

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

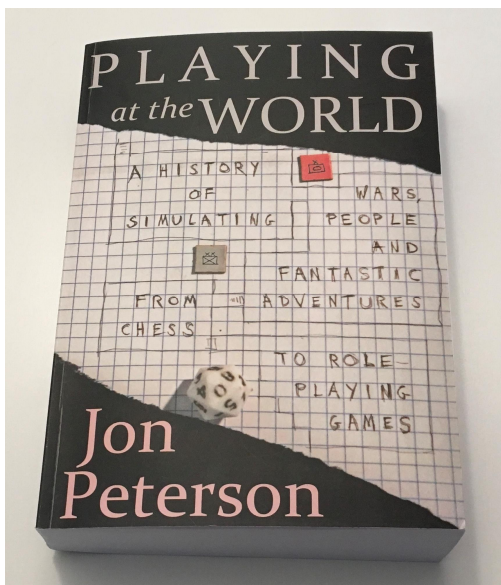
**By Jon Peterson**

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**Review by Paul Le Long**

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

Honestly, it's 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&D's 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 '20s and '30s 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 as a history of wargaming from Chess through games in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the various Kriegsspiels designed to be played by princes and generals, right up to the civilian wargames of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We see the development of miniatures games and board wargames of 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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.