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## BOOK REVIEW: *FORSCHUNGSDRANG UND ROLLENSPIEL*

Evan Torner

### Abstract

A review of the German language edited collection entitled *Forschungsdrang und Rollenspiel*, the first scholarly anthology dedicated to *The Dark Eye* (DSA, *Das schwarze Auge*), which focuses on tabletop role-playing games as a means to perform and narrate history and place.

### Keywords

book review, TTRPG, *The Dark Eye*, Germany, language, history, place

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**Stefan Donecker, Karin Fenböck, Alexander Kalniņš, Lukas Daniel Klausner, eds. *Forschungsdrang und Rollenspiel*. Waldems: Ulisses Spiele GmbH, 2019. 204 pages, Hardcover, ISBN: 9783963312090**

Scholars in Germany are increasingly interested in their own country's hobby-gaming heritage. Such research would indeed be remiss if it did not mention *The Dark Eye* (DSA, *Das schwarze Auge*), the best-selling German-language tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) since the 1980s. The edited volume *Forschungsdrang und Rollenspiel* (FUR), whose title roughly translates to "The Urge to Research and the Role-Playing Game," is a gorgeous hardcover released by DSA's own publisher Ulisses Spiele. One might mistake the tome itself for a game resource, which seems to me both a great marketing strategy as well as a way to make all those of us in analog games academia go green with envy. I mean: Imagine if our scholarly books were released with the same production values and marketing as the high-gloss gamebooks we now study! While FUR is by no means the first academic study of DSA,<sup>1</sup> it is no doubt the first scholarly-critical anthology dedicated to DSA from the game's own publisher, a trend of which more analog game companies should take note.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lucia Traut, *Ritualisierte Imagination Das Fantasy-Rollenspiel "Das Schwarze Auge"* (Münster: LIT, 2011); David Nikolas Schmidt, *Zwischen Simulation und Narration: Theorie des Fantasy-Rollenspiels: mit einer Analyse der Spielsysteme Das Schwarze Auge, Shadowrun und H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu* (Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> It bears mentioning that *Analog Game Studies*, with its collaboration with Asmodee Game in Lab in running the annual GENERation Analog conference, is in a similar game-publisher-funded arrangement.

Simply put: the ascent of Game Studies as an interdisciplinary field has come at a time when literally all three pillars of academic knowledge production—secure research faculty lines, library budgets, and academic publishing houses—are severely threatened. By the same token, analog games publishers have by now witnessed the structured amnesia and legitimacy barriers built into their industry, and are strengthening ties with academia in order to secure long-term interest in their titles and a lasting legacy, when market cynicism would otherwise push all their cultural work into the dustbin and/or collectors' markets. It makes sense for games publishers to publish academic work about their own titles, even if that means both conflict of interest and the risk of putting out scathing critiques of one's own work. In a social media era governed by algorithms and metrics, one must remain "in the discourse," with humanities scholarship serving as one outlet among many.

Before I delve into the content of the book itself, it bears mentioning that not only is the title of this book in German, but all its text as well. *Analog Game Studies* tends to review books published in the English language, but this is just that: a tendency, not a firm policy. If a reviewer is literate in the language of the book, as I am in German, both their language and games expertise help inform each other in the resultant review. Furthermore, I join my colleagues Yuliya Komska, Michelle Moyd, and David Gramling in performing here a small act of "linguistic disobedience,"<sup>3</sup> in which my own positionality as an American speaker of German and a civically engaged intellectual is highlighted. Our gaming circles are so monolingual as to be suffocating, and each passing year reveals to me how much rich discourse can be found only in Finnish, Mandarin Chinese, French, Portuguese, Japanese, Spanish and, yes, German, to name a few. We must continue to cultivate an international, multilingual gaming community, or we will fall prey to the same provincial ignorance that divides humans across such arbitrary lines. *Analog Game Studies* should welcome further non-English-language publications for future review.

The German language suits this project well, as its subject is a homegrown German-language TRPG community that provided a welcome, robust alternative vision of role-playing to that of *D&D* during and after a period when German-language translations of English-language TRPGs were scarce, namely the 1980s. A revival of medieval fantasy swept the globe then, as J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was translated into Russian<sup>4</sup> and fantasy war games such as *D&D* found content-hungry global gamer markets ready for them. In the case of Germany, DSA was published in 1985 by Schmidt Spiele, a long-established Munich-based game company. As Austrian author and long-time



Figure 1: Cover of *Forschungsdrang und Rollenspiel* edited by Stefan Donecker, Karin Fenböck, Alexander Kalniņš, and Lukas Daniel Klausner.

<sup>3</sup> Yuliya Komska, Michelle Moyd, and David Gramling, *Linguistic Disobedience: Restoring Power to Civic Language* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Here I speak of the 1982 Kistyakovskiy/Muravyov translation which, although abridged, initiated fantasy larping in the USSR almost overnight.

DSA developer Hadmar von Wieser writes in the foreword of *FUR*, the substantial resources and reputation of a traditional boardgame company in promoting a new TRPG cannot be overlooked:

When [Schmidt Spiele] decided in 1983 to join the emerging role-playing games boom, it was able to offer this new kind of game amidst conventional family games and board games thanks to the company using its market position to convince the [German] department store chains, namely Karstadt. In addition, there came television ads for the game, a rare case in the European role-playing game business up to the present. DSA is still, to this day, living off the coverage they reached back in those days (100,000 base sets sold).<sup>5</sup>

DSA sold because the infrastructure was there to ensure it would be sold. But it also rode a larger wave of European reckoning with the Middle Ages during the ongoing global fantasy boom. As discussed in many of the essays in *FUR*, DSA paid special attention to the social structures, chivalry, technologies, and horizons of aspiration of the European Middle Ages. Rather than graft medieval content onto a structure for overt power fantasies and wargaming, DSA's developers aimed to create simulacra of the Middle Ages; a German response to *The Lord of the Rings* that was not dominated by the earlier Teutonic myths so easily coopted by Richard Wagner and Adolf Hitler for their anti-Semitic ends. These mostly white European men developers and play communities no doubt had glaring social blindspots, but their work also served as a corrective to both Wagnerian and *D&D* fantasy mythology.

*FUR* is divided into 5 sections, offering a total of 20 essays that truly approach DSA from every possible angle. After von Wieser's already-informative Foreword, the volume's editors Donecker, Fenböck, Kalniņš, and Klausner provide a reasonable explanation for what a role-playing game is, a brief history of the hobby, and a clear justification that the contemporary cultural studies trend necessitates also a closer look at games such as DSA, a phenomenon that has persisted in pop culture for 35 years across many hundreds of products. It is here, I should note, that much of this research appears emboldened and enhanced by the *Role-Playing Game Studies Handbook* edited by José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding.<sup>6</sup> This collective project in the 2010s effectively became the standard resource for RPG studies, as intended, within one year of its publication in 2018. *FUR* stands as a worthy companion volume to the handbook, in that it arrives at useful generalizable knowledge about TRPGs through an unflinching analysis of This One TRPG In Particular.

Tobias M. Scholz's essay (the title of which I translate as) "Cultural Diversity of Adventuring Parties as Competitive Advantage: An Analysis By Means of the Competitive Acceptance Model"<sup>7</sup> comes from a framework of intercultural management, arguing that the racial and regional diversity of the fantasy characters, with their mechanically articulated strengths and weaknesses, forms a powerful basis for competitive advantage. Compared with the humanities emphasis of the vast majority of the other essays, Scholz's essay is both an odd inclusion and also a welcome thought experiment. Yes, TRPGs *are* potent tools to run social simulations, and they do indeed model desirable configurations of human capability and behavior, as does all fiction. But Scholz's essay also highlights a further aspect of DSA of interest: the earnest attempt of the game's creators to create a rich, social world

<sup>5</sup> My translation of the original: "Als der Verlag 1983 entschied, in den entstehenden Rollenspiel-Boom einzusteigen, konnte er dank seiner Marktposition die Kaufhausketten, namentlich Karstadt, überzeugen, das neuartige Spiel *Das Schwarze Auge* zwischen konventionellen Familien- und Brettspielen anzubieten. Dazu kam Fernsehwerbung, bis heute ein Einzelfall im europäischen Rollenspiel-Business. Von der damals erreichten Reichweite (100000 verkaufte Basisboxen) lebt DSA bis heute." Hadmar von Wieser, in Donecker, et al. *FUR*, pg. 5.

<sup>6</sup> José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding, eds., *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> The German original title: "Kulturelle Diversität von Abenteuergruppen als Wettbewerbsvorteil. Eine Analyse anhand des Competitive-Acceptance-Modells."

that confers clear in-game advantage to diversity. Aventuria, the fictional world in which DSA is played, is in this sense a utopia; a non-place that invites us to reconsider human relations in our own world. It draws on thousands of years of human history, from stone age to late Renaissance, to create an alternate vision of the Middle Ages that may point toward a shared, productive future Eurasian continent.

Geopolitical history aside, the volume is laudable in its focus on role-playing as a means to perform and narrate history and place. In "The Tale Meant To Be Told Out: The Role-Playing Game Adventure as a Narrative Genre,"<sup>8</sup> Sebastian Bolte attempts, as many of us have,<sup>9</sup> to find the "text" in a role-playing game narrative. Drawing on both Gérard Genette's classic work on "paratexts"<sup>10</sup> as well as the body of work in Christoph Bode's "Narrating Futures" series, Sebastian Bolte concentrates on the multilinear, multitextual nature of the TRPG, using DSA as an example. Bolte's observations on the elusiveness of the TRPG text are useful as a starting point for what Georg Koch and Annegret Heinrich in their chapter "Playing with History: History and Historicity in the World of DSA"<sup>11</sup> call the "living history"<sup>12</sup> The player position and its immediacy in relation to this invented history, Koch and Heinrich argue, is the decisive element:

In its appeal to a certain societal conception of the past, Aventuria also becomes, via its relations to reality, a closed and therefore trusted and/or realistic -- albeit foreign -- world. [The game] makes it possible for the players to act spontaneously with concrete expectations regarding the world's reaction to them.<sup>13</sup>

Although German historian circles are notoriously skeptical of overt fantasy creations such as Aventuria, decades of its existence have relativized and made DSA's own contribution to historicity concrete. Lukas Schmutzer's "Gor and Tamariskenhain: Role-Playing Game Spaces and Aventuria's Places"<sup>14</sup> thinks through the ways that DSA in particular helps players flesh out the spaces of play using their imaginations. In this way, DSA invites the players to explore the conflicts of the game, of which there are many, through the specific, mechanically reinforced spaces of Aventuria. Tables, challenges, and encounters written down in DSA gaming books make this fictional world's conflicts somehow visceral for player groups.

The next section of the book is entirely dedicated to the structures of Aventuria society and their relation to their real-life counterparts. Bastian Gillner writes on Aventuria's hierarchies of nobility, Marc-André Karpieski on its warfare, David Nicolas Schmidt on its secret societies and spies, and Oliver Overheu on its medicine. As a relative outsider to the DSA community, this was the part that I found the most delicious nerdy, in a positive way. These authors are clearly enthusiasts about the material applying their disciplinary expertise to explain DSA to an outside audience. Role-playing

<sup>8</sup> My translation of "Die auszuverlässende Erzählung: Das Rollenspielabenteuer als narrative Gattung."

<sup>9</sup> See also: Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Jaakko Stenros, "Notes on Role-Playing Texts," *Beyond Role and Play*, edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Helsinki: Fëa Livia, 2004), 75-80; David Jara, "A Closer Look at the (Rule-) Books: Framings and Paratexts in Tabletop Role-playing Games," *International Journal of Role-Playing* 4 (2013), <https://journals.uu.se/IJRP/article/view/228>; David Jara and Evan Torner, "Role-Playing Games and Literary Studies," *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, edited by José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York: Routledge, 2018), 265-282.

<sup>10</sup> Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> My translation of "Das Spiel mit der Geschichte: Geschichte und Geschichtlichkeit in der Welt des Schwarzen Auges."

<sup>12</sup> Translation of "lebendige Geschichte." Koch and Heinrich, in Donecker et al., 37.

<sup>13</sup> My translation of "Durch den Rekurs auf eine gesellschaftliche Vergangenheitsvorstellung wird Aventurien ebenso zu einer -- wenn auch fremden -- durch ihre Bezüge zur Realität in sich geschlossenen und damit vertrauten bzw. (auf ihre Art) realistischen Welt. Den Spielenden wird es ermöglicht, mit einer konkreten Erwartungshaltung bezüglich der Reaktion der Welt spontan zu handeln." Koch and Heinrich, 37.

<sup>14</sup> My translation of "Gor und Tamariskenhain: Räume des Rollenspiels und Orte Aventuriens."

games offer thousands upon thousands of invented worlds to explore, and it is rare that even a single world comes under such scrutiny for the ideology lurking in its worldbuilding. Overheu's contribution, for example, shows in detail how, despite the medieval setting, medical practitioners in Aventuria are *extremely* knowledgeable about medicine and how bodies function. What they don't have, Overheu points out, is a functional healthcare system.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, its ideological conception of warfare, as Karpienski points out, has little to do with actual medieval warfare practices compared with both (A) granting its players an exciting evening of dramatic play and (B) accurately aping medievalism as portrayed in television and film. The authors strike an overall great balance between being respectful to the game and its constraints and pointing out the odd and often problematic assumptions that underlie its conception of history and society. Aventuria is intended to be a playground for white German boys and men, role-playing their way through the kinds of medieval stories they'd like to experience for themselves.

The next 2 sections concern philosophy, ethics, and historical case studies with respect to DSA. This is the bulk of the book and is primarily preoccupied with the worldviews that dominate this game, from thoughts on Rome and democracy to Wolfgang Sattler's masterful exegesis on demon summoners and Plato. Although the chapters exhibit somewhat fixed ideas about what does and does not belong to the categories of "ancient," "premodern," and "modern," they thoroughly engage with both the game's worldbuilding as well as the TRPG as an intersubjective fictional medium. This book's sophistication continues to impress, ranking it even beyond its predecessor book on *D&D* in this respect.<sup>16</sup>

The final section is devoted to 2 chapters on "People and Non-People,"<sup>17</sup> addressing the absolute elephant in the room of the bioessentialism of fantasy races. Karin Fenböck and Stefan Donecker's chapter on elves and dwarves in DSA is helpful in showing the evolution of what began as one-for-one copies of J.R.R. Tolkien's elves and dwarves across numerous supplements, such as the dwarf-focused *In the Labyrinth of Dreams* (*Im Traumlabyrinth* 1990). It is, however, unhelpful when it simply justifies the elf and dwarf stereotypes as a means of getting easy role-playing cues.<sup>18</sup> The authors mention the antisemitic history of "dwarves" and the Wagnerian roots of "elves" in passing, but much more could be done on this topic, especially when the authors surely have access to such critical material published in the *International Journal of Role-Playing*, *Analog Game Studies*, and elsewhere. Finally, Martin Tschiggerl addresses the orks in the game as a specific postcolonial construct. This chapter goes into depth on their origins in white European encounters with Mongols, the problematic category of "personhood" in the eyes of said Europeans, and the DSA developers' ongoing efforts to connect the orks with the monstrous. Tschiggerl's argument that the descriptions of orks match 19th and 20th-Century racist and colonialist conceptions of indigenous people needs to be broadcast loud and clear in a German hobby-game landscape that wants to internationalize and reach the broadest possible player base. Continuing to defend the game's openly colonialist language and disposition offers no good path forward.

FUR is an exciting volume dripping with enthusiasm for DSA, as well as the expertise to understand it within context. It certainly evinces a wider effort in German-speaking countries to both take TRPGs seriously as a medium as well as tease out the meaning of decades worth of pop-cultural worldbuilding. Aventuria itself invites players to begin to imagine themselves within a medieval

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<sup>15</sup> Overheu, in Donecker et al., 93.

<sup>16</sup> That book, in my mind, would be Christopher Robichaud and William Irwin, eds., *Dungeons and Dragons and Philosophy: Read and Gain Advantage on All Wisdom Checks* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> My translation of "Menschen und Nicht-Menschen."

<sup>18</sup> Fenböck and Donecker, in Donecker et al., 193.

mode, so it is up to the game to mediate “the medieval,” regardless of how broad or narrow the game’s conception of that may be. Furthermore, the book shows what could be done with dozens, if not hundreds, of different popular systems and worlds: *Shadowrun*, *Amber*, *FATE Core*, *GURPS*, *D&D*, *Wanderhome*, among so many others. The publishers of these games *could* sponsor the very scholarship written on their own games, educating their fans about the world and vouching for the importance of the games within intellectual circles.<sup>19</sup> FUR should serve as an example of the kinds of criticism so many of us in the community seek to publish and read. I hope this overall message will translate in the North American industry.



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<sup>19</sup> This is also the point where Evil Hat Productions, publisher of *FATE Core*, deserves special praise for putting out Shannon Appelcline’s *Designers and Dragons* (2014) series, which chronicles the *entire* TRPG publishing industry in a synoptic view. But Evil Hat could also release an edited volume simply on its own titles, including *For The Queen*, *Blades in the Dark*, *FATE*, among others. That would be the effective Anglophone equivalent of FUR in this context.