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Crafted worlds, imagined pasts: fantasy, gaming and archaeology

JULIA RAWCLIFFE AND ANDREW RICHARDSON

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Since the 1970s, fantasy gaming has grown from a small niche hobby to a global multi-billion-dollar industry. Whether played around a tabletop or online, millions of people, including many archaeologists, immerse themselves in imagined worlds or pasts during their spare time. There is no doubt such games provide much-needed enjoyment and escapism for their players. But do some of them also hold the potential to yield real insights into past societies, and can they help us get just a little closer to the lived experiences of our ancestors and the societies and worlds they inhabited? The modern gaming hobby and industry may be a very recent phenomenon, but the human imagination, and mythologies and cosmologies that include the fantastic, are ancient aspects of the human condition; does the fantasy genre, and roleplaying games specifically, have the potential to provide genuine insights into the past? This brief paper begins to explore some of these questions. It considers both the value of gaming for those already engaged in the serious study of the past, as well as the potential that the hobby offers as a gateway to an interest in archaeology and history for the millions of gamers worldwide.

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Introduction

Human beings have played games for millennia, and the development and playing of a myriad of games, be it for leisure, mental exercise, escapism, or as a way of modelling the world (whether real or imagined), can be viewed as a widespread, although not universal, aspect of human behaviour over space and time (see, for example, Hall and Forsyth 2011, 1326 and Parlett 1999). There is abundant archaeological evidence for the existence of gaming, and for the fantastic products of the human imagination, going back into antiquity, with competitive board games probably originating as an elite past time over 5000 years ago (Hall and Forsyth 2011, 1326; Murray 1951, 226–38). But what, if anything, have the modern gaming hobby/industry got to offer to those engaged in the serious study of the human past, and to archaeologists specifically? This paper explores that question, with a particular focus on tabletop roleplaying games (RPGs). It looks first at gaming today, before considering how the games hobby, and tabletop RPGs specifically, can act as a gateway to archaeology and a deep engagement with the past.

A further, linked, theme of the paper is "fantasy", which is a very popular genre within the modern gaming industry, especially in relation to roleplaying games. Like gaming, the fantastic is an ancient concept; the human mind has long had the capacity to range beyond the confines of tangible and apparent reality and can conjure and craft elaborate worlds of the imagination, whether they be the cosmologies and mythologies of antiquity, or the invented worlds of modern Fantasy fiction by authors such as George R.R. Martin, Clive S. Lewis or John Ronald R. Tolkien (and countless others). This paper also explores the potential of imagined fantasy settings ("crafted worlds") to provide useful insights into the cultures and societies of real past societies, through the prism of roleplaying games set in those worlds.

Gaming today

Gaming, having evolved from its origins in Antiquity, is today a multi-billion-dollar sector of the global economy. Games Workshop, founded in 1975 in a flat in Shepherd's Bush, London, is now regarded as one of Britain's most

successful companies; in January 2025 it entered the FTSE 100 Index (the list of 100 most highly capitalised blue chips listed on the London Stock Exchange) and its Chief Executive Officer was named by the Sunday Times as their business person of the year.[1] Such success is based on the widespread popular appeal of gaming. This popularity is reflected in the figures for attendance at gaming-related events such as games fairs and conventions. In August 2024, 335,000 attendees from 122 countries came to the trade fair halls in Cologne to attend *GamesCom*, one of the largest video game events in the world.[2] Later the same month, over 71,000 unique attendees made their way through the doors of the Indiana Convention Center (ICC) and Lucas Oil Stadium for *Gen Con Indy*, the self-styled "Best Four Days in Gaming", in Indianapolis in the United States.[3] Gaming, in this case, mostly meant board-games and role-playing games of the so-called pen and paper variety. And in October, the largest board game event of the year, *Spiel in Essen*, Germany, drew in 204,000 attendees from over 80 countries to seven trade halls that covered a densely crowded 62,500 square meters.[4]

Clearly, there is a considerable market for gaming, and the gaming hobby at large has long since transcended boundaries of age, maturity levels, social backgrounds, nationality, and identity. According to a study conducted by Market Analysts DFC Intelligence in 2020, around 40% of the world population were playing video games (although, admittedly, mass adoption does not necessarily equate to a hallmark of quality).[5]

The video game market is often one of the most talked about whenever the media discuss the topic of gaming, and it is, perhaps, quite likely the largest part of the gaming industry in terms of economic value and overall participation. Contributing factors to this include ease of access, as most people today possesses a device that allows them to play games, even if it is only their mobile phone. Another factor is the ease of play – not so much how easy any individual video game may be, but how easy it is to fit into the average life rhythm. They do not necessarily require other people to play with, the length of an individual play session is usually flexible, and these days often such games are more like a movie where the actions of the spectator/player affect the outcome of the story.

Whilst playing video games can sometimes be regarded (especially by family members of the gamer) as a somewhat solitary or even anti-social activity, online multiplayer games certainly do have the capacity for a strong social dimension, something movingly and powerfully illustrated in the Norwegian documentary "The Remarkable Life of Ibelin" (2024). More traditional "in-person" forms of multiplayer gaming, such as tabletop board games and the aforementioned "pen and paper" role-playing games, certainly entail a social experience, one perhaps more directly comparable to that enjoyed by gamers in the past. This social aspect of gaming is important and can be (and for many people is) a primary appeal of the hobby. But the range and diversity of games available to modern gamers is greater than at any time in the past; things have come a long way since the *Royal Game of Ur* (a two-player strategy race board game played in Mesopotamia as early as the third millennium BC: see Finkel 2007a).

Gaming the past

In a peculiar intersection of interests, many people who enjoy games also enjoy contemplating various aspects of history and archaeology. This is evident in the popularity of such video game titles as the *Assassins Creed* franchise, a game where the player takes on the role of a member of the shadowy Brotherhood of Assassins, fighting the equally shadowy secret society of the Knights Templar in a variety of historically noteworthy settings. While the accuracy of the depictions of the past are always up for scrutiny and debate, the visual spectacle provided by these games is undeniable and a feature constantly praised – to the point where some of the games of the series created a desire by many players just to wander around these re-imagined historic sites – without having to engage in any skullduggery. Indeed, one of the author's daughters, on a family visit to Florence, was able to navigate the historic heart of the city due to familiarity gained whilst playing *Assassins Creed II*, set during the Italian Renaissance.

The 12th and most recently concluded game in the series, *Assassins Creed Valhalla*, set in Norway and Anglo-Saxon England during the late ninth century AD, managed to generate one billion USD in customer revenue and had the most successful launch of the series, with some 1.8 million players reported by the publisher, Ubisoft.[6] This also reflects the enduring appeal of the Viking Age in popular culture.

The intersection between archaeology and video games is sufficiently significant to have spawned the term "archaeogaming"; a broad archaeological framework which encompasses the study of archaeology in and of video games, and the use of video games and/or virtual and augmented reality for archaeological purposes (see Reinhard 2018).

As a broad framework, there seems little reason to restrict the concept of archaeogaming to video games. Historical themes are also incredibly popular in tabletop board games. *Board Game Geek*, the largest online database of Board Games, lists over 5000 games under

Figure 1. A demonstration copy of Bretwalda, a forthcoming boardgame by PHALANX Image: Andrew Richardson.

their "medieval" tag alone, here defined as "themes or storylines set in Europe or Asia, between the fifth century (476, the fall of the Western Roman Empire) and the fifteenth century (1492, the beginnings of European overseas colonization)".[7]

Late Antique/Early Medieval northern Europe features as the setting for many games. A casual stroll around *UK Games Expo*, in Birmingham in early June 2023, revealed a wide range of titles, including games featuring Beowulf, Ragnarok, or set in Anglo-Saxon England. And a forthcoming boardgame, *Bretwalda*, by the games company PHALANX, represents the struggle for control of Britian between the warring Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (Figure 1).

Clearly there is a considerable intersection between people who enjoy games and people who enjoy historic themes. Perhaps it is based on a common ground of reading or enjoying thought-intensive hobbies in general. In the authors' own experience, gaming can certainly draw players into a deeper interest in, and engagement with, the past. This works especially well with young gamers, including teenagers, an age group sometimes regarded as challenging to engage with archaeology or history. One answer to the question "how do we engage teenagers about the past?" is definitely "get them gaming".

Gaming can also play a very direct role in setting someone on the path to a career in archaeology, as happened in the case of one of the authors (Richardson) via a game of *Call of Cthulhu*. A game of *Call of Cthulhu* (see below) is a role-playing game (RPG) replete with references to the ancient past, in which archaeologists frequently appear as characters. But what is a role-playing game?

Role-playing games

There are a great many ways to explain the essence of what a tabletop role-playing game (sometimes referred to as a "pen and paper" game) is, but fundamentally they all boil

down to a few common features. They are usually played by a group of around four to six people with one of them taking on the role of the Game Master (which depending on the game system being played might alternatively be called the Dungeon Master, Keeper et cetera). The players take on the roles of individual characters with their own special skillsets and backgrounds, while the Game Master presents these characters with the story, setting and auxiliary characters (termed "non-player characters", or NPCs) that the characters get involved in and interact with. Occasionally, when a situation could go one way or the other, various polyhedral dice are rolled to determine the outcome of such things as persuasion attempts, athletic feats or combat. When well-played and game mastered, RPGs can offer a truly immersive experience, which to some extent offers the opportunity to become someone else for a while, in a different setting, in a similar way to an actor playing a part, but without a script.

Today, role-playing games come in all shapes and flavours. Any genre of film or book has probably more than one corresponding role-playing game that could be used to generate stories in these settings. Historical settings are a feature of many role-playing games, and in some archaeologists, historians and researchers feature prominently, as they often do in other forms of media. Archaeologist is an available occupation for investigative roleplaying games such as Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu*, an RPG where player characters investigate seemingly innocent occurrences, only to find themselves confronted with strange tomes, maddening artefacts, shadowy cults and eventually, an unnameable eldritch horror beyond human comprehension from the pages of Howard Phillips Lovecraft's fiction.

An important aspect of role-playing games is the way that both the players and the Game Masters begin to interact with settings, that are, in the original sense of the word, fantastic. When no clear description of the world and the mechanisms it operates by exist, these gaps have to be filled by the players and their Game Master. Questions arise, such as "can a 'City of Thieves' function from an economic point of view?", or "what does a population of exclusively underground-dwelling, intelligent beings eat, wear or trade with?". And, it is just in the nature of the players of the game to attempt to answer these questions, even if they are of no material consequence to the real world.

Thus, the gaming hobby, and role-playing games in particular, can and do act as a gateway to a deeper engagement with the past, and with archaeology specifically, in the same way that public archaeology, and activities such as living history re-enactment, can contribute to widespread popular engagement with the past. This should be regarded as a good thing. There is a contrary view, sometimes expressed by teachers or parents, that gaming wastes time that would be better spent on studies or work. But, at least in moderation, gaming can be good for the mind, aiding memory, cognition, and mental health (see for example Palaus et al. 2017), and thus can support work and study, rather than undermine them.

But can gaming do more than that, and provide genuine insights into the past, or allow gamers, through an immersive experience, to better empathise with and understand their ancestors? That is perhaps a more controversial matter, and one which will be considered further below. Before that, the potential value of invented fantasy worlds is discussed. Have these often complex and rich works of the imagination anything to offer to those interested in the serious study of our own past?

Crafted worlds

The fantastic appears to have played a part in the human consciousness for millennia; for instance, prehistoric rock art from Indonesia dated to ca. 44.000 BP appears to show a hunting scene where the hunters are depicted as therianthropes (part-human, part animal beings), providing evidence of an ability by that date to envisage imaginary creatures (Aubert et al. 2019). And the creation of any kind of fiction, whether involving an element of the fantastic or not, and whether transmitted through oral storytelling, poetry or song, or through the written word, requires an act of imagination and some level of world building. The same holds true for the mythological and cosmological frameworks of past societies (and, arguably, of all religions). The construction of *entire* imaginary worlds (rather than those essentially rooted in, or directly related to, various versions or parts of Earth), purposely fictitious and often highly detailed, with their own internal logic and consistency, is perhaps a more recent phenomenon, and one especially associated with genres such as Fantasy and Science Fiction. The exact beginnings of the modern Fantasy genre are a major subject beyond the scope of this paper. However, the first works of fiction set in an entirely invented world are said to be those by the English socialist writer William Morris (1834–1896).[8] But it was with Tolkien's works that the modern Fantasy genre really came of age[9] and began to become the multi-billion-dollar cultural phenomenon that it now is. Tolkien's Middle Earth still stands as one of the most detailed and fully realised of all invented worlds. It is worth remembering in this context that Tolkien was also the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, and the influence of the Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian and

Figure 2. A mythic representation of the world of Glorantha. Artwork by Eric Vanel, © Moon Design Publications.

Germanic mythologies of the first millennium AD on Tolkien's Middle Earth are, of course, widely appreciated (see, for example, Bates 2002).

Many fantasy worlds have been created since, a few of which rival Tolkien's Middle Earth in their cultural (if not linguistic) depth and richness. And many of these have become settings for fantasy gaming. One, *Glorantha*, was created from the start from an anthropological and mythological perspective, and this is a good place to explore the question of whether fantasy worlds have anything useful to teach us about archaeological enquiry or can provide useful and/or immersive insights into the experience of people in antiquity.

In 1966, a mythology enthusiast from California sat down to write an account of some refugees, fleeing a place named Seshnela as it was being destroyed. Neither the refugees nor the land was real – it was just a case that the notion of creating your own mythology was so fascinating to this author, that he had been experimenting with the subject matter for a while. This author was called

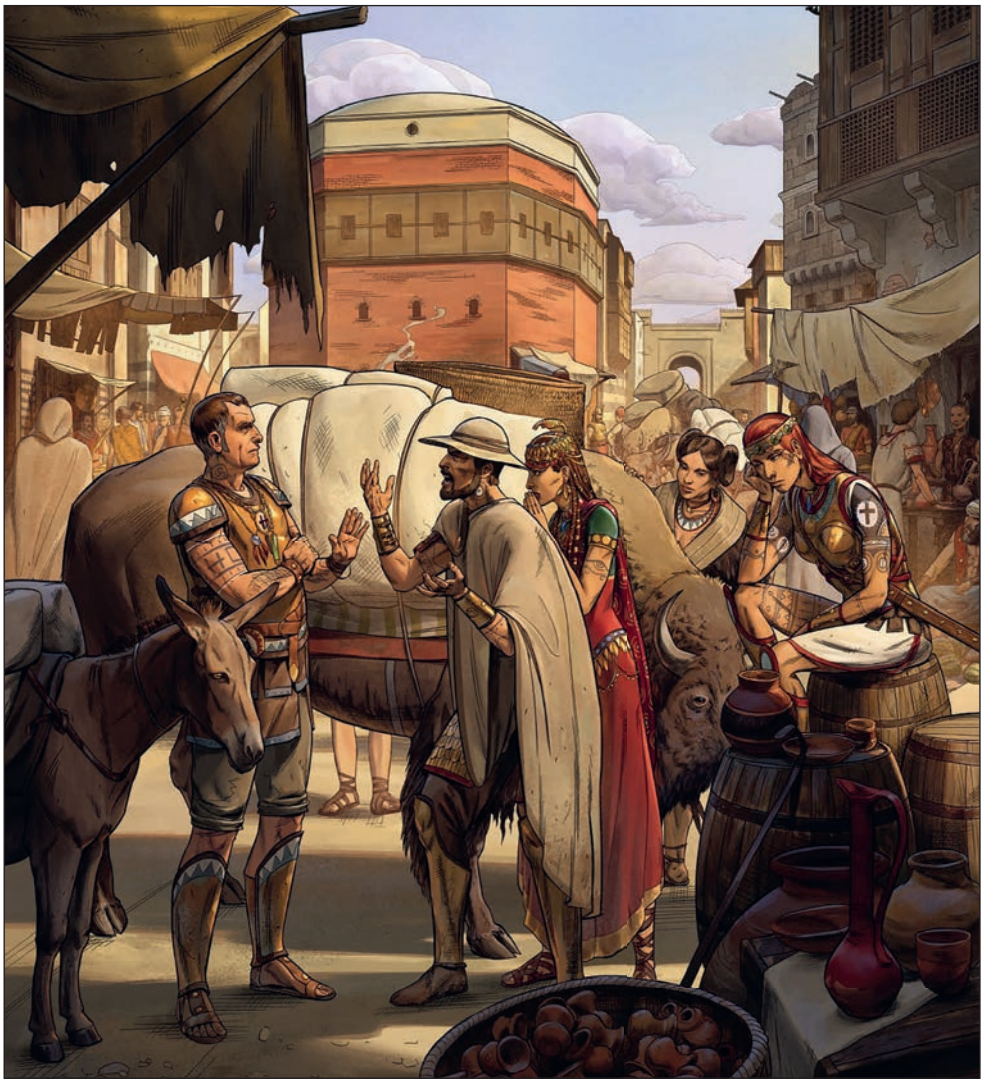

Figure 3. A street scene in the Gloranthan city of New Pavis. Artwork by Andrey Fetisov, © Moon Design Publications.

Greg Stafford and not even a decade later, in 1975, he was self-publishing a complex strategic wargame called *White Bear and Red Moon*, in which the players took on the roles of various heroes and armies, locked in an epic, world-changing battle.[10] The world in question was called Glorantha, a lozenge-shaped planet covered by a dome holding the sky and another below, holding the underworld. It was full of magic, there were gods, and a lot of strange and unusual lifeforms.

Coincidentally, only a year before *White Bear and Red Moon* was published, a man from Chicago was picking up the first print run of the game he had managed to scrape together the funding produce. This man was Gary Gygax and the game was called *Dungeons & Dragons*, often abbreviated as *D&D* (originally produced by TSR, D&D is today owned and produced by Wizards of the Coast, a subsidiary of Hasbro). It was the first role-playing game, and it continues to be the best-selling one to this day. As chance would have it, a friend of Stafford met Gygax at the printers and spontaneously bought the first copy of the game off him to send to his friend, who he knew was also working on a game at the same time. And so, Greg Stafford came to own the first copy of *Dungeons & Dragons* ever sold.

By 1978, Greg Stafford and his friends were running a game company called *The Chaosium* (today usually known simply as Chaosium) and they had developed their own roleplaying game based around Stafford's Glorantha. They named the game *RuneQuest* and, much like *Dungeons & Dragons*, it is still published and played today.

Glorantha is a mythic world, in which the sky is a dome, through which Yelm, the Sun god and Emperor of the Universe, ascends every morning before returning again every evening to the shadows of the underworld. Runes have tremendous power in Glorantha, and all beings, whether mortal or immortal, are bound to them and influenced by them. The Gloranthan cosmos (Figure 2) is inspired by, yet different from, the cosmologies and world views of real past cultures.

Over the years since Greg Stafford created Glorantha, more and more people have contributed to its development, bringing in ideas that were adopted (and sometimes later discarded again), to the point where Glorantha has developed into a highly detailed world, with its own self-contained cultural and mythological heritage that rivals that of any imagined world, and sometimes it seems almost that of the real world. This has been a great communal exercise over the course of six decades and is ongoing. Today, Glorantha stands as one of the most fully developed fantasy worlds, one that has drawn heavily on archaeological and anthropological sources to give it unparalleled depth (Figure 3). There is a huge body of published material on Glorantha, both printed and online, but for a detailed overview see in particular Stafford et al. 2014 and Stafford and Richard 2018.

Figure 4. Some of the animal tribes of Prax, as depicted in the board game Khan of Khans Artwork by Ian O'Toole, © Moon Design Publications.

To illustrate the depth of the Gloranthan cultural setting, the next section takes a focussed look at the inhabitants of Prax.

Case study: the tribes of Prax

Prax is a dry, arid land, similar to the Eurasian steppe or North American chapparal. According to the mythology of the land, the beings living there were dying because the area had become inhospitable to life. The god Waha came to the land, and one of the deeds he performed was arranging the so-called Survival Covenant – a system by which half the beings would live off what plants Eiritha, mother of Waha and also a goddess, could provide from her hiding place in the earth. The other inhabitants would live off the bodies of the former. Since all the beings agreed that this would be necessary to ensure everyone's survival, lots were drawn over several contests. This resulted in animals such as the bison, ostrich, llama, bolo lizard, rhinoceros, impala and sable antelope feeding on plant life, while the humans, who won most of the contests, taking their place as the herders and consumers of the animals. However, the Morokanth, bipedal tapir-like creatures, won their contest, and consequently earned the right to herd and eat humans (a fact that resulted in both sides accusing the other of somehow cheating

during this contest). In practical terms, this mythological past means that the different peoples of Prax live divided into their own tribes, each keeping herds of the animal that is sacred to them (Figure 4).

This subsistence model also has important mythological implications. For instance, each tribe depicts Eiritha, the Praxian mother goddess, in the guise of their own tribal animal (see Figure 5). The same deity represented in different ways by different cultural groups is, of course, a model drawn from Earth's antiquity.

This mythological background has consequences for the material culture of these tribes. A nomadic people in a land of arid steppe, who derive their food primarily from bison, for instance, would eat a diet dominated by red meat and also perhaps milk and cheese-like products. Also, the bison would be their main source of materials for crafting – namely bones, fur and horn.

If one were to imagine what a small shrine dedicated by the Bison Riders to Eiritha might look like, it seems likely that bone, horn and fur would all feature, and that it would perhaps depict a goddess in the shape of a human female but with the head of a bison. The Ostrich Riders, on the other hand, would not have immediate access to milk, fur, horn or strong bones, but instead to eggs and feathers. A votive image of Eiritha made by the Ostrich Riders would therefore perhaps take on an entirely different form, perhaps as an image carefully pierced into a particularly large eggshell, with a halo of feathers stuck into the back shell to simulate the arrangement of feathers on an ostrich.

This sort of line of thought can be spun all the way through the other tribes, categorising them in terms of whether their herd animal have fur, or a leathery hide, whether they provide workable bone or not, and what their horn, if available, might be suitable for.

All these factors would also have implications regarding trade. All tribes rely on trade with each other and with caravans that pass across and through Prax. Some trade is also conducted at the oases in Prax (which are permanently inhabited by a separate culture group), and some aspects, such as tanning, might feasibly require a degree of outsourcing to crafters who are more sedentary than the nomadic tribes. In this way, the animal nomads would be able to acquire raw or worked materials provided by the other tribes, especially if the material provided cannot be substituted through anything that their own herd of beasts can provide. However, there is then the question of whether a Praxian of a certain tribe would object to using materials from a different herd beast when it came to items of religious importance, such as the altars discussed previously. It is, after all, the depiction of their sacred goddess through materials other than those that are sacred to their own tribe. On the other hand, as the mythology goes, the same goddess provided for the other tribes, a circumstance that is not disputed. So, would it matter or would there perhaps be a cultural taboo attached to it?

Of course, there is no right or wrong answer, because there is no objective truth in this case. Everything here – Glorantha, Prax, the Tribes, the gods Eiritha and Waha – are completely made up. So then why does it matter? A non-gamer archaeologist or historian might well answer "it doesn't". But then again, many non-archaeologists might also ask "why does it matter that we think about the lives of people in the past?" In both cases, similar intellectual drives and processes are at work. Whether dealing with an invented imaginary culture, or a past culture, simply asking the subjects is not an option. Thus, if curious about an aspect of a culture, whether real or imagined, one can draw on archaeological and anthropological methods, practice and theory. A key difference that must be acknowledged is that our understanding (however flawed or partial) of past real-world societies and cultures, is founded upon a basis of material evidence (or certainly should be); this is an essential aspect of archaeology. This is not really the case in a fictional or fantasy setting. However, well-constructed fictional/fantasy settings generally do have their own internal consistency and logic, and many (including gaming settings) have a widely accepted canonical version. Whilst these aspects may be far more flexible or elastic than in the real world, they are not generally completely so, especially in collaboratively constructed settings involving multiple authors and/or players. Thus, areas of disagreement about the interpretation or representation of aspects of a fantasy setting can generate intense debates, with protagonists citing "evidence" (such as earlier, sometimes contradictory, publications) that support their point of view. Such debates can often resemble, at least superficially, the evidence-based debates that take place between archaeologists or historians about the actual past.

Do debates about such matters in fictional or fantasy settings have any real meaning? In the case of the imaginary Tribes of Prax, perhaps not. However, for a professional artist commissioned to draw a depiction of how the Bison Riders worship for a game book, they are of very legitimate concern. For a player who has decided that his or her character would like to make a votive image of Eiritha according to the customs of the tribe their character belongs to, it might be a question asked but then waved through by the *Game Master*, as being a matter of little consequence beyond providing extra colour to the narrative. But many roleplaying gamers can be obsessive

about points of detail (especially when it comes to their characters!). Some, once having considered the question, will not be able to let go of it, and it will be researched at length, debated, and then, quite inevitably, be compared to real-life examples of cultures deemed to represent the best analogy to that in question.

Thus, very many gamers playing in imagined settings like Glorantha love visiting museums in search of comparative material. They will often share newly discovered archaeological finds reported on by the media with their friends and networks, often framing the conversation in terms of relevance to a particular aspect of a game or setting. This is because their minds, almost immediately in some cases, go beyond considerations of what these objects mean in terms of the world we live in, to how these objects would enhance their interpretation of their chosen fantasy setting. They view artefacts though a dual lens of genuine appreciation for their real-world, archaeological value, alongside a vision of the place and role of artefacts in the world of imagination.

Of course, whereas the archaeologist seeks insight into the past though interpretation of material culture, the gamer or game designer might try to deduct details of the material culture of the people in their setting from their own knowledge of the imaginary culture being portrayed. However, they will usually do this by analogy with real-world cultures. Thus, there can be little doubt that archaeology provides a rich resource for games designers and gamers.

Conclusion: Gaming is good for archaeology

What, then, are some of the benefits that can be drawn from gaming for those engaged in the serious study of the human past? Firstly, gaming, and tabletop roleplaying in particular, is an important and potentially easily achievable way of engaging a very large segment of the population about the past. An adventure set in a particular historic moment can, within a few hours, teach five or six students about the people involved, their times and the way they lived and generate an overall interest in the wider subject matter, when funding a Netflix series on the topic or making an *Assassins Creed*-style game is not economically feasible and educational textbooks can't quite seem to drive the message home. The immersive nature of roleplaying is the key here; lessons that are based on a lived experience become deeply embedded.

In addition, the gaming industry is experiencing something of a golden age in terms of artwork. Whereas in the 70s, gaming artwork was often highly derivative and painted by whoever was at hand and willing, these days many companies employ professional and highly talented artists who are specialised in working according to highly detailed briefings. The results are fantastically evocative depictions of people, their clothes, goods and surroundings, and also include incredibly detailed maps and vistas. This is very similar to the way that archaeological reconstruction art is commissioned and produced. Indeed, there is a great deal of overlap between the skill sets needed by artists working to visualise imagined, fantasy, settings and those of specialist archaeological reconstruction artists. Some artists do already work in both spheres, to the benefit of both the heritage and gaming sectors.

The vast popularity of the gaming hobby, with its strong online communities, also frequently means that game-related archaeological and historical topics are widely discussed by large numbers of gamers, who, almost like a computer running a simulation hundreds of times to generate a plausible outcome, can take a hypothetical event, and filter it through a simulation that accounts for the human experience.

This process can enhance their own understanding of the challenges involved in living in a certain society. However, it also enables others to see how certain situations or events may involve, especially when comparing the outcomes of multiple groups, grappling with the same set of circumstances. The information gathered from such informal discussions might not generate something of immediate scientific value – after all, people who live today have different sets of values and due to this, nobody is capable of accurately transferring themselves into the headspace of someone who lived nearly two millennia ago, even though thinking as their character is something that most gamers get quite skilled at over time. But it does perhaps make it easier to find the moments where there is a disconnect between the experience of present-day humans and people in the past, in situations where actions or societal norms from history may initially seem very alien to the modern population. Thus gaming, and historically engaged gaming communities, have the potential help to understand different modes of thought and how modern thinking influences how the past of humanity is viewed today.

Furthermore, for archaeologists, or anyone interested in the serious study of the past, it is contended that gaming does have the potential to provide insight into that past. This can be based on playing a well-designed game that attempts to represent a historic setting. Of course, the essential unknowability of the past, and the impossibility of any objectively "true" representation of it, remains a significant problem here. But that problem applies to

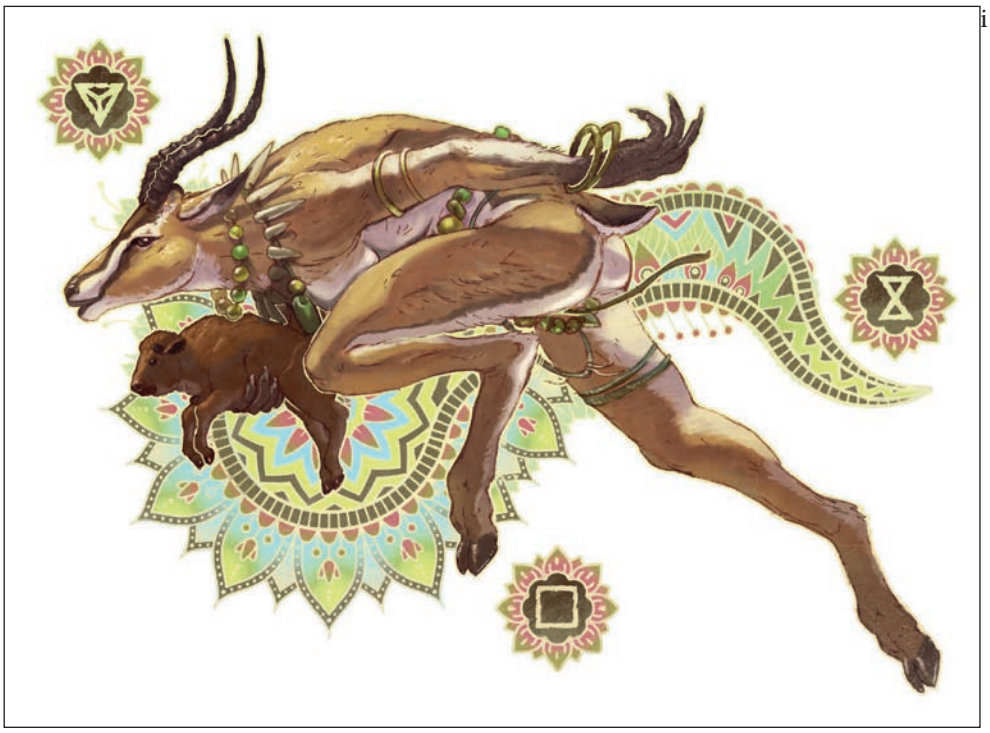

Figure 5. The goddess Eiritha as worshipped by the Impala people of Prax. Artwork by Loïc Muzy, © Moon Design Publications.

archaeology as much as to gaming. An archaeologist, historian, or gamer can try to "get inside" the head of a human in the sixth century AD (for instance), but they can certainly never actually do it. However, *trying* to get closer to that person's way of thinking and being, whilst acknowledging that it can never be wholly successful, remains a worthwhile effort; arguably, if this was not the case, there would be little point to archaeology. Pluralist approaches to attempting to engage with and understand the thinking of others, even those very different from ourselves, provide some basis for optimism in this respect (see for example Berlin 2016), other theoretical perspectives perhaps less so.

But what about games set in fantasy worlds such as Glorantha? Here the potential for useful insights into the past may not be so obvious. But it does exist. Roleplaying games are designed to provide an immersive experience, and their essence is that the player roleplays a character, getting inside their head, and their situation. There are many roleplaying games set in the historical past, including the Dark Ages of northern Europe. These do have merit, though potential errors and anachronisms (such as bales of straw in a mead hall) can jar for those with expertise in these settings. Partly for that reason, a world like Glorantha can appeal to archaeologists (and there is a long tradition of archaeologists being involved in writing or playing in Glorantha) more than historical settings. It provides a "safe space", free from any angst about historical accuracy. That doesn't mean it cannot provide genuine insights into past cultures. Just two examples include lustrating the effectiveness of gift-giving as a tool of political power, and, perhaps more fundamentally, the question of approaches to ritual behaviour. It is still possible to encounter archaeologists who seem to regard "ritual" as a separate and distinct form of behaviour from strictly functional behaviour and practices. Hence people will talk about having discovered a "ritual" site or deposit. In Glorantha, gods, spirits and magic are real and all-pervading. In that sense, it is close to the reality that many people in the past believed themselves to be inhabiting. In such a world, ritual and functional behaviour is inextricably interwound, whether cleaning the longhouse, preparing for a fertile harvest, or undertaking a cattle raid. The lived, immersive experience of inhabiting a magical and mythic reality, where ritual and functional behaviour are indivisible, has proven a most valuable insight that gaming, and gaming in Glorantha in particular, can provide.

In the end, it all comes down to a very simple observation: there is no reason why the archaeologist/historian and the gamer can't be friends, and there are many ways in which the gaming and heritage worlds intersect, usually to the benefit of each. But, if the reader is thinking that games, "fantasy" and imagined worlds like Glorantha are frivolous distractions from the study of the real past, then they would do well to remember that our ancestors inhabited a cosmos coloured, peopled and shaped by the human imagination; to understand them, one must understand that. Greg Stafford (1948–2018), creator of Glorantha, said it as well as anyone, and it seems appropriate to leave the last word to him:

> Fantasy is not so much a suspension of disbelief as it is an acceptance of our own unconsciousness. Fantasy is as old as man, beginning back in our animal history when someone had the first abstract thought. In our Western society, empirical data and rational thought have become the touchstones of experience. This is worse than cutting off half your body. The fantastic is easily half of the universe, whether you count galaxies and nucleotides or court a demon in a pentacle (Stafford et al. 2014, dust jacket).

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For online sources, see end notes.

Endnotes

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