Living Antiquity. Role-Playing Games with a Setting In Ancient Times

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Be prepared to read in these pages about role-playing games and Ancient History, about the importance of the existing relationship among them. Of course, many might think that our intention is to take a conventional approach to the matter by focusing on the existing opposition between the historical and fantasy elements of these games, maybe defending the former while openly criticising the latter. This would perhaps be the type of approach taken in academia, without raising too many eyebrows. However, it should be noted that this is neither our intention nor our goal here. Quite to the contrary, our purpose is to offer an overview of the impact and influence of the classical tradition and ancient history on contemporary popular culture. To this end, I will focus on what is conceivably one of its more minority, but nonetheless paradoxical, expressions in terms of the number people who are familiar with it and can thus be influenced by it: the role-playing game.

All role-playing games have an atmosphere, a setting necessary for their development. This setting is based on some or other source from which the data required to flesh it out in a satisfactory manner can be obtained.[1] Hence, throughout these pages, I will take a general look at the ancient sources used in the design of role-playing games not only of an historical nature, but also belonging to the fantasy genre. As will be seen, history is an essential source for the design of fantasy elements which are always based, to a greater or lesser degree, on our knowledge of the past.

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[1] Sánchez Ojeda 2006-2007, p. 14-15 (consulted at: <dreamers.com/defensadelrol/articulos/Juegos_de_rol___Mito_y_realidad. pdf>).

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But, at the same time, there is also historical fantasy. This concept is used to refer to the creation of fantasies that have then become part of history, as has happened, for instance, with mythologies and especially with ancient ones. These combine a set of more or less cohesive myths, based on traditions and legends. By and large, they were created by different societies to explain the origin of the world and the forces of nature, generally associated with some gods, a religion or an historical culture.[2] Precisely, myths express the views and beliefs of a country, time, culture or religion as regards its origin. In this sense, ancient mythologies are per se very important historical sources for many role-playing games belonging to the fantasy genre.

Ancient historical sources provide the necessary atmosphere and setting for many role-playing games, contributing to the action or events to be developed in them. They can be historical facts that are reproduced more or less faithfully, sources of inspiration for plots, actions or events set in other historical periods or even in fantasy worlds.

Besides the obvious educational value of role-playing games in general – a well-studied aspect, although one that is not central to this work[3] – it should be stressed that the historical sources on which they draw (for their design and settings) are very valuable history teaching resources. Rather than dwelling on history as a whole, I will be focusing here on the educational role that role-playing games can play in the transmission of knowledge about ancient history and the classical tradition at all levels of contemporary popular culture. And I will do so by analysing a non-exhaustive, though hopefully representative, selection of role-playing games (their infinite number continues to increase[4]) with settings directly or indirectly influenced by antiquity.

As already noted, historical sources play a very important role in role-playing games, especially as regards their setting. I am aware that such an affirmation would probably cause an outcry among the proponents of role-playing games with a fantasy setting, arguing that there are many more of these than historical ones. And they would be right. So, in this aspect, we agree. But a deeper analysis reveals that historical sources play a prominent role even in fantasy role-playing games. The role-playing game market includes fantasy adventures, science fiction, fantasy horror games and also many other historical adventure and action games, some of which are based on novels (such

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[2]   In this regard, see for example, Vernant 1991; Sissa, Detienne 1994.

[3]   See for instance, Henriksen 2006; Harviainen 2008; Montola, Stenros 2008; Henriksen 2010; Grande de Prado 2010; Abella García, Grande de Prado 2010; Roda 2010.

[4]   Sevillano Pareja 2008.

as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or Lovecraft's *The Call of Cthulhu*), on films and TV series (*i.e. Star Wars*), on popular myths and legends (werewolves, vampires, etc.) or simply on historical periods and milieus (the time of the Spanish Empire and the Caribbean pirates, the Second World War, the Middle Ages and, of course, antiquity).[5]

But before focusing on the ancient settings, it is inevitable to refer to what has probably been the historical setting par excellence: the medieval fantasy setting as found, for instance, in *Dungeons & Dragons*. In this case, the game's world is similar to the one existing in the historical Middle Ages: town and village life, knights, castles and feudalism, costume, speech, mentalities, attitudes, gender relations, occupations and professions, economic life, architecture and art, rudimentary lines of communication, plenty of banditry and villainy, even the type of music and musical instruments, etc., and also, of course, technology reflected, above all, in the forms of waging war and the weapons used (swords, shields, spears, bows and arrows, and armour, and heavier equipment such as scorpions, rams, catapults, etc., but without gunpowder as yet). And all this without bearing in mind the way in which the magical nature of some of these weapons enhance the game's fantasy setting. The design of *Dungeons & Dragons* would have been impossible without drawing on historical sources. And despite being a fantasy setting, those playing the game can doubtless learn enough about the general aspects of medieval life and culture outlined above. In other words, it allows them to become familiar with medieval history as a whole – perhaps even with its most relevant features – far-removed from that other conception of history as a mere succession of historical facts, generally known as chronicling.[6]

And even the game's fantasy atmosphere has borrowed from historical sources, particularly historical mythology, and not only from the ancient classical kind, but also from the Nordic, Chinese and pre-Columbian American mythological traditions: dragons, gryphs, unicorns, pegasuses, minotaurs, dwarves, elves, trolls, gnomes, giants, ogres and animated trees, to name but a few.

The influence of historical sources on the conception of religious pantheons is another aspect that should be highlighted: gods of good, gods of healing, neutral gods of justice, gods of war, gods of evil, even perhaps a supreme god, the existence of chaos as a primordial god... all of them are modelled on the gods of different ancient pantheons. There is an historical contradiction here: the typical religion of the historical

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[5]   See our previous study on this subject in Carbó García, Pérez Miranda 2010.

[6]   Pérez Miranda 2010, p. 153.

Middle Ages – or, at least, of the European Middle Ages, on which the settings of *Dungeons & Dragons* and other games are usually loosely based – was monotheistic, whether it be Christianity or Islam. Consequently, it is not the best choice for role-playing games with a medieval fantasy setting due to the important role that magic plays in them and also because magical practices were persecuted by monotheistic and other organised religions (even the polytheistic ones, such as Roman civic religion). The reason for this was that magic undermined the direct control that religion and the expressions of power normally associated with it exerted over the faithful.[7] So in order to accommodate magical practices, these role-playing games tend to resort to polytheistic religious systems, more typical of antiquity, without an excessively organised or powerful clergy.

This can be clearly seen, for example, in the *Dragonlance* saga, a series of novels inspired by the *Dungeons & Dragons* role-playing game: the priests and their high priest, followers of the god of good Paladine, pursue evil with an eye to eradicating it. This would evidently involve eliminating the gods of evil and even the neutral ones and the introduction of a monotheistic system with a sole, very powerful priesthood with, furthermore, an undisguised aversion to magic of any kind. To give continuity to the novels, and in order to put an end to this all-powerful priesthood in defence of polytheism and thus give free rein to the magical practices characterising this type of medieval fantasy role-playing game, the gods bring about a cataclysm with obvious biblical and, more generally, ancient Middle-Eastern mythological connotations. Needless to say, everything turns out as planned.[8] Even in this conception of religion, religious systems and magic, the importance of history can be clearly seen; in this case, that of ancient religious history.[9]

It goes without saying that the greater the reliance of a role-playing game on historical details, the greater the importance of historical sources for fleshing out its setting, characters and plot, as well as for its development in general. And, as I wondered a moment ago, what about historical fantasy? Let's remember what is historical fantasy: this concept refers to the development of myths and fantasies that end up forming part

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[7]   Magic, one of the key enemies of the Graeco-Roman sacrificial system, could also serve as a form of mediation with the divine. Accordingly, the magi perverted the sacrificial code for their own evil purposes and exemplified the chaos that would result from the disappearance of the religious role of the emperor, the guarantor of social, political and religious order. Gordon 1990, p. 253-254.

[8]   As seen in one of the central novels of the *Dragonlance* saga, Weiss, Hickman 1986.

[9]   In relation to religion and catastrophic events in antiquity, see Carbó García 2012.

of history, like, for instance, mythology. I have already claimed that myths express the views and beliefs of a country, time, culture or religion as regards its origins. When in an historical fantasy role-playing game a god, a Greek mythical hero or a mythological creature, such as the Minotaur of Crete, a centaur or a nymph appears, as in the game *Oráculo* (Oracle), to which I will refer immediately, this makes it seem less realistic. But in no way does it affect the importance of the historical sources on which the game is based, since they inform us about mythology. These sources provide us with the necessary information about those myths appearing in the game, but without renouncing more historical aspects, as occurs with mere fantasy; although we have already seen that fantasy also draws heavily on historical sources. It should be stressed that when playing an historical fantasy role-playing game, the sense of reality cannot be the same as when playing, for example, *Comandos de Guerra* (War Commandos), a very realistic Spanish role-playing game set in the Second World War. In fact, the importance of historical sources just varies from one game to another.

Having already mentioned *Oráculo* as one of the few historical role-playing games with an ancient historical – historical fantasy, to be more precise – setting published in Spain, the time has now come to perform a specific analysis on a representatives corpus of role-playing games directly or indirectly set in antiquity, in accordance with the considerations set out above. Since very few Spanish role-playing games set in antiquity have been published, a common solution has been to resort to fan-made productions. In some cases, these have been made available online to be downloaded and used for free.[10]

For the purpose of studying the ancient historical settings depicted in role-playing games in chronological order, I will begin with ancient Egypt. The first game is *Saqueadores de tumbas* (Tomb raiders), published by Ludotecnia.[11] Its cover reads as follows:

> A role-playing game drawing on classical historical sources, allowing players to enter a game world based on reality to which a touch of fantasy has been added so as to create the right ambience and make it more entertaining and challenging, if possible. However, you can completely eliminate this element of fantasy and just play the role of a tomb raider who has to pit his wits against the tombs' smart designers and architects and the Pharaoh's guards.

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[10] In this connection, the work of Hector Sevillano Pareja is enlightening, Sevillano Pareja 2008, p. 905; more recently, Cabrero Sañudo 2010.

[11] Gil, Sánchez 2013.

The problem is that rather than "drawing on classical historical sources", it is an excellent example of pulp fiction, epitomised by Harry Houdini and H. P. Lovecraft's *Imprisoned with the Pharaohs*, published in *Weird Tales. The Unique Magazine.*[12] The history of Egypt is simply a pretext or a basic setting for the game's action, insofar as some of its plots are not even set in ancient Egypt, but in the 1920s and 1930s. These adventures are strongly reminiscent of the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun by Howard Carter, the fantastic archaeology of *Indiana Jones*, some of the thrillers and horror films released by Hammer Studios and Universal Pictures, such as *The Mummy* and its remakes since 1999, and even the "aliens built the pyramids story" in films like *Stargate*. Again, ancient (and contemporary) historical reality and fantasy can go hand in hand.

From a purely historical perspective, the text provides a brief history of Egypt, which gives us insights into the daily life of the Egyptians, the timeline of the Egyptian Empire, the Egyptian gods, funerary architecture and, of course, the ins-and-outs of tomb raiding and a description of typical booby traps. Players can interpret a number of characters including raiders, soldiers, scribes, priests and slaves, but the game is flexible enough to allow for the design of others such as artisans, artists, simple specialist characters and even physicians. With respect to the realm of fantasy, the priests can practice magic, and not only real magic, but also the far-fetched kind, along the lines of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The same occurs with the design of the booby traps or the appearance of the mummies that come to life. The decision on whether to pick a more fantasy world or stick to a more historically accurate one is up to the game master and the players. In this sense, the important thing is that the game allows the second option. And on the subject of settings, they are not without their errors as regards both the Egyptian bestiary (while crocodiles and scorpions do appear, there are neither beetles nor jackals) – as if there were such things as piranhas in Egypt! – and the anachronistic kitchenware and utensils, among other things. There are even greater blunders, such as an Egyptian book of hieroglyphs bound like a modern one, complete with spine, front and back boards and pages, instead of papyri.

In the end, to play in historical Egypt, the *GURPS. EGYPT. Tombs. Temples. Trouble* game has better features and provides a well-crafted setting. This *Generic Universal Role Playing System* was published by Steve Jackson Games (to which I will

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[12]   Houdini, Lovecraft 1924. For this issue, see Blackmore 1991a et 1991b.

be returning later on since it has also games set in Greece and Rome.[13] With an Egyptian setting, but with a greater dose of fantasy, there is the recently published *Egyptian Adventures – Hamunaptra*, from the series *Mythic Vistas,*[14] which also has other games dedicated to the Old Testament world, the Greek Heroic Age at the time of the Trojan War, and imperial Rome. Although it is actually nothing more than an updated version of *Dungeons & Dragons* in a complete ancient-style Egyptian setting.

This combination of ancient and contemporary history in game settings is also present in other historical periods like, for instance, Napoleon's Egyptian campaign in 1798[15] and the gradual rediscovery of Egyptian civilization thenceforth, and the aforementioned pulp fiction setting of 1920s and 1930s. One of the best examples are the adventures of the Nyarlathotep Cycle, part of *The Call of Cthulhu* series, and its enlightening sourcebook about Cairo.[16] In sum, ancient and classical archaeological settings are equally popular.[17]

Leaving Egypt for Mesopotamia, noteworthy is *Testament*,[18] belonging to the *Mythic Vista* series, a game bringing to life the world of the Old Testament. Its cover, depicting the alleged parting of the Red Sea and it waters engulfing the Egyptian army pursuing the fleeing Hebrews, is a statement of intent and its setting, as its back cover reads, "Part history, part mythology". Despite providing detailed cultural information on ancient Israel, Canaan, Egypt and Mesopotamia, including history, beliefs, holy days, architecture, etc., the fantasy mythical setting is back with a vengeance: from the manifestations of divine power and Biblical plagues to outlandish magical practices, with objects of power like the Ark of the Covenant and creatures such as the legendary beasts of Babylon, monsters and demons that possess the bodies of people, etc. As its introduction indicates:

> Play a wandering Babylonian magus, a sorcerer in the service of Pharaoh, a Canaanite maker of idols, or a prophet of the God of Israel. Walk the streets of ancient Jerusalem, stand beside King David as one of his Mighty Men, smite Philistines, ponder the mysteries of gargantuan tombs, look upon the dwellings of the gods, and battle demons, dragons, plagues, and the legendary beasts of Babylon. Testament gives you everything you need

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[13] Kane 2003.
[14] Amadeus Suleiman, Kenson, Marmell 2013.
[15] Strathern 2007.
[16] See Herber 1984; Anderson 1995.
[17] Sevillano Pareja, De Soto García 2011; Sevillano Pareja, De Soto García 2013.
[18] Bennie 2006.

to immerse yourself in the Biblical Era, including: A dozen new core and prestige classes, including the Levite Priest, the Egyptian Khery-heb wizard, and the Desert Hermit. Over 30 new monsters, including Nephilim, Tempter Devils, and Zebub-Spawn. Over 50 new feats and over 100 new spells. Rules for barter, curses, piety. Guidelines for leading a small tribe through the hazards of the Bronze and Iron Age world.

Another game worth mentioning is *La Puerta de Ishtar* (Ishtar Gate).[19] When I first heard about the title I, of course, said to myself, "Finally, an historical game set in ancient Babylon and Mesopotamia!". Then, I saw its front cover, featuring a sort of minotaur taskmaster (or wardu, as they are called) with a whip in one hand and a slave on a chain in the other. Next, I read its back cover:

> The Empire of Akkad conquered and ruled by Sargon the Alchemist for more than 2000 years. First and Only Emperor [...] Enshakushanna, Witch-king of the braided beard, dominates the city of Uruk with an iron fist. The sacrifice of countless lives at the wish of the Gods of the Stars from the top of the Ziggurat provides him with knowledge and power [...] The Phoenicians, deaf-mute craftsmen, offer their goods to the merchants of Assur in exchange for lives [...] But it was not always thus. There was Sumer before. But those who still knew the lost writing fled with Hammurapi. With their god Enlil defeated, they founded the underground city of Babylon, to which the sickly light of the stars never reaches. The Ishtar Gate, which allows access, has been closed for more than two millennia.

This was when I saw the map of... Mesopotamia? with a underground Babylon located in the Zagros Mountains, as with the city of Moria from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, with the names of the rivers changed, etc. After glancing at the picture of the Ishtar Gate at the foot of the mountain, I closed the book. It was only missing Gandalf, the wizard, and the Fellowship of the Ring trying to solve the riddle to open the West Door, guarding the great underground city of the dwarves.

After recovering somewhat, I opened the book again and had to admit, albeit reluctantly, that the setting did have a smack of antiquity about it: the cities, the traditions, the everyday customs, the architecture and buildings, the names of the gods and the kings... but that was about it. As a matter of fact, the game's anachronisms are all too plentiful, it geographical accuracy is dismal, and its fantasy setting overshadows anything else. The aforementioned gods of the stars are none other than the Cthulhu Mythos deities, created by Lovecraft. The supposed deaf-mute Phoenicians, who communicate telepathically, are not even human beings. The way in which the game

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[19]   García Carmona 2012.

depicts antiquity is particularly alarming, because it is excessively misinterpreted and the erroneous knowledge that it thus transmits cancels out any good that it might have done. Any teenager seeing the Ishtar Gate in photographs or at the Pergamonmuseum in Berlin, after playing this game, would be more than bewildered. If someone then asked him to locate Babylon on a map, he would point to the Zagros, *i.e.* in Iran, instead of in Iraq. His knowledge of the names of gods, kings and other real historical information would be so flawed that, when playing a similar game, rather than educating him it would have quite the opposite effect. Knowledge would be perverted. Notwithstanding the awards that it has won and the fact that it has quality and is fun to play, this is the sad reality. When all is said and done, it is no more than a combination of the atmosphere created by Lovecraft in his pulp fiction and the typical sword and sorcery genre to be found, for example, in Conan; ah, yes, with an ancient Mesopotamian feel to it. But with that ancient historical setting, the game's author has achieved his aim of making it almost unrecognisable from the point of view of its own historical appreciation.

Turning to the Greek world, the first example should perhaps be *Mazes & Minotaurs*,[20] which is presented as a role-playing game involving heroic adventures in the mythical age. Gods, heroes, creatures and artefacts borrowed from Greek mythology are mixed with adventurous characters in an archaic Greek setting, in stark contrast with the famous and original *Dungeons & Dragons*, with its medieval fantasy setting. Whereas in the latter there are dungeons, where dragons are kept, in the former there are mazes, from where minotaurs emerge; so, of course! the opposition is clear, and although the setting is not the same, they still share many similarities:[21] *Dungeons & Dragons* vs. *Mazes & Minotaurs*, then. However, despite the fact that the historical setting – either medieval or ancient – is important and that fantasy is present in both games, in *Mazes & Minotaurs* this same fantasy has greater historical connotations, insofar as it is based on Greek mythology: its gods, heroes, creatures, myths, etc. From this perspective, its ancient setting, both real and fantastic, is tremendously appealing.

A similar case would be that of *Oráculo. El juego de rol mitológico* (Oracle. The mythological role-playing game),[22] as its name suggests. Although the game's background is mythological, it is meant to be set in the eleventh and tenth centuries

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[20]   Legrand, 'Mithras' Elliott 2006.

[21]   It should be recalled that *Dungeons & Dragons* was inspired by strategy games using miniatures (*i.e.* war games) at a time when many of them recreated Greek and Roman battles.

[22]   Micó 1992.

BC, during the so-called "Greek Dark Age". In spite of being a fantasy game, it also belongs to the historical genre, since, as before, the gods, demigods, creatures, etc., are those of Greek mythology. The game is designed so that the characters can (and should) meet with gods such as Zeus, Poseidon, Hera, Ares, Athena and Hades; cross paths with heroes including Heracles, Perseus, Theseus, Jason, Odysseus, Achilles and Ajax; and confront creature like the Minotaur, Polyphemus, Medusa, the Kraken, the Hydra, Scylla and Charybdis… and, of course, mermaids, other cyclopes, centaurs, nymphs, and the full repertoire. The game is attractively designed around the concept of fate as conceived by the Greeks in their mythology, controlled by the Moirae. Interestingly, this introduces some features and limitations that are not present in other games. But, at the same time, it also offers options in line with its mythological setting. For instance, if a character dies during the game, he immediately goes to Hades. But, as with Greek mythology, a heroic mission carried out by his companions can save him and return him to the world of the living. Also worth mentioning are the game's maps that contain few details, thus reflecting the poor geographical knowledge at the time, and which could be related to the mythical journey of Odysseus or Jason and the Argonauts. And just as in the Greek myths the gods could speak in favour of a human or accompany and protect a hero, so too can this be done here. In a nutshell, a fairly substantial knowledge of classical mythology can be gleaned from *Oráculo*.

The cases of *Mazes & Minotaurs* and *Oráculo* are perhaps the most paradigmatic in terms of role-playing games set in ancient Greece. The Greek mythological world offers the authors of role-playing games the possibility of introducing fantasy in their adventures, without having to invent it. This combination of Greek history and its mythology with fantasy – or historical fantasy, as I have chosen to call it here only for the purpose of the analysis of games – is achieved in such a way as to make it entirely acceptable for players since fantasy continues to have part of historicity. Even so, game systems and player preferences have given rise to other role-playing games with similar characteristics. These include *The Trojan War* belonging to the *Mythic Vistas* series, obviously set in the period of the Trojan War and which also includes all aspects of Greek mythology related by Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*;[23] and *Grecia: el juego de rol* (Greece: the role-playing game) which allows to play the game in a strictly historical mode, although the idea is to do so with some mythological elements, as noted above.[24]

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[23]   Rosenberg, Ryman 2006.
[24]   Morello 2012. This game forms part of a fairly common phenomenon in the role-playing game community in Spain and also in other countries, involving the independent creation and even publishing

Unlike the previous games, a more historical approach can be found in *Alejandro Magno* (Alexander the Great), whose subtitle is very revealing: "the role-playing game to play history".[25] Here, the ancient setting is the Hellenistic world in which not only is it possible to play in the time of the Macedonian conqueror, but also in the following centuries, during the reigns of the Diadochi and, later on, during those of the Epigoni.[26] This game's setting is 100% historical, *i.e.* without any fantasy elements.

Europe prior to the advent of Rome has also been chosen as an ancient setting for role-playing games. One of these is the Italian *Druid*, a kind of counterpart to *Mazes & Minotaurs*, with all the elements of the later but with a setting inspired by Celtic mythology and, therefore, more or less belonging to the historical fantasy genre.[27] In addition to druids, magic, spirits of the forests, lakes, etc., it also features races such as elves, dwarves and halflings. However, the use of Celtic mythology as inspiration sometime seems to be merely a pretext to develop a setting of the type known as "sword and sorcery" in the British Isles prior to the Roman invasion or revolving around the world of Arthurian legend after Britain had been abandoned to its fate by the Romans, with the alleged resurgence of druids, magic, etc.

Similarly, there is *Hispania Fudge,*[28] set in the Punic Wars and the Roman conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, from the end of the third to the end of the first century BC, which is strictly historical and features a carefully crafted setting. The game provides plenty of references to history and chronology, the Iberian tribes and their lives and customs, the Romans, the different armies and their weapons, geography and landmarks, hierarchy, society, diplomacy, religion and morality, transport, trade, roads and also historical Carthaginian and Roman characters alive at the time.

Let us now take a look at role-playing games with a Roman setting, taking as an example *Roma* (Rome), released by the Spanish publishing house Ludotecnia.[29] The

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of role-playing games by amateurs and connoisseurs, which stand out for their quality and great layouts. A clear alternative to publishing houses, as we shall soon see in other significant examples of ancient settings.

[25] Another independent production and available online free of charge is Rittman's *Alejandro Magno. El juego de rol para jugar la historia*, 2006.

[26] According to the designation initially adopted by Droysen in the nineteenth century. Droysen 1877-1878.

[27] Albertarelli, Gandolfi, Parente 1993.

[28] Perojo Gutiérrez, Rodríguez González 2008. Another independent creation of a good role-playing game that bridges the thematic gaps in the Spanish publishing market.

[29] Coto Bautista 2013.

game's strict historical setting is that of Republican Rome and its fall at the end of the first century BC. By gathering additional information, however, it is possible to play from the regal period until the end of the Empire, provided that due attention is paid to the socio-political and economic changes that were taking place. But confining ourselves to the game itself, it contains some useful appendices describing in a brief but satisfactory way Roman society, including its economy, medical practices, state and military organisation, family life, individual status, the role of women, religion, the main festivals and deities, and ownership and currency. Moreover, it includes a brief Latin glossary and reading and film recommendations. It has no fantasy elements, as indicated on the back cover: "In this game you won't find dragons or laser swords, but something much more dangerous and deadly: the ambition of men".

With the same scrupulously historical setting there is *SPQR*, a role-playing game conceived and designed as the main tool of an innovative pilot project for teaching ancient history using role-playing games, which was designed by the author of these lines at the University of Salamanca between 2002 and 2008,[30] and whose results were published in 2010.[31] With regard to its ancient setting, the general period is that of the Principate and, more specifically, around the time of the Flavian emperors (AD 69-96). The scenarios in which the different rounds are played include Rome – with a huge number of possibilities; Ostia and the region of Lazio; the area of Campania around Capri, Sorrento, Ercolano, Pompeii and Mount Vesuvius, coinciding with its eruption in AD 79; Corsica; Gaul; and finally Britain, coinciding with Gnaeus Iulius Agricola's conquest and subjugation of the Briganti. The game covers various aspects of everyday life in Rome, including housing, streets, markets, temples, baths, taverns, theatres and other entertainment buildings; society, classes and cosmopolitanism in the *urbs*; political and military career paths and the functioning of the institutions; ideologies, imperial power and the functioning of the bureaucracy; religion and beliefs; mythology – treated only as a belief, without introducing fantasy elements in the game; the races in the Circus Maximus and the gladiatorial and wild beast shows for the opening of the Colosseum or Flavian Amphitheatre; urban security and its organisation; the Roman army and fleet, and war; the conquered barbarian tribes and those living beyond the frontiers of the Empire, and the way in which they saw the Romans; the Roman road system and journeying over land and by sea; the aforementioned eruption of Mount Vesuvius; and so on and so forth. Players also have the opportunity of interacting with

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[30]   Carbó García 2001.
[31]   Carbó García, Pérez Miranda 2010.

historical non-player characters: the Emperors Vespasianus, Titus and Domitian, the consuls and generals Cerialis, Frontinus and Agricola, writers like Pliny the Elder, Pliny the Younger, Tacitus and Suetonius, and other minor historical characters whose names and personalities have come down to us thanks to the works of Roman historians like Suetonius and Tacitus.

Other games set in imperial Rome include *GURPS Imperial Rome*,[32] with the same rigorously historical perspective as that of *SPQR*, and *Eternal Rome*,[33] forming part of the *Mythic Vistas* series, covering the period from the founding of the city to the barbarian invasions and in which although historical accuracy prevails, it also has a fantasy side to it, since it has the option of including magic and mythical monsters.

Arcana Mundi: Secretos de la Roma Imperial (Arcana Mundi: Secrets of Imperial Rome) is set at the end of the second century AD.[34] Notwithstanding the game's broad historical setting, it also contains a large measure of fantasy. Polytheistic intervention and magic are back, not in a mythological sense, but something closer to how the Cthulhu Mythos deities would act. Nonetheless, the general historical setting is impeccable and the gods are both those of the Roman pantheon and those assimilated from the pantheons of other cultures.

Since the end of the 1990s and throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, the work of H. P. Lovecraft and the myths of Cthulhu have had a huge influence. Just as we have seen how these are present, albeit under different names, in *La Puerta de Ishtar*, they are explicitly so in the imperial Rome supplements for *The Call of Cthulhu*.

I am referring here to *Cthulhu Invictus*, which is really nothing more than a guide for the detective stories of *The Call of Cthulhu* set in the Roman Empire in the first century AD.[35] Its approach is based on the assumption that the primeval gods of the mythology invented by Lovecraft were behind the mythological origins of some of the most ancient gods of Rome or those of other tribes bordering on the Empire or conquered by Rome. In short, it is a fantasy or horror role-playing game with an ancient historical setting. But from a positive point of view, the mere claim that the myths of Cthulhu could be associated in some way with Rome is in itself an indication

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[32]   Carella 2000.

[33]   Davis 2007.

[34]   Rodríguez 2015.

[35]   Bowser, Newton, Goodwin 2009.

of the importance that ancient historical setting have in the general context of role-playing games. The remarkable number of supplements published in this respect also endorses that claim. By the same token, even tales of the myths of Cthulhu with that same Roman setting have been published, thanks precisely to its success.[36]

Also with an important place for fantasy there is the Italian game *Lex Arcana*[37] set in the fifth century AD, after the fall of the Western Roman Empire and in a world where the political powers are trying to reorganise themselves using magic. In point of fact, the game holds that Augustus and Hadrian were the authors of the first magical codices in the Roman Empire and that the Edicts of Milan and Thessaloniki never existed. After the fall of Rome in AD 476, a *cohors auxiliaria arcana* is established: its mission (and that of the players, of course) is to ensure the correct use of magic and to pursue its prohibited uses. In any event, the game revolves around fantasy and magical adventures in a world vaguely inspired by ancient history in which the intentional misrepresentation of historical data and the danger that this entails is again present.

Lastly, I would like to mention another independent Spanish role-playing game available for free on the Internet. *Hispania: terra indomita Germanicorum* by Blas Malo,[38] an author who has gone on to publish medieval historical novels, is set in late antiquity, more specifically in Visigothic Hispania. An appropriate way to conclude this analysis is to resort to Malo's own words, when justifying its strictly historical character:

> Why did I make this game? First, I love history and role-playing games, and with this game I combine both things; secondly, reality always surpasses fiction; in third place, with an historical role-playing game you don't need to buy expensive modules and supplements: everything you may need (history books) can be found in your city library at zero cost.

In conclusion, we have been able to observe through this representative, although non-exhaustive, analysis of role-playing games that history and antiquity – from Egypt and Mesopotamia to late antiquity – have a strong presence in their settings. Although there have been examples almost since the advent of role-playing games, it is a phenomenon that has intensified over the past decade. In spite of the fact that the historical settings based on any ancient civilization, race or territory are

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[36]   Sammoms 2015.

[37]   Colovini, Toffoli, Maggi, Nepitello 1993.

[38]   B. Malo, *Hispania. Terra indomita Germanicorum* (free download available online at: http://www.galeon.com/eltrabolo/descarga.htm).

remarkable, emphasis should also be placed on the undeniable attraction that fantasy elements have for players. In this regard, the merging of modern fantasy with ancient history – for example, the myths of Cthulhu with those of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Rome – and the use of ancient historical fantasy, normally based on Greek mythology, have been surprisingly successful. And not only for creating a fantasy context for games set in antiquity, but also for the huge influence that ancient mythology has had on the conception of various aspects in other fantasy role-playing games from their own origins, as with *Dungeons & Dragons*. Interestingly enough, there has been a recent tendency to make role-playing game settings as historically accurate as possible, at least as far as ancient ones are concerned. And when publishing houses have failed to satisfy the demand for games with a more historically faithful and real ancient setting, role-playing game fans, the best experts in the world in their field, have designed and self-published their own creations, without this affecting in any way their quality in terms of design, layout and setting or playability.

They are clear indications that ancient history and ancient historical fantasy, as I have called their various mythologies, have much to say in role-playing games, which constitute another way of transmitting information about antiquity and our knowledge of it in present-day society.

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