

Imagining Classics: Towards a Pedagogy of Gaming Reception

Tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) use a combination of procedural rules, setting information and emergent play to create shared fictional spaces. Just like the corpus of classical literature, each of these three elements comprise readable texts that transmit information about the historical and cultural context of their production. Like other works of fictions, RPG texts mine existing texts, genres and cultures for material to repurpose in the creation of fictional worlds and situations. The worlds of the most popular genre of TTRPG (exemplified by *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) and its successors) is a fantasy pastiche initially based on the early 20th century pulp adventure fiction of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Robert E. Howard, and Fritz Leiber, on the epic fantasy of J.R.R. Tolkien, and on a popular capitalist American imagination of Medieval Europe (Peterson 2012; Chrulew 2005); however, their creators drew from a variety of inspirations, including classical myth (Mackay 2001; Chrulew 2005). Although *Dungeons & Dragons* remains the industry leader and a powerful cultural force whose logic lies behind much of the cultural production of the video game industry, a host of TTRPGs exploring a variety of historical and fictional genres has developed, including some which draw on received knowledge of the classical past.

This paper arises from an introductory class in which students analyzed classical texts (in translation) in parallel with TTRPGs to examine the reception of knowledge about the past and its reproduction through tabletop play. In the first part of the paper, I will examine three instances of classical reception in TTRPGs that we covered in the class and discuss how the students interacted with classical material within the framework of TTRPGs: 1) gods and monsters from Greek myth in *Dungeons & Dragons Book VII: Gods, Demi-gods & Heroes* (Kuntz and Ward 1976), 2) the curious classically-based alternate history meta-RPG *Mazes and Minotaurs* (Paul

Elliot, 2012) which imagines a version of Dungeons and Dragons based predominantly on classical mythology rather than medieval fantasy, and 3) simulations of Homeric heroism in *Agon* (John Harper, 2006), perhaps the most commercially successful “indie” or “story” game based on the classical world. In the second part of the paper, I will show how students translated aspects classical texts into game elements of existing games into their own games. Through research-derived and creatively-focused procedures of game design, the students engage closely and explicitly with the ancient material and the process of reception. I will argue for the pedagogical value of the close analysis and play of TTRPGs and the translation of classical characters, situations and settings into game terms as a supplement and framing device for the traditional close analysis of classical texts.

Bibliography

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