

DUNGEONEERING
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This text focuses on the cultural origins and para-history of the fantasy dungeon, and by extension, the roleplaying game format. Positioning the form as an organic, diffuse reaction to the complex cultural phenomenon of medievalism, an array of mechanics relating to the modelling, analysis, and contention with abstract, complex or subjective forces are described.

The argument made by the majority of Medievalists that the Middle Ages are a period somewhat arbitrarily defined historically and continually reused and reinvented to promote ideological ideas about the present has existed almost as long as the definition itself. Now more a convenient metaphor and site of projection for alterity than actual history, the Middle Ages has become a 'cultural myth'—able to emphasise in relief the values of whatever the current modernity may be. Because of this constant reinvention and reuse of the Middle Ages to serve this process, contemporary Medievalisms are as much ontological as historical, referring not just to the past, but to the multifarious versions of that past—the Middle Ages as mediated by the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, or Neoliberalism are all sites that can be visited and inter-referenced; Medievalism has folded in on itself.¹

Vocabularies of Medievalism are ubiquitous and immediately understood, and yet hold no con-

1. Andrew B. R. Elliot, *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century*, Kindle ed. (Martlesham: The Boydell Press, 2017) ch.1

text. They are simultaneously visible and invisible, embodied and discorporate. 'Banal Medievalisms' abound—North American White Supremacists march with Viking-era shields bearing the insignia of St. Maurice, black patron saint of the Holy Roman German Empire,² while thousands of IKEA fake fur rugs are shipped to Belfast every year and covered in artificial snow for actors to wear in the production of *Game of Thrones*.³

This ontological contradiction and its larger consequences in attempting to comprehend the human relationship to Medievalism can be understood by classifying the source of these phenomena as an *eerie entity*. Mark Fisher repurposes the word *eerie* to describe a sensation of displaced agency, where the profoundly non-human is experienced as wielding an autonomous power.⁴ In literary terms, when something is eerie, a sense of dread is evoked through glimpses, tremors and tricks of the light that yield both failures of absence: lingering spirits, inexplicable smells and phantom doubles, and failures of presence: disembodied voices, gaps in memory and internal alien-ness.⁵ The muddled extent of human agency in such scenes provokes a questioning of the influences on humanity of complex, immaterial and inanimate forces—the paranormal having always

2. Josephine Livingstone "Racism, Medievalism, and the White Supremacists of Charlottesville." New Republic, 15 Aug. 2017, www.newrepublic.com/article/144320/racism-Medievalism-white-supremacists-charlottesville.

3. "Designing the Middle Ages: The Costumes of GoT," youtube.com, Getty Museum, 4 May 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVv1oH1hLlo.

4. Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016) p.10

5. Roger Luckhurst. "Making Sense of 'The Weird and the Eerie.'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 11 Mar. 2017, www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/making-sense-of-the-weird-and-the-eerie/.

been a method for the figuration of power that cannot otherwise be visibly expressed.⁶

If the uncanny experience of the eerie is symptomatic of larger, invisible powers, these powers themselves can be defined as *eerie entities*. As Fisher puts it, where spaces are empty of the human but still somehow animated, we might feel the echoes of an eerie entity, and are reminded “that ‘we’, ‘ourselves’ are caught up in the rhythms, pulsions, and patternings of non-human forces.”

The most significant eerie entity for Fisher is the phenomenon of capital, something that can be understood as being “at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing (...) [it] nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity.”⁷ The consequences of a systemic global engagement with capital are so various and ever-present that a holistic understanding of its relationship to the human can only be granted through its rhythms and tremors — the absurd, traumatic and profoundly non-human anomalies it produces in human life are direct experiences of Fisher’s eerie.

By considering Medievalism in the same cast, a case-study can be drawn, detailing human responses to eerie Medievalist phenomena and their ultimate collection in and encircling of the roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons* — a format that can be consid-

ered as a potential technology for not only depicting eerie entities, but communicating with them.

Before examining the formal mechanics of *Dungeons & Dragons*, I will briefly account for the circumstances leading up to the publication of the game and how Medievalism influenced its genesis. I will do so in order to give a background on how these technologies developed and why they are specifically derived from the eerie sway of Medievalism.

Dungeons & Dragons finds its most direct roots in the historical tradition of wargaming. These systems can be traced back through a history of games — the most obvious example being Chess — however it is with the inception of the Prussian ‘kriegsspiel’ in 1812 that can mark the genesis of *D&D*.⁸ Developed as a device for training military officers in the art of battle tactics, the iterations of the board game, incidentally produced over much the same time period as Neo-Gothicism, strived to find a balance between accurate representation of reality and participant comprehensibility. Kriegsspiel’s intention was, after all, to be a pedagogical military technology. The remarkable innovations in game mechanics that this research generated regarding simulation technologies were carried through into *D&D* and the majority of other roleplaying game systems — a subject that will be noted in the later section regarding simulation mechanics.

6. Robert MacFarlane. “The Eeriness of the English Countryside.” *The Guardian*, 10 Apr. 2015. www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/10/eeriness-english-countryside-robert-macfarlane.

7. *Idem*

8. Jon Peterson, *Playing at the World*, Kindle ed. (Los Angeles: Unreason Press, 2012) ch.3.

As with most military technology, the kriegsspiel slowly melted into civilian culture — however, in this case, not initially as a direct commercial conversion. Over the next century and a half, simulated war-games moved from the courts of Prussian kings to the sheds and cellars of solitary men; hobbyists tinkering with their own game systems and hosting groups of friends, or, as last resort, subjecting their wives to homebrewed battlefield simulations.⁹ Notable figures included in this pioneering phase of war gaming were Robert Louis Stevenson, father of the adventure story, who turned the events in his personally devised war games into short fictional accounts, and H.G. Wells, father of science fiction, whose published game *Little Wars* was an attempt to use the kriegsspiel as a tool for pacifism through obviating the need for real conflict. Wells created not only one of the first commercially available wargames but also the first to have a consciously anachronistic setting, so as not to be too realistic.¹⁰ Following the more widespread release of wargames like *Tactics* in the 1950's, hobbyists in the United States became unified under a number of consistent and widely available gaming rubrics. They formed clubs, tournaments and a myriad of publications to find opponents and distribute game rules; and through play-by-mail games, they carved up blocks, cities, counties and states into terrain that could be contested and held by 'generals' skilled enough at simulated strategy.¹¹

9. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, ch.1.

10. *Ibidem*, ch.3.

11. *Ibidem*, ch.1.

Given the hindsight of *Dungeons & Dragons'* dominance over the tabletop game market, the development from the mass unit war game (traditionally based around either a contemporary technological setting, like the tank warfare of *Tactics* or a specific historical setting like the European 1901 of *Diplomacy*) into the character oriented, narratively driven fantasy adventures of *D&D*, is uncannily organic; its defining qualities evolving in multiple places at once through the informal communities of the period. The specific transition from a re-enactment of a contemporaneous modern warfare setting to an exploration of Medievalist fantasy is notable here as the uprooted and eerie Medieval seems to have offered itself up to the wargamers. This began very innocuously, with the first published wargame in Medieval setting being developed mainly as a tactic for promoting pre-existing Medieval miniatures and vacuum-formed castles. These plastic castles, providing a perfect material analogy for the empty, pliable Medievalist referent, were sold by the same distributor who commissioned the ruleset, hoping to shift extra stock. This sales technique unexpectedly gained a crucial velocity granted by, despite H.G. Wells' best efforts, actual conflict: The Vietnam War.

When the letters pages of wargamer's zines became full of community members drafted into real warfare, and anti-war and counter-cultural movements in the U.S. gained traction, re-enacting the tank battles of Erwin Rommel as a leisure activity began to seem both personally objectionable and,

crucially, unprofitable for wargames publishers like Avalon Hill. Medievalism, availing itself to this growing space for genre, presented a perfect replacement. The ambiguity and unadulterated otherness of the period made it ideal for displacing the wargame into a guiltless zone, admitting the necessary levity of play. Beyond that, a popular perception of warfare in the Medieval period as polite, ordered and chivalric provided not only a comforting contrast to the chaotic, brutal and asymmetrical conflict in Vietnam, but was also mechanically sympathetic to the ludic structure of wargames. The setting provided sides that were evenly matched technologically, with agreed-upon rituals of conduct and clear victory conditions.¹²

The move to a Medieval setting enabled not only deflection of criticism from the U.S. counter-culture, but also its capitalisation. When the explosively successful paperback edition of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, brought the fantasy genre and its sword-and-sorcery forebears into the U.S. mainstream in 1965, the counter-culture began to adopt elements of its pastoral depictions of agrarian simplicity, harmony with nature and removal from modern industrial society. The feudalism and racial war intrinsic to the narrative was forgotten. A year after the book's publication, on May Day in the Summer of Love, the Society for Creative Anachronism was founded — the first 'living history' group, dedicated to re-enacting pre-17th century European cultures. The group also published *A Handbook of the (Current) Middle Ages* in

12. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, ch.2.

1968 — a manual on Medievalist clothing patterns, feudal group organisation, and the construction and use of safe, re-enactment friendly weaponry [FIG 1].¹³ The influx of plastic-castle inspired Medieval wargames that appeared at this time aligned directly with these broader cultural movements — some members of the Society for Creative Anachronism were also members of *D&D* co-creator Gary Gygax's first Medieval wargaming group, The Castle and Crusade Society, and so when Gygax's first Medieval wargame miniatures system, *Chainmail*, was published in 1971, it was a natural channelling of both of these cultural and commercial forces.

While *Chainmail* was intended to be an accurate simulation of Middle Ages warfare, it also featured an extremely significant afterthought — a short supplement covering the optional use of fantasy monsters, powerful heroes and magical abilities aggregated from the literature of Tolkien, Howard and Moorcock.¹⁴ It was this rudimentary, incidental appendage and the growing market for fantasy fiction that it tapped which gave *Chainmail* its commercial niche and success, heralding an important shift: from wargamers pursuing game systems that accurately re-enacted history to pursuing game systems that attempted to simulate something intrinsically subjective. Gygax, not having the copyright to any specific fantasy literature, was forced to instead provide a kind of toolset for re-enacting a fannish

13. The Society for Creative Anachronism, *A Handbook of the (Current) Middle Ages*. (San Francisco: The Society for Creative Anachronism Inc, 1968)

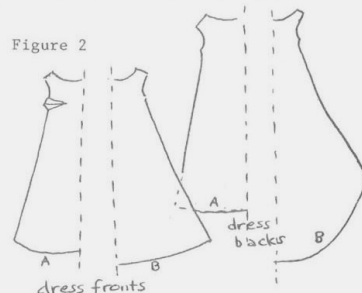
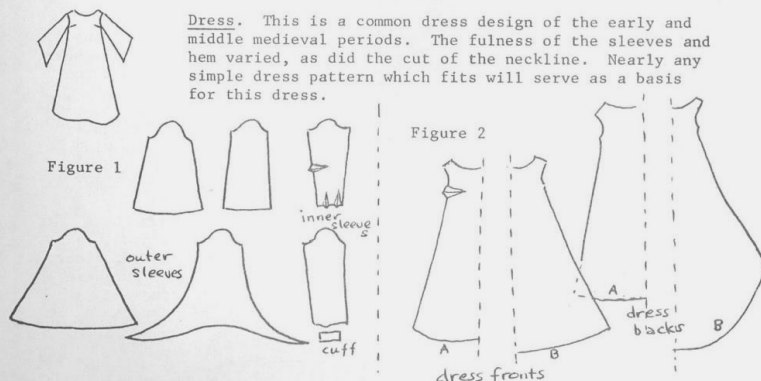
14. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, ch.2.

While I do not wish to malign the art of costume making, I suggest that you make clothes, rather than costumes. Costumes are often unable to take the strain of dancing, lounging and picnicing, to say nothing of fighting. Also, they are often less effective than clothes in the light of day. Many medieval styles are so readily sewn as to make costumery unnecessary. In selecting what you will wear to an SCA event, use common sense. Consider the nature of the event, what you will be doing, the weather, the time at your disposal, and funds. A velvet gown with yards of skirt and enormous sleeves can be very lovely, but is unlikely to remain lovely if it is worn to a tourney on a hot and dusty summer day. If dust and sweat do it no damage, picnicing and dancing probably will. There is a wide variety of styles at your disposal. Some of these I'll discuss a little later.

Women's Clothing

Early Medieval European women's clothes tended to be long loose dresses with long sleeves. Many robes and towel dresses are good approximations of these styles. Also, they can be made very quickly, since there is little fitting and few seams involved. Most peasant costumes are quite suitable; if you have such clothing do not fear to wear it. Since we do not require European garb, a sari or kimono is quite acceptable. If your garb implies an action, you may be asked to demonstrate it. You need not comply, of course, but do not dress as a harem dancer if you would be embarrassed by a request to perform.

Please note that my tailoring instructions are not completely authentic. If this offends you, there are many texts available for more accurate patterns. Darts and set-in sleeves are relatively recent innovations. Medieval dresses which were not terribly loose had gussets. A truly authentic dress is likely to appear clumsy to the modern eye.



amalgam of popular fantasy concepts, allowing for the same kind of selective reading that the pastoral counter-cultural movement had made of *Lord of the Rings*. As we will come to see, this notion was hugely important to both *Dungeons & Dragons* and potential communications with the eerie. Additionally, in *Chainmail*, a nascent form of the titular dungeon from *D&D* can be seen — here implanted, cuckoo-like, as a briefly ruled outline for how siege tunnels in castle sieges could be secretly mapped on graph paper and administered by a referee. It is appropriate that these subterranean spaces began life as siege tunnels. By examining one final eerie tale leading up the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons*, concerning the Blackmoor Campaign, we can see the uncanny way by which these spaces clandestinely burrowed themselves into the imagined territory of Blackmoor, and finally the title of the game.

The Blackmoor Campaign of *D&D*'s co-creator Dave Arneson began life as a series of Medieval multiplayer sessions of *Chainmail* set in a shared universe he had invented, where participants played versions of themselves transported to a fantasy world to hold command over armies and territories. The characters and world they collectively imagined was persistent between play sessions, and so naturally, the players increasingly began to place narrative focus on their individual characters defending the Kingdom of Blackmoor from evil and taking occupation of its castle — inevitably another vacuum-formed plastic structure [FIG 2]. Once, however,

FIG 1.

Scanned page of clothing advice from *A Handbook of the (Current) Middle Ages*. The Society for Creative Anachronism, *A Handbook of the (Current) Middle Ages*. 1968. pg. 13

this castle was taken, Arneson struggled to find further challenges for the players — in a narrative sense, they had reached the end of their third act. In an effort to extend the playability of his game, Arneson used Gygax's siege tunnel rules to create a hidden, labyrinthine system of underground passages, accessible from the cellars of Blackmoor Castle, containing enough traps, monsters, puzzles and treasure to occupy his players. This simple adaptation had remarkable consequences, both for the fantasy world of Blackmoor and roleplaying games in general: The empty void defined by the interior of the plastic castle mould, symbolic of the empty Medieval, was finally filled. Medievalism's hollow core was now riddled through with an improbably syncretic space combining prison, maze, Egyptian tomb, story structure and animal lair: *the dungeon*. Arneson's players, suddenly finding rich new territory right under their feet, eschewed their large armies and began to traverse the tunnels as individual characters, finding this system of subterranean exploration and adventure so addictive that the rest of the Kingdom of Blackmoor was left to wither. Its lands and citizens became a vestigial component of the fiction, shrinking in size and complexity as the tunnels grew ever deeper, eventually forcing Arneson to reclaim narrative sovereignty over the castle in order to maintain the fidelity of the world.¹⁵

15. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, ch.1.



FIG. 2.

Archival catalogue images of Elastolin-brand vacuum-formed castles—literally empty Medievalist signifiers, frequently used in Blackmoor, *Chainmail* and modern era wargaming. Elastolin, *Elastolin: Past & Present*, Castles & Fortifications. www.elastolin.nl/pagina110.html

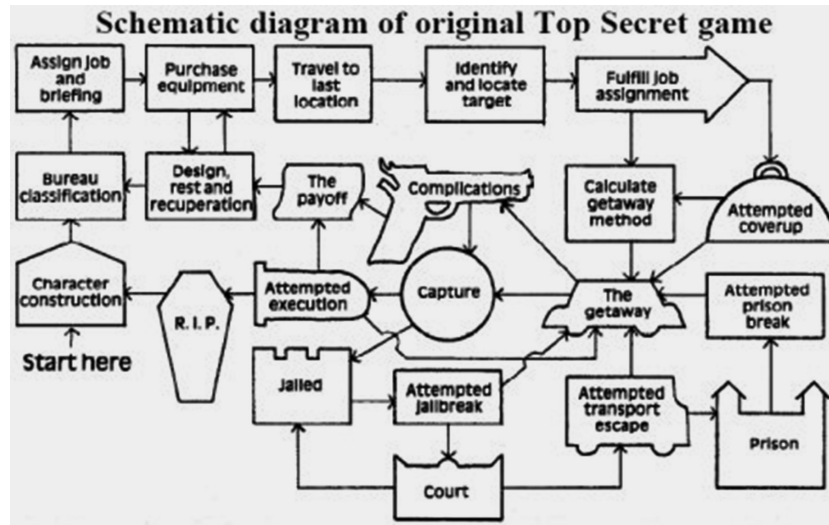


FIG 3. Diagram demonstrating the use of a dungeon structure to plot a spy genre roleplaying narrative. Jeff Rients. 'top secret flowchart' *Jeff's Gameblog*, Suddenly... espionage!, 29 Oct. 2006. www.jrients.blogspot.com/2006/10/suddenly-espionage.html

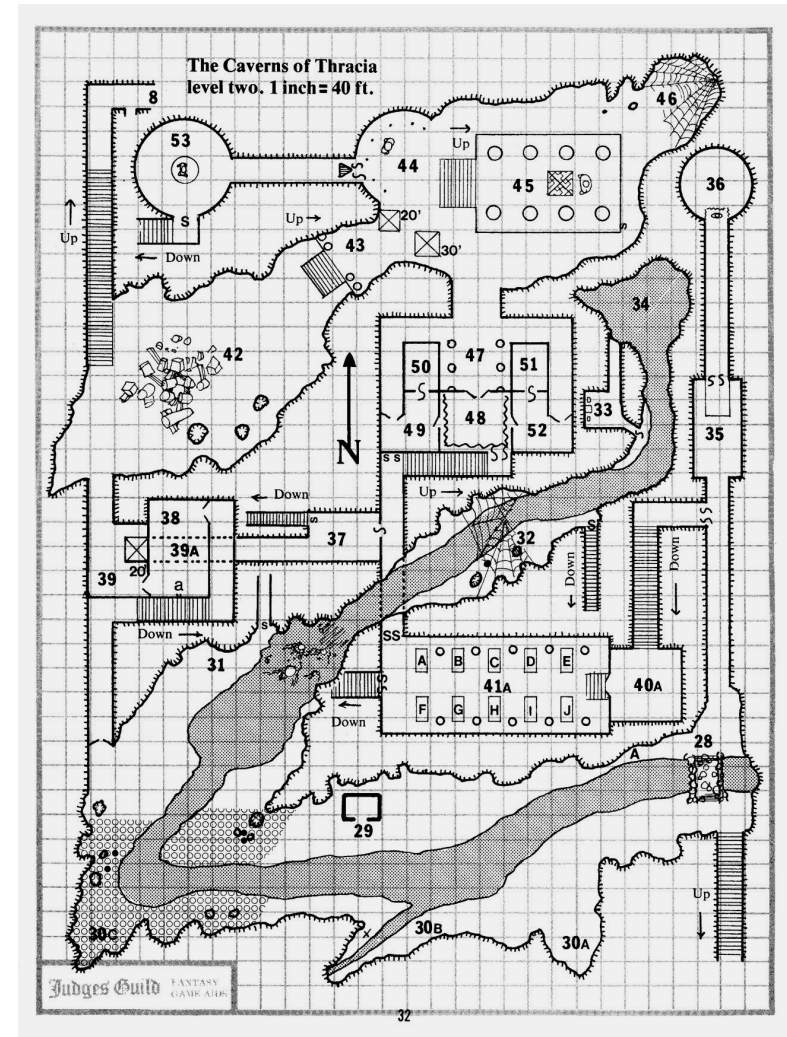


FIG 4. Dungeon map from Paul Jaquays' *The Caverns of Thracia* D&D module, showing a trademark multitude of entry points and spatial interconnections. Paul Jaquays. 'The Caverns of Thracia level two'. *Judges Guild no.102: The Caverns of Thracia*, Judges Guild 1979, p.32

As a conceptual architecture, the dungeon is indelibly a space of ambiguity, interpretation, and potential. It is, as with much of *D&D*, a method of categorisation rather than content. A dungeon does not necessarily have to be an underground labyrinth — it could be a journey through a forest, an interrogation scene or an escape from a crowded city. It is always broken down, in mechanical terms, to a series of interconnected spaces, events or narrative beats, [FIG 3] generated and known privately by the game referee (Dungeon Master) — which are gradually revealed by the exploration of the players. In the decades since the format tunnelled through Blackmoor and into our world, dungeon design has developed into its own theoretical field, with various schools and terms named after famous ‘dungeoneers’ — ‘jaquaying’ a dungeon, for example, means providing non-linear pathways and multiple types of exploration in the style of Paul Jaquays [FIG 4].¹⁶ The sustained emphasis on these spaces feeling like immersive, reactive environments has produced a paradoxical form — both inert, awaiting revelation by the player as a book waits to be opened, and simultaneously active — a mathematically derived ecology of simulated forces and beings that interact with the dungeon irrespective of player behaviour.

This undead architecture, at once still and moving, and like Fisher’s definition of the eerie, at once absent and present, often translates very liter-

ally in terms of dungeon content — most classic dungeon designs outline spaces with complex histories. They translate into sites that have accreted multiple functions over time and display them all at once: an ancient burial cairn is now the hideout of a band of brigands, or giant beasts have dug tunnel nests into an abandoned stronghold. These multi-layered — and laired — environments provide a formal, spatial representation or cognitive mapping of the complexity of eerie subjects — sprawling, complicated structures that intersect with human interaction in unusual ways. The best and most elegant dungeon designs achieve a strange form of poetry. Through suggestions and implications given by their environment, the players slowly piece together the context and history of their surroundings node by node, ultimately enabling them to engage more fundamentally with the fabric of the world [FIG 5]. Like a poem, information in a dungeon is encoded in a way that requires active reading, where the quality, method and affect of reading is intrinsically part of the work — in the case of the dungeon, however, the mechanics of the game system allow this active reading to happen not only outside the text, but within it — a poem where the words change around you as you read. This notion of a systematised, active process of reading highlights one of the unique aspects of roleplaying games; they are texts where the experiential and the structural can be totally flattened, and where very literally the map can also be the territory. As will be detailed later, the application of this to the eerie can

16. Justin Alexander “Jaquaying the Dungeon” The Alexandrian, 23 July 2010, www.thealexandrian.net/wordpress/13085/roleplaying-games/jaquaying-the-dungeon.



FIG 5.

First page of a random table of one hundred caves, taken from underground megadungeon book made by contemporary D&D bloggers Patrick Stewart and Scrap Princess. This section describes a number of caves within a potential dungeon. Each area also functions as a short, suggestive poem. Patrick Stewart and Scrap Princess, 'One Hundred Caves'. *Veins of the Earth*, Lamentations of the Flame Princess, 2017. pg. 263

be surprisingly straightforward. An eerie experience or entity can be both explicitly manifested within the text of the game as some kind of non-human force, and experientially conveyed through game mechanics that affect player behaviour.

If this comment on the textual quality of the roleplaying game sounds familiar to those with an understanding of videogame criticism, this is not a coincidence. The relationship the dungeon format creates between player, dungeon-master and dungeon is a predecessor of not only the player, interface and algorithms of a videogame, but also the relationship between user, interface and computation in digital computing more broadly. The dungeon master acts an interface or medium, translating the inputs of their players into mechanics and revealing information and consequences in exchange. The dungeon format of periodic, interconnected compartments of information should infer an obvious structural connection to how humans interact with digital technology.

Beyond this structural resonance, the link between the dungeon and the digital is explicit—some members of the computer sciences departments at MIT and Stanford were also participants in the Blackmoor Campaign, and following the huge popularity of *Dungeons & Dragons*, by 1977 there was a new group of hobbyists attempting to translate roleplaying games onto their budding computer hardware.¹⁷ Hoping to replace the refereeing,

17. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, ch.5.

calculation and information storage roles of the dungeon master with what they perceived as a fast, infallible and truly neutral machine mind, students and technicians worked overnight, secretively utilising the spare computing cycles of the university's large, expensive machines, used by daylight for scientific processes. Risking the total deletion of all of their work or reprimands for wasting processing power, the technicians, like the fictional sappers of Gygax's siege tunnels in *Chainmail*, were furtively filling the spare memory of their machines with subterranean tunnels, creating large interconnected dungeons that could be explored by, as with a dungeon master, speaking directly to the machine [FIG 6]. "YOU ARE IN A MAZE OF TWISTY LITTLE PASSAGES, ALL DIFFERENT," spoke one prototype, prompting the user to type in commands in response.¹⁸ The experiments at MIT and Stanford show that the very first digital virtual space ever created was, in fact, the dungeon, and our entire understanding of virtual spaces after this point are defined by this.

While the legacy of these experiments with regards to videogames is clear—contributing to the ubiquity and banality of the fantasy genre within any given gaming format today—this development is also relevant due to its impact on development of computer interfacing. We currently relate to these non-human modes of cognition by accessing pockets of information through dialogue - exactly as we relate

18. Dennis G. Jerz "Somewhere Nearby is Colossal Cave: Examining Will Crowther's Original 'Adventure' in Code and in Kentucky," *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, 2007, www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/001/2/000009/000009.html.

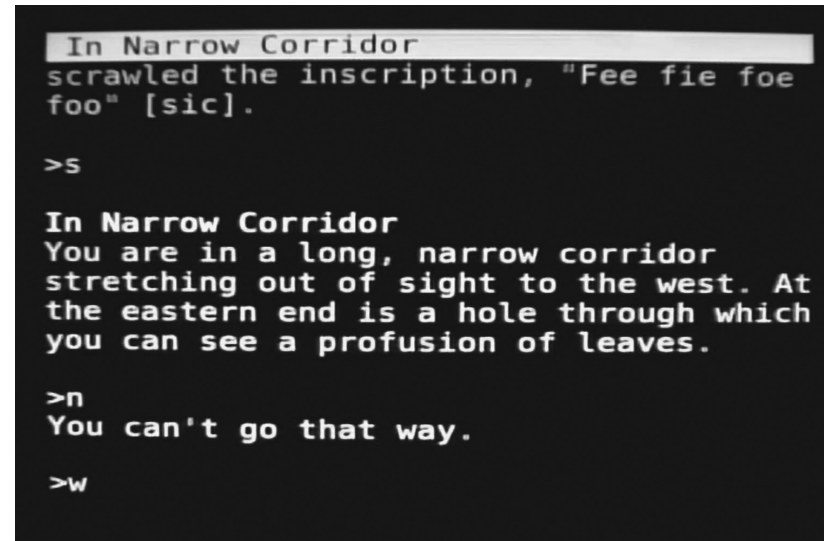


FIG 6.

Still from an online play-through of William Crowther's 'Colossal Cave', the first text-based adventure and one of the earliest virtual spaces. Glade Swope, 'Colossal Cave Adventure play-through'. *YouTube*, Jan. 19 2016. www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3etkSoHrR8 (video still)

to a dungeon. The architecture of a file structure or web 1.0 site mirrors precisely that of a *D&D* dungeon design—these are all hypertexts, database narratives—and it can be claimed that the dungeon of Blackmoor Castle provides both the original hypertext and the tools for reading it. This is significant to an engagement with the eerie, not only because of its legacy and implications regarding simulation technology, but also because our contemporary human relationship to computing is, albeit being nascent, rigid and highly proscribed, imminently adjacent to the much wilder notion of having a relationship with the incalculably complex and malleable systems that comprise eerie entities.

The dungeon is a labyrinthine embassy for the eerie, giving architectural form to Medieval fantasy. It presents the final, key component of the success of the original *Dungeons & Dragons*—a referee driven storytelling game in which players take on roles of individuals, exploring and adventuring in indefinite spaces that allow them interactions with otherworldly beings.

Mechanically, *Dungeons & Dragons* contains a number of tools significant in their construction in relation to Medievalism, and, as technological mechanisms, are thereby potentially extricable to approaching eerie entities more generally. In the following section, the most significant of these devices will be detailed, including, where possible, their non-*D&D* origin or application in order to begin to see how they might

pertain to communicating with eerie entities beyond just the Medieval.

As has already been noted, *D&D* relies on the concept of simulation—its system of rules function as a model of certain characteristics relating to a combination of the physical laws of reality and the genre conventions of fantasy fiction, which are then operated over time by the players. The science of simulation began its contemporary ascendance during the same period as the *kriegsspiel*—the growing use of statistics by newly unified, modern states naturally feeding into their military technology through the concept of probability. It is hard to underestimate how radical the notion of using statistic-informed chance both in game play and the burgeoning field of probability theory was at the time. To illustrate, Rieswitz, the creator of the *kriegsspiel*, was compelled to design a playing dice so visually distinct from a conventional one that not even the slightest association with gambling would be possible—the sinful pursuit of luck being the only conceivable use for random chance before the invention of probability.¹⁹

As a product of the Enlightenment and the nation state, simulation, probability and statistics are of course open to the same criticisms—something far too large and well-trodden to detail here. It is perhaps in the critique of high modernity through urban and cultural planning, where statistics and probability were specifically used as tools for designing new, complex environments, that a more specific

19. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, ch.3.



FIG 7.

Wargamers at the RAND corporation circa 1950s, a dark void under the table. The RAND Corporation, 'The Serious Role of Gaming at RAND'. *Rand Corporation*, date unknown, www.rand.org/multimedia/audio/2017/03/23/the-serious-role-of-gaming-at-RAND.html

analogous critique of simulation can be read. High modernism's disregard for locality and organic interaction and its emphasis on standardisation and legibility can equally be applied to the concept of simulation.²⁰

To expand on this, another experimental military simulation by the RAND Corporation provides a useful example — *Towards a Cold War Game*. In the late 1940s, the Social Science Division at RAND, most of whom were war gaming hobbyists, were tasked with formalizing political and financial factors into a mathematical system susceptible to their existing methods of analysis — essentially expanding the original notion of the *kriegsspiel* outwards to encompass the wider implications of warfare [FIG 7]. Every attempt, however, to systematize these abstract political factors introduced unsatisfactory levels of simplification — there was no possible way of developing a rigid system that would account for the complexity and specificity of politics. Ordered by the U.S. government to create a system for communicating with the eerie entity of global political dynamics, the SSD managed only to create incomplete and static depictions. Following these failures, the scientists turned to more experimental, socially oriented methodologies partly inspired by the political wargame *Diplomacy*, which contains no dice rolls or chance. The result, *Towards a Cold War Game*, pushed *Diplomacy*'s mechanical minimalism even further: containing no systematic mechanics whatsoever, the

20. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like A State* (Yale: Yale University Press 1999) p.4.

game simply involved the players assuming the roles of different parties involved in the Cold War and taking turns submitting written moves of any kind of a panel of judges who would qualitatively assess their efficacy. The value of *Towards a Cold War Game*, therefore became not about creating a high-modernist and mathematically precise, standardised model, but rather to channel the qualitative expertise and knowledge of the players and judges into an iterative process where potential events might be played out.

D&D and its descendants take this qualitative simulation further by, as detailed above, attempting to provide a simulation framework for the consciously unreal. The data both inputted and outputted from the simulation is highly interpretive, intending to be a generatively random framework rather than a prediction of events. As with the intricate systems of the real world, there is also an upward limit on human comprehension of complexity within roleplaying game design. This is evidenced by the attempted *D&D* successor, *Chivalry & Sorcery*, which boasted having a vast advantage over the original by adding a far more detailed and comprehensive system of mechanics to the basic game—providing calculation models for increasingly minute actions the players might take. However, despite being praised for its thoroughness and accuracy, its players, lacking the black box calculation of computing, eventually gave up on *Chivalry & Sorcery* for being restrictively complex,

favouring the more simplistic but interpretive rules of *Dungeons & Dragons*.²¹

This interpretive system is important to contending with the eerie—by creating a subjective simulation, it is possible to outline *genre*. In combining multiple fantasy elements into one systemic model in *Chainmail*, Gygas formalised the fantasy genre into a series of adaptable tropes, creating an accessible fantasy DIY kit that lowered the bar for entry by the audience.²² Once something is defined as genre, it is visible: it can be named, criticised, modified and held in the hand. Gygas's process of amassing and converting myriad fantasy elements into one system is now the standard procedure for roleplaying game design. Games oriented around science fiction, horror or romance all seek to mechanically formalise the characteristics of those literary tendencies into a recognisable system adaptable by the player. In the context of the eerie, this process can be extrapolated from the imaginary to the real—*D&D* provides the formal outlining of a certain kind of Medievalism. When this idea is expanded beyond its Medievalist roots, the creation of interpretive models formalise tropes of other complex and invisible eerie entities—capital, for example, may not allow a high modernist universal control system, but a kind of relational cognitive mapping. Then, a model might be created that allows complexity to be tangible and malleable without needing to be entirely com-

21. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, ch.5.

22. *Ibidem*, ch.4.

prehensible. In other words, an entirely algorithmic system may not allow interaction with the eerie, but something that combines the interpretive model of *Towards A Cold War Game* with the structural representation of the dungeon, just might.

A useful classification here can be drawn from the traditional, literary use of the eerie: the supernatural. A less allegorical school of supernatural thought proposes a distinction within contact with the otherworldly: depiction and invocation. It may eventually be possible to create a very accurate mathematical simulation of an eerie entity despite its complexity—as is done with, for example, weather prediction—but in supernatural terms, this would merely be a depiction; a static representation of a limited model, open to many of the same failures as high modernism and the initial experiments of the RAND corporation. An interpretive, genre-forming simulation may allow for a tactile, human scale interaction and is something closer to an invocation—inferring a kind of visceral, embodied dialogue with the entity through possession, conjuration or command.

To conclude this section, it is interesting to note that interpretive simulations have a history of communicating directly with eerie entities—in the play-by-mail wargames of the 1960s, players struggled to find a fair method for using randomly generated numbers—the outcome of a dice roll by someone in Illinois being completely unverifiable as truly random by someone in Minnesota. Eventually, they settled on a nationally recognised standard of veri-

fiable chance: The financial market. Many play-by-mail game mechanics were redesigned in order to use a system where shares of a chosen stock traded on a particular date served as the surrogate for a dice—as if the invisible hand of Adam Smith were rolling it.²³ In this we might see the much larger and complex entity of capital passing us by, tantalisingly adjacent to the budding roleplaying game system, like a blue whale passing above a deep ocean probe.

The next technology that *D&D* provides is interlinked with its simulation—its use of taxonomy. As game historian Jon Peterson says, “a game cannot model combat with an orc if an orc might equally well be a whale, or a blind giant, or three-headed, or simply a goblin.”²⁴ To that end, Gygas began a process of classification that reached fruition with the publication of the *Monster Manual* in 1977—a statistical grimoire of entities for players to interact with. In order to function within the rule set of *D&D*, players necessarily had to conform to a basic universal set of mechanics. Indebted to Tolkien’s addition of clear racial specificity to the previously amorphous creatures of folktales and myths, Gygas created a modular taxonomy of beings drawn not only from fantasy tropes but also from ancient myths, fairy stories, Hollywood cinema and a bag of plastic toys from Hong Kong. By classifying these creatures, the *Monster Manual* definitively linked the names of

23. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, ch.3.

24. *Ibidem*, ch.2

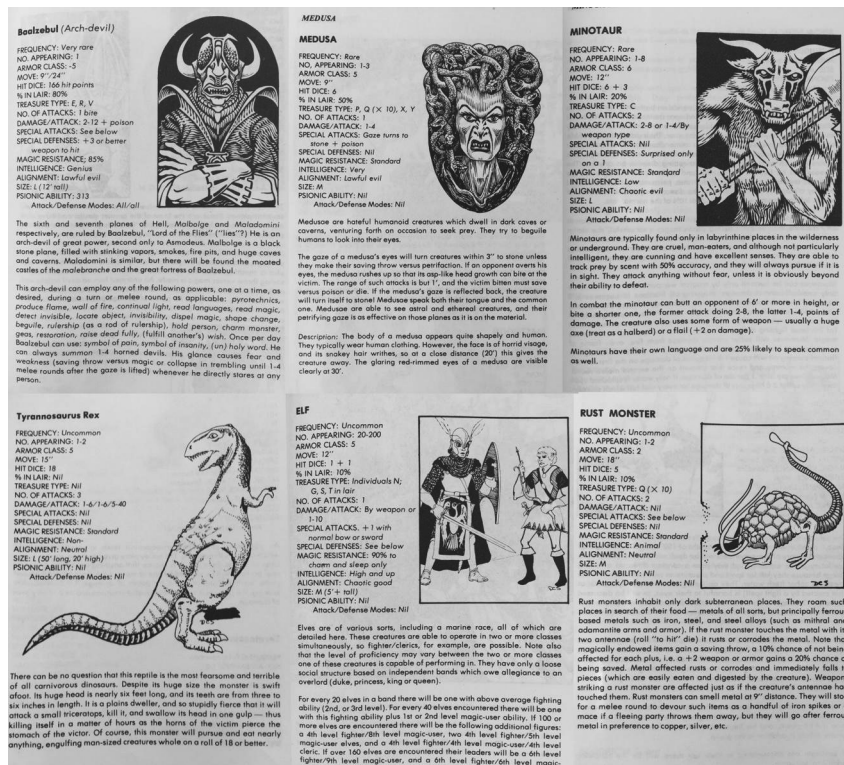


FIG 8.

Composition of various monsters featured in the original *Monster Manual*, deriving clockwise L-R from: Christian Literature, Greek Myth, Palaeontology, Tolkien and a plastic toy from Hong Kong. Gary Gygax with David C. Sutherland III, D.A. Trampier, Tom Wham and Jean Wells. *Monster Manual*. Lake Geneva: TSR Games 1977

monsters to particular physical characteristics and behaviours, establishing a widely understood baseline of classification that still fundamentally persists in popular culture.²⁵ Due to its influence over the fantasy genre, even those without direct exposure to the game are likely to have a passing understanding of the characteristics of orcs and goblins which will be as much informed by *Dungeons & Dragons* as they are by Tolkien and earlier fables.

Additionally, through forcing these disparate beings to conform to a basic set of distinctions, a kind of mathematical ecosystem was forged. A leprechaun, a hydra, a dinosaur and the prince of hell could all be posited as existing on the same plane of equivalence, with a system in place to indicate the consequences of their interactions [FIG 8]. This approach is typical of *D&D*'s tendency to formalise categories rather than contents. Once the distinction of player class, species or monster type is established, it becomes very straightforward for the user to make their own additions based on these classifications. Ultimately, the *D&D* system is infinitely extendable, but still narratively cohesive.²⁶

Through its use of modular categorisation and emphasis on narrative, *D&D* conducts a kind of re-mooring, although not by attempting to reverse the process of Medievalism and re-attach the Middle Ages to its historical context. Instead *D&D* formulates tropes of the Medieval into a consistent

25. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, ch.2.

26. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, ch.5.

taxonomy that uses a basic, interpretive system of storytelling defined by the relationships between categories. Unlike factual, historical contextualisation, this approach maintains the plasticity of the eerie Medieval, but, like the interpretive simulation, ratifies relationships between its characteristics. *D&D* refills empty referents, like the void in a vacuum-formed castle being tunnelled through with interlinking dungeon corridors.

Within a year of *Dungeons & Dragons* being released, a slogan began reverberating through the various fanzines of the war gaming community: “D&D is too important to leave to Gary Gygax.” Gygax had very quickly lost control of his creation. By 1976, it was nearly impossible for his publishing company to legally distinguish between home-made alterations, unlicensed anthologisations, entirely new game systems or outright pirate versions of the game. Their offices received an unmanageable deluge of fan-made content whilst the thriving DIY wargaming community happily modified, incorporated and redistributed their own additions to the game system.²⁷ This anti-authorship mantra, while obviously not a desired outcome for Gygax, is indicative of a certain kind of viral success the game had — made possibly entirely by its interpretive system — which, as detailed above, gave primacy to categories over specific content, allowing for a modular expansion of the game’s core systems. While later iterations of

the game presented a unified, copyrightable fantasy realm in the style of Tolkien’s *Middle-Earth*, incidentally based on Arneson’s Blackmoor campaign, Gygax’s initial rules were as noted, a kind of fan agglomerate which required the individual referee or Dungeon Master to shape into a cohesion of world building and significantly, a style of gameplay suited to their specific player group. No stranger to autonomous, open-source production from the wargaming days, the hobbyist community created not only myriad variations and additions to *D&D*, but also planted the seeds of many other roleplaying games that followed — *Dungeons & Dragons* becoming as much a movement or format as a single intellectual property. This collaborative generation persists in contemporary roleplaying primarily through online blog communities — Dungeon Masters post their own gameable content for others to implement in game sessions in an autogenerative, kaleidoscopic feedback loop. It’s possible to take, for example, the world-building concepts from one blog author, a mechanic for diplomacy from another, and a random generator table of ancient curses from a third, and allow these elements to organically intermingle through exposing them to a group of players, ultimately feeding the results back to the original authors. The formal structure of the dungeon very clearly demonstrates this open-source user modularity — the architecture of one dungeon can be made up of rooms designed by many different authors. Beyond this providing a further distinction between

27. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, ch.5.

the interpretive modelling of *D&D* and the universal standardisation of the empirical simulation, the autonomous communal volition and collaborative content generation provided by roleplaying hobbyists presents a method for reconciling multiple subjectivities into a single cohesive system. This is vital for contending with the eerie. If, as this text proposes, interpretive simulations are preferable to standardised simulations for invoking abstract entities, these user-determined interpretations of an eerie force will obviously all differ, not really offering any advance on the total formlessness and plasticity of the original abstract entity. By providing a modular framework, *D&D* allows these subjective interpretations to not only co-exist, but actively integrate—invoking the eerie may prompt us to all build separate rooms, but the dungeon allows them to coexist as one architecture, and for a narrative to inhabit and animate them.

The importance of human interaction and interpretation is crucial in holding together this modular system—unlike their computerised descendants, these games use humans as a vessel—the collective willingness of the players to create a cohesive narrative filling in the absences or discrepancies of the system. In this way, it is possible to see the game system itself having a kind of agency autonomous from the intentions of the players. Perhaps the easiest analogy would be the Ouija Board—a tool for automatic writing or spirit communication which is currently produced and sold by boardgame publish-



FIG 9.

A 1970's U.S. advertisement for the Ouija board, positioning it as both a boardgame and a method for seeking ghostly advice on love, money, school and travel—all potentially sites of the structurally eerie. Famous Parker Games, 'Ouija's Weird! Ouija's Wonderful'. *The Occult Museum*, 'The Mysterious History of the Ouija Board'. www.theoccultmuseum.com/mysterious-history-ouija-board/

ers [FIG 9].²⁸ By each participant placing a hand on the planchette of the Ouija, its movements and the words they spell out are purported to be the voice of spirits—this claim can be made as the movements of the planchette do not belong to a single individual, but the collective motion of all the hands in play. This unconscious collaboration works in exactly the same way as the willingness for narrative cohesion in *D&D*, and has the potential to, like the Ouija Board, allow spirits to gain agency through the collective will of human participants.

So far I have illustrated how certain technologies derived from *Dungeons & Dragons* can create a system by which eerie entities can be invoked, given subjective form, and granted agency through human collaboration. Once the entity is invoked, there is one final technology that allows us to speak back to it—the act of roleplaying.

As with much of *D&D*, the notion of roleplaying entered the game completely incidentally and organically, despite ultimately becoming specific enough to define an entire genre of gaming. In the pre-*D&D* wargaming period, players often adopted the characters and tactics of historical and fictional generals to add flavour to their games, further immersing themselves and avoiding the stale repetition that simply playing a game as mechanically successfully as possible would eventually provide. As

detailed in the account of Blackmoor campaign, the invention of the dungeon incentivised players to cast off their armies and continue as individual adventurers, meaning they would return to inhabit the same character periodically throughout the campaign, were less concerned with balancing the numbers and managing the mechanics of their forces and more occupied with their individual narrative journeys. Jon Peterson defines a spectrum between two types of voice within a roleplayer: the *immersed* voice and the *detached* voice. The immersed voice is diegetic, emulating the kinds of speech and behaviour that fictional entities within the fantasy itself might make, while the detached voice treats the game as a game rather than the fantasy that it models. Where players sit on this spectrum depends not only on the specifics of the game system, the playstyle of the dungeon master, and the individual proclivities of the players, but can also continually oscillate at any point during a game; a player conversing in-character to a creature portrayed by the dungeon master can immediately detach, zooming out and speaking to the dungeon master as a player to clarify a rule or suggest a mechanic before again switching back to her immersed voice.²⁹ Returning to the analogy of the Ouija board, the paradoxical dual-voice approach of *D&D* translates as both accepting that the planchette is being moved by the hands of the players, but also a willingness to, despite this knowledge, immerse oneself in the premise of the Ouija being a genuine method of com-

28. "Ouija Game," Hasbro, www.hasbro.com/en-us/product/ouija-game:86117134-5056-9047-F5E1-46EB2553A56A.

29. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, ch.4.

munication with spirits. This fluidity of diegesis and conscious suspension of disbelief provides a powerful tool for communicating with the eerie — like performing a ritual, a participant can recognise that they may be taking part in something absurd, speculative or fantastical, and yet still fully immerse themselves in the act. In such instance, both a detached view of the system and its immersed human affect can be experienced — as Mark Fisher says of the eerie, the outside can be seen from the inside.

Roleplaying's mechanical role is intrinsic to the type of interpretive simulation proposed in this text as a method for interacting with the eerie. While roleplaying has its own roots and relevancies in therapy, theatre and pedagogy, its incorporation into simulation technology and consequently game design began in the 1950s with the aforementioned tale of the scientists experimenting at the RAND corporation. With *Towards a Cold War Game*, roleplaying became implicated in simulation technology in the same way as probability: through military research. Both the participants in the game and the panel of judges who assessed their moves were required to operate simultaneously in the detached voice, weighing political cause and effect from their own expertise, and the immerse voice, considering the individual responses of their respective roles relative to the new historical circumstances being generated. In this way, it was perhaps one of the first uses of simulation technology that could communicate directly with an eerie subject.

To expand on how this 'channelling' might work in the quite literal sense of direct communication, the roleplaying podcast *Friends at the Table* provides the closest possible example. Posited as a 'critical world-building' podcast, each season begins with the participants discussing what kind of narrative they want to tell, what sort of environment they want to inhabit and what topics they want to address. The show runner and dungeon master, Austin Walker, then formulates this input into the world-building for a roleplaying campaign, which is then played out and recorded over hundreds of hours and a deep emotion attachment to the characters, moving between different game systems to suit different scales and types of story that happen within the world. Specifically to *Friends at the Table*, large and complicated topics of queer identity, cultural appropriation, political accelerationism, transhumanism and ethics of technology are imbued within the world-building and are tackled both directly by the immersed voices of the players through their characters, but also more abstractly by their detached voices discussing aspects of the world-building.³⁰

Curiously, in addition to this folding in of complex and abstract ideas, many of the scenes that play out in *Friends at the Table* involve communicating with diegetically eerie beings. Whether playing in a fantasy or sci-fi setting, the players often find themselves making deals with ontologically incomprehensible entities — undying, all powerful gods, history erasing spirits, or impossibly advanced artificial

30. Austin Walker, *Friends at the Table*, www.friendsatthetable.net.



FIG 10.

Composition of fanart depicting gods, spirits and other non-human intelligences generated by the roleplaying narratives of the Friends at the Table podcast. Various artists, 'Counter/WEIGHT and Heiron fanart', *Counter/WEIGHT*Wikia, 2015-ongoing, *The New Archives Wikia*, 2014-ongoing. http://counterweight.wikia.com/wiki/COUNTER/Weight_Wikia, [www.thenewarchives.wikia.com/wiki/The_New_Archives_Wikia](http://thenewarchives.wikia.com/wiki/The_New_Archives_Wikia)

intelligences — all speaking through the immersed voice of Austin Walker, but living through the collective will of the players and given visual form through community fan art [FIG 10].

If the emphasis here on the simulation model having an organic, inhuman agency and its own, somewhat randomly generated accretion of complexity and plurality sounds similar to the description of an eerie entity itself, this is entirely intentional. The use throughout this text of anecdotal stories of slow, incidental developments in culture and technology, functioning both as the link between the Medieval and mechanics of *D&D*, but also as the evidence of the uncanny intrusions that precisely define an eerie entity, aim to highlight that, in order to commune with the eerie, we must take on some of its aspects. In this way, the interpretive models proposed by roleplaying games should be encouraged as a kind of spirit guide or companion species, self-domesticated eerie entities, like cats unto lions — cats, of course, can traditionally perceive ghosts. The freedom and autonomy of evolution of these models is vital in order for them to truly connect with their larger cousins, rather than suffering the fate of the stunted, failed early game systems of the RAND corporation. Dungeons must be allowed to continue tunnelling themselves, extending siege corridors to and from eerie entities and eerie experiences.

Returning, however, to Mark Fisher's definition, by communicating through interpretive simulation models we may better 'see the inside from

the outside' and begin to understand the ecological dynamics between human and abstract forces and the where the weight of agency lies.

To conclude, perhaps the structural form of the dungeon and the practice of dungeon design, or 'dungeoneering' provides a useful vocabulary for collecting these methodological notions. Within the roleplaying community, 'dungeoneering' refers to both designing dungeons, but also the skill in-game characters might have in order to successfully navigate them; providing a term that incorporates both the distanced and immersed voice, and conflates model-building and exploration. With regards to the dungeon itself, it is an interdisciplinary form that incorporates, generates and hosts narrative. In its very construction it flattens factual and symbolic forms — interpenetrating tunnels and chambers that contain and syncretise knowledge. Its designs can be easily distributed and quickly modified; rooms can be added, or two dungeons can be connected. It is not only a cognitive map but a cognitive territory of things labyrinthine and dread-inducing, and yet it still provides a key. It exists only to provide human interaction, but is designed to have its own agency separate from its human users. It is paradoxically a system, a story, a space and an organism. Fundamentally, dungeons are living embassies — places where the human and the eerie may meet on neutral ground.

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