

will continue to enumerate with pride the texts that they have made their own.

—Elizabeth Gargano, *The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC*

Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons

Premeet Sidhu, Marcus Carter, and José P. Zagal, eds.

Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2024. Contents, appendix, contributor biographies, index. 372 pp. \$35.00 paper. ISBN: 9780262547604

It has been fifty years since the original version of *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) was published in 1974. Authors Sidhu, Carter, and Zagal's interdisciplinary anthology *Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons* commemorates this milestone with essays about the game's past, present, and future. The book crosses both academic and industrial boundaries, featuring contributions by scholars, designers, and players. The chapters are organized into four relevant topics: histories, influences, critical play and analyses, and futures. Together, these sections provide a multifaceted yet accessible look into the game and its community.

The first section, "Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons," explores the game's history. The collection first celebrates many years of D&D scholarship with an opening reflection by sociologist Gary Alan Fine, the author of 1983's *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Fine narrates how he began studying a Minneapolis D&D group and

how his book came to be published in an environment less welcoming to studies of popular culture. The following chapters examine the influence of war game design and culture on D&D. Jon Peterson continues his ongoing examination of the game's connection with war games, locating its preoccupations with exploration and character progression in the war-gaming tradition. Evan Torner traces D&D's combat focus to its war-gaming origins, arguing that inevitable combat is core to the game's ideological representation of characters, monsters, and even deities as potential combatants. Tony A. Rowe and Zach Howard then present a history of John Eric Holmes's D&D Basic Set, in which D&D's relative inaccessibility, inherited from war games, necessitated an approachable introduction to the game.

The history section goes on to highlight the contributions of designers who have modified the game's rules and settings. Michael Iantorno presents an interview with Ryan Dancy, a former Wizards of the Coast executive who championed the Open Gaming License that has provided a route for external creators to make and distribute content for D&D. Mateusz Felczak then analyzes how players have modified digital adaptations of D&D, working within each version's constraints to achieve different visions of digital D&D. The section ends with a personal history of customization—Stephen Webley outlines his experience returning to D&D during COVID-19 lockdowns with childhood friends. The group's play emphasizes the mundanity of adulthood rather than typical adventure and combat. The histories effectively trace a tension between

authoritative, formal characteristics of the game, shaped by the game's origins, and players' abilities to steer their experiences in new directions.

The second section, "Influencing Dungeons & Dragons," contributes to contemporary conversations about the reciprocal relationships between the game and its wider cultural contexts. Esther MacCallum-Stewart examines how actual play, a spectated form of role playing, reshapes expectations of how the game should be played. Adrian Hermann analyzes editions of D&D that have represented religion by changing approaches to the cleric class and fictional pantheons. Dimitra Nikolaidou shows that pulp fiction has shaped D&D and that D&D has in turn influenced speculative fiction and its authors. The next chapter, by editor Premeet Sidhu, showcases the use of D&D to teach both course content and wider social skills. David Harris and Josiah Lulham then observe similarities between D&D and improvisational theatre. The second section closes with another personal essay, this one by Jay Malouf-Grice, who details her group's forging of a found family through queer play that challenges hegemonic game-play norms. The essays demonstrate that cultural context shapes how D&D gets played and shows that the game's influence reaches far beyond the limits of the table.

In the third section, "Critical Playing Dungeons & Dragons," authors contend with the problems of D&D's history, design, and community. Amanda Cote and Emily Saidel critique the game's representations of race and the recent attempts by Wizards of the Coast to address controversies surrounding these

representations. They reframe flexibility granted to players as an offloading of the responsibility to diversify the game onto players. Daniel Heath Justice reflects on a life of playing D&D as a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, articulating a tension between the game's persistent settler colonialist logics and the possibility of centering characters typically marginalized by the game. Aaron Trammell and Antero Garcia identify a similar conflict drawing on their experience playing the game as mixed-race children. They reveal that the representations of race, the centrality of combat, and the exploration mechanics identified earlier in the collection reinforce a white, suburban imagination and constrain the types of play allowed in the game's sandbox. Kellynn Wee's chapter details how these Western fantasies play out in Singapore, demonstrating the importance of geographic and temporal contexts. In the section's final chapter, Victor Raymond and Gary Alan Fine argue that the game's early years, despite being subject to a moral panic, provided a site for personal growth through exploration of deviance within a supportive group. The essays in this section acknowledge D&D's shortcomings while celebrating its possibilities.

The final section, "Futures," turns toward the next one hundred years of D&D. In its single chapter, Jonathan Walton employs the format of the random table, commonly used by D&D players to generate traits for characters and locales. Walton's tables are populated with myriad potential changes to the game's rules, settings, and wider contexts. This playful structure is both clever and appropriate, projecting the conversations presented

earlier in the volume into the future. Although the table format may imply a lack of agency, futures determined via die roll rather than purposeful action, its use here reinforces the collection's theme of working within the game's structures to produce open-ended possibilities.

Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons is a strong contribution to an ongoing discussion. Although each essay approaches the game from a unique combination of topic and disciplinary background, the authors and editors have made efforts to place each piece in a dialogue with others using thoughtful structuring and explicit references between chapters. The editors and authors have crafted an accessible entryway into several continuing conversations in academic, journalistic, and industry circles.

—Mirek Stolee, *The Strong National Museum of Play, Rochester, NY*

Playing with Reality: How Games Have Shaped the World

Kelly Clancy

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In *Playing with Reality* Kelly Clancy traces in a single volume the historical trajectories of games and game theory from antiquity to the present day. Clancy is a neuroscientist and a physicist, whose research includes the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI), and hers is a much clearer than usual scientific voice and

approach to the discussion of play and games. Clancy's book appeals to both academic and general audiences, offering accessible language covering a historical spectrum of topics that provides an almost story-like approach to ideas.

Clancy offers an overview and a critique of games that have been embedded in humanity, demonstrating the complex relationship between the history of human development and understanding of the self and the use and development of games. Her critique of game theory asserts that its misused principles have contributed negatively to society. Mathematical rationality and economic ideas based in game theories do not take into account human agency nor social, political, or historical contexts. Throughout the volume, Clancy demonstrates the strong ties games and game theory have to capitalism and economics (particularly to maximized growth capitalism) as well as the ties of the development of AI through computation and computer-learning games to its socio-economic framework. She carves out a space in play and game scholarship for her critical approach as she covers this vast history of games, game theory, war games, and AI. *Playing with Reality* does a wonderful job of bringing these together.

This book is split into four parts that explore distinct aspects of play. The first, "How to Know the Unknown," looks at historical play, exploring play's ties to religion, superstition, and understanding the self. Here Clancy's neuroscience background proves critical. Games offer ways to explore mental agency, helping us understand how we think, the sources of dopamine, and the ways we learn. This section connects our cognition and under-