was more than a science-fiction trope. Haraway reinterpreted the standard notion of the cyborg, detailed as early as 1960 in an attempt to theorize how humans might live in space.[5] Instead of such an instrumental approach, she challenged old dualistic separations of the

5. See Manfred E. Clynes, , and Nathan S. Kline. "Cyborgs and Space." Astronautics (September 1960).

Human vs. Machine, as well as influenced theorists who followed her into articulating the complex relationships humans face in today's technologized world. N. Katherine Hayles argued in *How We Became Posthuman* that imagining a self without a body is a techno-fantasy.[6] Her target was Hans Moravec and others, who championed scenarios of radical mind uploading. Since her response, much of critical posthumanism seeks ways to challenge the Enlightenment Project's traditional categories of the human, nature, the self, and so forth through the discourse of the *corporeal* or *somatic*. One focuses on the importance of actual bodies affected by actual technologies.[7] My approach moves away from the posthuman body toward conceptualizing the process of engineered posthumanization through fantasist spaces in which new subjectivities emerge. Thus, I alter Saler's term, 'virtual' worlds, for 'realized' worlds. 'Realized' worlds in analog terms means the democratization of agential, systemic, and creative thinking across much of humanity, changing discourses away from bodies toward those of *space,* that is: worldbuilding and play in those worlds.[8]

Modernity itself has encouraged the proliferation of realized game worlds. Stephen Toulmin suggests that the received view of the modern age was never stable, a view that insisted on the dominance of modern philosophical 'Reason' as a defining factor.[9] Modernity's appearance and disappearance was and is a discursive phenomenon and it now exists in a less-than-dominant fashion as a

6. N. Katherine Hayles. How We Became Posthuman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
7. See Andy Miah. "A Critical History of Posthumanism." Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity. Springer, 2009, pp. 71–94. For good introductions to the terms, see Miah; Tamar Sharon. "A Cartography of the Posthuman: Humanist, Non-Humanist and Mediated Perspectives on Emerging Biotechnologies." Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Thought 2 (2012): 4–19; Francesca Ferrando. "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: New Relations." Existenz: An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and Art 8.2 (2013): 26–32. For key methodologies see Cary Wolfe. What Is Posthumanism? Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010; Rosi Braidotti. The Posthuman. 1st edition. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2013.
8. I admit that the 'real' is a loaded discourse, but one I leverage thanks to a resurgent new materialism and realism seen across a variety of disciplines.
9. Stephen Toulmin. Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

phenomenon with myriad definitions contextualized in specific cultural moments, many of which are still *superstitious* and *traditional* (the two bugbears of optimistic European rationalism).[10] Our words become engineering blueprints. The modern fantastic, a discursive (*written*) and engineering (*systemic design*) phenomenon based on empirical principles of constructing worlds with fantasy qualities, now drives an inflection of modernity in which lived spaces oscillate between the real and the imaginary.

The intersection between modernity and 'realized' worlds is the discourse of posthumanism and its focus on Cartesian dualism, as well as the problems this poses for subjectivity. Just as the legitimation of science and modernity paradoxically interrogates the central doctrine of Cartesian dualism, critical posthumanism attacks Cartesian abstraction and universalism. In response, it encourages the acceptance of qualities similar to Renaissance humanists' love of particulars, skepticisms, varieties, i.e., lived individual affairs. In its most distilled form, a critical posthumanist position rejects abstracted Cartesian notions of the human, while accepting Renaissance humanism's particularism. Just as the idea of modernity reaching beyond the Cartesian definition to a literary influence a century before Descartes is valuable, if flawed, we should see the modern fantastic's form of posthumanism defined by its creation of 'realized' worlds, encouraging within them humans to be humans in a posthuman fashion.

Pre-Cartesian humanism is often rejected as a model because it retains stable ontological borders between the human and nature. If we can agree that human essentialism is problematic, that discussions of human nature are always predetermined by discourse, we see that 'realized' worlds engender a variety of humans and humanisms,

10. See Toulmin.

plenty to account for the differences that allow a plurality to thrive, without the need for a controlling definition.[11] Our attempts to step into our 'realized' worlds lets us see such details flourish. TRPGs in their current aesthetic form should please both traditional humanists and posthumanists: they encapsulate humans as social beings telling oral, ephemeral stories as well as imagining what systems and complexities transcend them. What is most radical is not imagining the limits of constructing the human and transgressing them, but in imagining new fantasy spaces in which intelligent beings can live in a multitude of forms and places.

The modern fantastic encourages creativity and agency for the broadest number of persons, as well as the expansion of realized worlds across a variety of platforms. From this vantage point, the modern fantastic emerges as a very 'human' process that has been occurring in detail since at least the late 19th century with the rise of the popular novel and its many fictional worlds. But if we take the long view –– and this impulse is already present in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1615), the protagonist of which seeks disappearing myths in the face of disruptive change –– such change is *helping* us tell our myths. Technological mythmaking speaks to my insistence that the modern fantastic's key dynamic, *posthumanization*, must retain aspects of the human worth saving. We enter 'realized' worlds of our own making, wherein we leap into the enchanted present powered by stats, maps, and our capacity for narrative. This is not only an intellectual process, but an experiential one. Without venturing into these simulated worlds, we cannot know them.

REALIZED WORLDS

Situating the modern fantastic's posthumanizing process requires a

11. One recent RPG example of this would be Caitlynn Belle and Josh T. Jordan's Singularity (2016).

brief comment on one major influence in critical posthumanism: Gilles Deleuze's[12] ontological philosophy of difference, multiplicities, flows, assemblages, forces, and intensities, especially how they relate to the abstract concept, the 'Real.' Deleuze, along with Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, and Lyotard, consistently consider the transcendence of Western thought (i.e., relying on external grounds such as God, Truth, the Self, etc., for rational judgment) and how this transcendent philosophy affects the conceptualization of the modern subject, as well as the discursive practices used to define it. Deleuze informs my approach to posthumanization because of his move to not just erase ingrained dualities like subject/object, but the textual attempt to corral the movement of material forces, what he calls 'flows' which emerge in a variety of forms and operate without our full cognitive understanding.

A difficult aspect of Deleuze's thought helpful in conceiving analog game texts as the basis for 'realized' worlds is his conception of the 'virtual' as a creative space for thought. Saler also chooses to treat the virtual as non-digital. He frames the virtual, though, within a historical context prior to its use defining technological virtual reality. For him, virtual worlds are "acknowledged imaginary spaces that are communally inhabited for prolonged periods of time by rational individuals."[13] Deleuze's concept of the virtual serves the modern fantastic more completely. He expands the term even more to describe the complex process of becoming. For Deleuze, the virtual emerges out of 'actual' material life as the 'real.' Before the virtual is the 'flow' of life. With perception, we see or experience the virtual. And the virtual is needed to make the actual *real,* slowing the flow of life to actualize it into the real. Deleuze has conceived of the "virtual" in a capacious fashion, robust enough to handle the complexities of

12. Often along with Félix Guattari. Henceforth, Deleuze.
13. Saler, p. 6.

realized worlds and their various game manifestations. Embracing this realism rejects the naïve inflection surrounding most fantasy, i.e., that the fantastic only works in imaginary texts because the world is supposedly knowable in an uncomplicated and straightforward manner.

How can we expand the real beyond this naïve conception? Like Deleuze, engineers are also interested in problems directly related to material reality. And while they do use discursive tools, they are not bound by them but, ultimately, rely on engagement with the material world for reliable and verifiable results. If engineers failed to find some sense of an actual world, they would fail at their jobs too. But we have clear examples of successful results. Thus, engineering provides the ultimate challenge to naïve realism, rather than to Deleuzian thought. We should read Deleuze as pursuing the difficulties in generating human meaning and understanding thought in a world with complex systems that often yield little meaning or transcendent answers of any kind.

'Realized' worlds multiply by the day as game designers write, and the raw material of the TRPG constitutes part of the real, rather than simply imaginary. They are part of a massive assemblage of real and imaginary parts. Moreover, these 'realized' worlds undermine the actual world's stability as simplistically real.[14] Herein lies the beating heart of a Deleuzian philosophy of becoming in which the material world is empirically knowable and the virtual world key. In such an understanding, science charts the process of the actual/virtual world becoming real, and philosophers of science, engineering, and technology push back in the opposite direction so that the philosophical creation of concepts do, in fact, affect the actual/virtual (real) world in a material manner.

14. A perennial theme in science fiction, especially from Philip K. Dick onward and one to which the discourse of posthumanism is finely attuned.

Thus, I follow other theorists in using the idea of this Deleuzian force situated behind the world of differentiated matter, much like Manuel DeLanda does as a form of pre-thought, a pre-human categorical concept that allows for creativity to emerge in material ways.[15] The modern fantastic follows such a trajectory with the increasing proliferation of realized worlds. Game texts and game tools, then, become part of this posthumanization process of creating realized worlds within a perennial modernity whose key attribute is continued critique.[16] Ultimately, these material objects must be considered within assemblages of intensely complex networked analog/digital relationships that help in understanding today's massively connected communication systems, as well as explain how human beings fit into such a matrix of human and non-human elements like individuals playing TRPGs. Ultimately, my reading of Deleuze clarifies how something as complex as the creation of the realized worlds of, say, *D&D* functions today.

TRPG CAMPAIGN SETTINGS

Analog game texts are written manuals that give players the abilities to engage realized worlds, and to change them. The embodied materiality of the tabletop experience is critical. Physical game texts must be read, outlined, annotated, as well as understood at an imaginative level. Game tools are critical as well. The pen, paper, and dice combination, along with all of the rules and tables in the books, the maps, etc., function as material agents that augment the texts. Beyond the iconic dice, figurines on a battlemat are exemplary in providing analogues for this process, material objects that abstract what they represent. Even more so, the use of online tools and virtual

15. For example, see Manuel De Landa. Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy. London; New York: Continuum, 2002.
16. Michel Foucault. "What is Enlightenment." The Foucault Reader. Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984, pp. 32-50.

tabletops (e.g., Roll20.net, Fantasy Grounds, and a host of others) further embed players into the posthuman realm where intelligent machines work in their favor. In fact, the latest version of *D&D* –– 5th edition –– has been noted for its rulebooks as hacking tools, as well as for their difficulty of use in that they require a DM to jump back and forth between texts (a problem complexified by the supplement of third-party resources) and one assisted with online tools.

Rich cultural products like TRPGs allow fans to expand story worlds for their own play. Buying a core rule text, tweaking it, adding material online, creating homebrew rules, collaborating with others at the table, utilizing OCRed PDF versions, joining a virtual tabletop, adding a character-management app to your phone, and so forth, all correspond with the type of cultural transformation now informing an embodied material technoculture. What makes the TRPG unique in this process is its mix of discursive and material components. Most clearly, the texts that comprise the core products are important as guides for imagined realized worlds and characters—written records in both analog-and-digital forms. These material objects function as embodied entities deeply enmeshed in dynamic human/nonhuman relationships.[17] TRPGs step beyond a reader's consumption, or even engagement via fan fiction, letters, etc., beyond what Saler details into the construction of virtual spaces. Instead, these 'realized' worlds form a microcosm of the broader social-technical world emerging today.

Imagination combined with a strict set of rules has structured the modern fantastic, posthumanization, and TRPGs since the beginning of the wargaming/TRPG industry. As both Appelcline and Peterson

17. For a detailed "experiment" (135) of how game materials function as actors, see Rafael Bienia. Role Playing Materials. Braunschweig: Zauberfeder Verlag, 2016. Bienia attempts to give game materials a voice, thereby adding a humanizing element to his deployment of Actor-Network theory, similar to what Latour did with his quasi 'novel,' Aramis.

have noted, the path to popular-cultural penetration began when the wargaming industry of the 1950s combined with the Tolkien phenomenon and fan-created scenarios of the 1960s to form a new type of gameplay in the 1970s: the fantasy role-playing game. TRPGs are a unique form of simulation-and-narrative text-based games, peaking in the U.S. in the early-to-mid '80s with the success of TSR's *D&D* and since then expanding and collapsing at different times. *D&D* had been published in a variety of forms since 1974, only in the critical year of 1977 forming into the two versions of the game that would dominate the 80s: Basic and Advanced.[18] At this point, the epic fantasy of J.R.R. Tolkien found its first popular imitation with Terry Brooks's far-future *The Sword of Shannara* (1977), and a host of others soon to follow in the 1980s. A curious coincidence in publication dates also sees John Eric Holmes's version of the *Dungeons and Dragons Basic Set* (1977), as well as the first offering of the *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* books, the *Monster Manual* (1977), both appearing in the same year as George Lucas's groundbreaking *Star Wars* (1977), a film that would thrust science fantasy into the public imagination and create an immersive story world through merchandising of licensed products. Ultimately, these gametexts comprise milestones in the modern fantastic's move toward the creation of sophisticated realized worlds.

D&D is as expansive as the human imagination, with a system ready to deploy its mechanisms on behalf of any fantasy. When Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson first collaborated on creating the new type of wargame that would become *D&D*, they called it "The Fantasy Game."[19] But *D&D* itself was never so stable. In the beginning, original *D&D* was open to hybrid science fantasy, comparable to

18. While the Monster Manual was published in 1977, the other two books that comprise the Advanced game were published in the next two years, the Player's Handbook (1978) and the Dungeon Master's Guide (1979).
19. Appelcline, p. 12.

Star Wars. Arneson's adventure "The Temple of the Frog" included "battle armor, a teleporter, and even a scout craft."[20] One of the early adventure modules for AD&D, *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks* (1981) presents a buried spaceship that functions as a dungeon. Furthermore, *D&D* played a bridging role between these gonzo fantasy scenarios and the sober business world. *Dragon* magazine became the first professional magazine dedicated to fantasy and science fiction games,[21] and D&D's science-fantasy influence is clearly admitted in the "'Appendix N' of the *AD&D Dungeon Masters Guide* (1979),"[22] where references are made to the works of fantasists such as E.R. Burroughs, Lin Carter, L. Sprague de Camp, August Dereleth, Lord Dunsany, R.E. Howard, Fritz Lieber, A. Merritt, Michael Moorcock, Tolkien, Jack Vance, Roger Zelazny.[23] The modern fantastic leans on the classic fantastic to deliver.

While *D&D* would become famous as a refined example of sword-and-sorcery tabletop role-playing, the industry would expand into all major publishing genres, hybridizing, fragmenting into a variety of systems and gaming styles. Science fantasy, though, would prove to be a favorite of later games interested in both dragons and spaceships, demons and detectives, broadswords and handguns. For example, Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) demonstrated how a change in focus from sword-and-sorcery and mythic fantasy, as well as from space-opera SF, to science-fantasy horror, changed both the mechanics and tone of a game from dungeon crawling, killing monsters, and gaining loot to investigating cosmic horrors. Such imaginative blending of supposed opposite science-fantasy tropes also defined later games like *Shadowrun* (1989) and *Rifts* (1990). These

20. Appelcline, p. 20.
21. Appelcline, p. 23.
22. Appelcline, p. 349.
23. Gygax, p. 224.

would harness both the genre mechanisms of magic and science to enhance their game worlds, as well as the player and GM imaginative possibilities. Interestingly, two of the most recent popular TRPGs—Monte Cook's *Numenera* (2013) and, along with Bruce Cordell, *The Strange* (2014)—both utilize a science-fantasy approach.

A look at some of the most content-rich fantasist campaign settings reveals an incredibly detailed series of imaginative realized worlds that far exceed those of any one writer, even Tolkien. Yet early campaign settings of *D&D* were abstract and largely numbers, a few sketches, and brief descriptions.[24] Gygax's company, TSR, showed an ability to branch out from its initial world, Greyhawk, with *Ravenloft* (1983), an example of a mixed-genre adventure, this one fantasy and horror, as well as an adventure that focused on problem solving instead of simple dungeon delving. This adventure module would, itself, inspire an entire setting later. The *Dragonlance* series of adventures of the 1980s are examples of the turn toward in-game narrative sophistication already seen with *Ravenloft*, not to mention the attention paid to both its campaign setting and other product tie-ins, like the very popular novels by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman. *Dragonlance*'s more cohesive approach to its campaign setting and adventures, though, were later superseded by the *Forgotten Realms*. In particular, the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* (1987) "was the first TSR setting that was truly and exhaustively detailed—thanks to a line of sourcebooks, rather than just adventures."[25] TSR would eventually release other detailed campaign settings: e.g., *Spelljammer, Ravenloft, Dark Sun, Al-Qadim, Planescape, Eberron, Birthright, Mystara,* etc., a trend that now defines

24. A notable exception at the time was M.A.R.Barker's Tekumel, from Empire of the Petal Throne, a more socially and culturally detailed game world at the time.
25. Appelcline p. 73.

the industry with 5th Edition's multiverse combining all of these into one grand fictional universe.

Other companies followed the impulse to develop detailed campaign settings with extended game lore. Even a wargaming miniatures' company like Games Workshop produced massive imaginative frameworks, providing players interested in tactics and combat with enough reading material about their miniature figurines to occupy their time. We see these details exemplified with Games Workshop's *Rogue Trader* (1987), a wargame that only flirted with role-playing. The popularity, though, of *Rogue Trader's* 40K setting, as developed in the later fiction of the Black Library, encouraged the need for a full role-playing game with *Dark Heresy* (2008) and a series of other source books. Meta-plotted immersive story worlds are now standard: from White Wolf's *World of Darkness* to the licensed material of Greg Stafford's *Glorantha*, Paizo's *Golarion*, Green Ronin's *Freeport*, etc.

Such game texts, while certainly manuals for play, do more than provide rules' systems or narrative frameworks. Within the modern fantastic, they form a vast *megatext* of world-building material increasing in proliferation through engaged fantasist cultures. These cultures have moved from the margins to the center, and their virtual – 'realized' – worlds are continuing to grow. Moreover, these game texts do more than challenge traditional notions of authorship, or readership, the discreet text, the ubiquity of discourse, etc. They provide living analog-and-digital realized worlds that, more and more, now define us as technological persons. Video games and other media draw heavily on the systemic narratives fostered by the TRPG medium and its sprawling hybrid settings. The spaces in which we choose to visit, and sometimes live, provide the mechanisms for who we are and what we are.