

Utopia on the Tabletop

Edited by
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11. Citadel of Chaos: An art practice to materialise an alternate present

Mark Rohtmaa-Jackson and Allan Hughes

When not in the tower he haunted the room where he had set up his War Tables—high benches on which rested models of cities and castles occupied by thousands of other models of soldier. In his madness he had commissioned this huge array from Vaiyonn, the local craftsman. [...] And Dorian Hawkmoon would move all these pieces about his vast boards, going through one permutation after another; fighting a thousand versions of the same battle in order to see how a battle which followed it might have changed.

— Michael Moorcock¹

In Moorcock's *The Chronicles of Castle Brass*, Hawkmoon is consumed by a madness to commission his miniature armies, and finds their permutations and predictions more absorbing than the fine day outside his room of tables. Rather than turning inward like Hawkmoon, we, under the guise of the parafictional games company *Blue Mountain Arcturus*, find ourselves examining tabletop gaming as a means to turn toward ourselves toward the wider world: as a language through which we try to alleviate our anxieties of the fine day. This text is a summary of how we hope to achieve alterations to our conditions through an experimental practice. It hopefully points towards areas of study that might be useful to others working with tabletop games as a means to learn strategies for survival:

¹ Michael Moorcock, 'The Champion of Garathorm,' in *The Chronicles of Castle Brass* (London: Grafton Books, 1987), p. 4

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the challenge to critical games design in the wake of Guy Debord and Alice Becker-Ho's *Game of War* (1987).

Citadel of Chaos (2019) is our case study for this chapter, an artwork made for the exhibition *Polymorph Other* at Queens Hall Arts Centre, Hexham, that same year. It was conceptualised, designed and built as a large piece of scenery or terrain for a hypothetical wargame table. It is a background rather than a focus; something that gives a place an environment that enables other things to happen. As such it is about the possibilities of things happening because of what we might have made. But this is not just on the small scale (a piece of scenery allows a story to be told between players through a game being played) but in the belief that this kind of work can change things outside of the system in which their world is contained (that such stories can lead to possibilities elsewhere).

Our interest in the paraphernalia of tabletop games as a mechanism for change is both about offering alternatives as well as magical intervention. We do this through merging ideas of worlds, mostly dystopian in some way, and games seem to us a system in which this kind of merging is already commonplace. The playability of a game of historical battles requires alterations to history to make them work, yet there are also tabletop games in which elements of the fantastical are inserted into historical conflict, or recognisable characteristics of historical conflict are replayed in science fiction or fantasy environments. Sometimes this is indirect. The game *Space Hulk* (1987), a board game set in Games Workshop's *Warhammer 40K* universe, is partly based on movies like *Aliens* (1986), a film that draws on characteristics of US global identity in terms of the economic and technological might of the colonial few against an indigenous many. Sometimes the collaging is more explicit: see Gamers in Exile's *Class War* gaming figures range, cast for a game that sadly never materialised, which included characters such as 'Thatcheroid Iron Lady' (clad in plate mail) and 'Reagenoid' (resembling a sheriff), alongside 'Fascist Pig' (a pig-faced policeman with riot shield) and 'Radical Feminist,' all of whom carry interchangeable medieval weapons such as swords, maces and crossbows.²

² Gamers in Exile 'Class War Figures' [Advert], *White Dwarf*. February 1987, p. 64.

Our practice follows this tradition and reconsiders it in the context of art-making, especially that of ‘fictioning’ as explored by O’Sullivan and Burrows in their book *Fictioning: The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy* (2019). In these terms, the basic premise of what we do can be summarized as ‘the deliberate imbrication of an apparent reality with other narratives’³ as well as a ‘collective invention to address ways of overcoming,’⁴ in our case drawn from fantasy and sci-fi pop culture. Our conversations about *Citadel of Chaos* owes some debt to the considerable work O’Sullivan and Burrows have done in this field.

If this fictioning through tabletop games culture is about utopia, our understanding is perhaps close to that of Muñoz in our sense of utopia as a temporal flux or derangement, something which is not prescriptive, but instead illuminates what cannot quite yet be articulated. Our fictioning embodies faith in the act of transformation in its own right, and the appearances of ‘radical impossibilities in the world of the natural.’⁵ It’s also inspired by the kinds of utopias of the later works of William Burroughs that start to deal with utopias (such as 1971’s *Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead*) and which is efficiently described by Skerl as ‘not literal images of the ideal community [but] utopian as a *force*.’⁶

As such we understand our work not to be a depiction or analysis of utopia but attempts to sketch out paths from which utopian ideas might be negotiated. What follows is a description of the origin story of the work and some key aspects of how we imagine it to function when moved out of the safety of the games table and onto the plinths of contemporary art, adorned with their languages and doubt.

³ Simon O’Sullivan ‘Fictioning the Landscape,’ *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology*, 5:1 (2018), p. 53

⁴ David Burrows and Simon O’Sullivan *Fictioning: The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2019), p. 257

⁵ José Muñoz *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press 2009) p. 139

⁶ Jennie Skerl ‘Freedom Through Fantasy’ in Jennie Skerl and Robin Lydenberg (eds.), *William S. Burroughs At the Front: Critical Reception 1959-1989* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 192

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The Work



Citadel of Chaos, Blue Mountain Arcturus (2019)

The work itself is a 28mm scale model of BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead UK. The scale was chosen to make the model consistent with 28mm gaming figures (a common size for fantasy, historical and science fiction wargames covering individual combat, skirmishes and larger engagements, as well as the common scale for building visual representations in roleplaying games, commonly those necessitated by combat scenarios). The materials, style of painting and finish that we used when building the model mirrored those associated with hobbyist scenery

building for gaming. In our model the image of BALTIC, instead of faithfully reproducing its current physical state, had been partially demolished by a crashed flying saucer. Amongst the shattered glass some 28mm scale aliens stand in observation while a tote bag lies abandoned spilling a solitary orange onto the plaza. This is a scene around which a skirmish, battle or war might be able to take place. Although understood by us as an artwork (through our making of it clearly being an act of art-making), it is made as terrain (through our considerations of all aspects of its making being in line with the kinds of values applied when building terrain for wargaming tables). This, then, is the object. But it owes both its existence and its potential as a utopian force to the time and place of its origins.

Origin Story

Like and unlike Hawkmoon, we are not isolated from our town and city: even when we turn inwards into possibilities of new worlds (as we might do in fiction and in games) we do so with the hope that they will in some way come into being, or that they realise a state of becoming in potentia. From 22nd June to the 9th September 2018 Newcastle and Gateshead were chosen to host the Great Exhibition of the North, an event dedicated to communicating the North of England's art, culture, design and innovation. Scrutiny of the exhibition's challenges included whether the project's political objectives (especially those designed from Westminster) undermined any real attempts to reflect what the North might be, want and/or need, as well as controversy around southern-based arms manufacturer BAE systems identified as one of the exhibition's lead sponsors.⁷

⁷ Neither of us could be considered as being from the north being referred to here, although both of us hail from other norths outside of England's self-proclaimed definition. Yet we both live and (mostly) work in this north. One thing that stuck us in this process was the teleological fictionalisation of the North: a series of set pieces that represent (somehow) its makings.

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Amongst the projects that were commissioned was new work by the artist collaborators Joanne Tatham and Tom O'Sullivan, who proposed to respond to the nature of such exhibitions and the role of contemporary art within them. Tatham and O'Sullivan's understanding and interrogation of the ways in which images are deployed into social environments by the will of cultural institutions and artworld action, and the complexities (especially the ethical and human complexities) that arise from these deployments, makes their participation a convincing sell. Their commission for Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, *A Proposal To Ask Where Does A Threshold Begin & End* (2018), is an apposite example of this approach, being as it incorporates a range of personal and rhetorical representations of the Middlesbrough locale.



A Successful Proposition For The Great North Exhibition, Joanne Tatham & Tom O'Sullivan (2018)

Their original proposal for the Great Exhibition was to install a large sculpture of a face on the north elevation of Gateshead's BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, facing Newcastle. Following negotiations with BALTIC curatorial team over a period of nearly a year, the proposal was 'deemed unfeasible'⁸ and they ultimately renegotiated towards a similar, although less monumental, intervention to the interior spaces at BALTIC, giving the work its title *A Successful Proposition for the Great North Exhibition*.

As is common with public art, Tatham and O'Sullivan's studio practice involves the production of scale models and maquettes to test ideas, and they produced just such a visualisation in the proposition of this artwork. The initial scale model sat expectantly in the studio at Northern Charter in Newcastle offering a vision of a future event that would never occur. Of course where maquettes for an unrealised project might be a radical impossibility in one world, it may yet become an agent for change in another. Tatham and O'Sullivan's maquette allowed us a form that brings together concerns of institutional representation (both the Great Exhibition of the North and BALTIC) and places them in the scale of a game world in which stories may be rewritten and one apparent reality might be imbricated with other narratives.

⁸ '[The] initial proposal was deemed unfeasible within the available budget and timescale, with any external installation work needing to be completed in advance of the kittiwakes' protected nesting season. A further proposal to build a face on the 4th floor external viewing balcony also proved to be unrealisable, and despite the initial project brief to produce a large Quayside artwork, the artists then proposed to present a series of fabricated faces within BALTIC's interior. [...] The illustration showing the unsuccessful proposal was drawn by Todmorden based artist Simon Manfield.' Joanne Tatham & Tom O'Sullivan, *A Successful Proposition for the Great North Exhibition*. (Gateshead: BALTIC 2018).

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Blue Mountain Arcturus

For us, as Blue Mountain Arcturus, the construction of a model of BALTIC as an act of collaborative invention was to both make this lost Tatham & O'Sullivan work happen (or rather *have* happened, in that at the point in the timeline at which visitors meet the BALTIC model, the installation of the work has taken place), but also to make that happening produce a moment from which countless other possibilities or futures begin.

As an object made in the traditions of wargame terrain, the model is scenery for events of conflict and yet does not define what those events might be. We felt that it would not be enough to represent the unsuccessful artwork, as it could easily be interpreted as a model, frozen in its planning state. So we introduced an event that would advance a new narrative (an impossibility) in a manner that is catastrophic for the apparent reality into which it is inserted. This event is of course the crash-landing of the flying saucer, which announces both a real horror (the demolition and the burning of a recognisable institution) as well as a fantasy.

Citadel of Chaos is an event rather than a proposal. And one with two clearly apparent indicators this is a world similar to ours yet different. It says: here is a world in which BALTIC exhibited Tatham and O'Sullivan's original proposal. Yet it also says this world is one in which aliens exist and are (deliberately or not) interventionist. Of course we didn't invite aliens into the conversation only for their science fiction credentials. The appearance of UFOs has frequently been attributed to wider social and political anxieties that underline lack of agency and control; whether that is the existential threat of nuclear annihilation⁹ or the acceleration of technology.¹⁰ Further to that the most oft repeated experiences of close encounter conditions are those that explicitly inhibit subjectivity, such as lost time and sleep paralysis. It is from a vortex of sympathetic contexts of

⁹ Carl Jung, *Flying Saucers : A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies* (Princeton University Press, 1978).

¹⁰ Jacques Vallée, *UFOs In Space: Anatomy of a Phenomenon* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1974).

Rohtmaa-Jackson and Hughes: Citadel of Chaos

anxiety, the values, successes and failures of institutional (cultural and political) representation, that our own model of alien encounter appears from; materialising in the speculative fabric of our own locale.

What did we hope to achieve by this collaborative intervention into the image of BALTIC and the Great Exhibition of the North? Ultimately we are both seeking a kind of utopia as force, or rather, more humbly, a route by which utopia as force can be negotiated. We understand there to be two means by which this can be read in the work: firstly in terms of its making as a production of the conditions of the magical universe and possibility of agency in the world (especially that the world can be manipulated). And secondly in terms of the implications of the making and materials for aiding the realisation of desires and agency of visitors. What follows looks at these two readings and some of their implications.

Citadel of Chaos in the Reality Studio

The first route into this kind of intervention in the fine day of BALTIC and the Great Exhibition comes from the magical thinking / Reality Studio route of William Burroughs¹¹. O'Sullivan describes fictioning, in part, also via a reading of Burroughs, as a transformative 'deployment of other times in the present.'¹² Burroughs' activities with such deployment extend from

¹¹ Indeed the name of our games company, *Blue Mountain Arcturus*, comes directly from a 2008 interview between prominent Scientologist David Gaiman and Mark Rohtmaa-Jackson. In the interview Gaiman, who had been part of the newly formed Guardian's Office of the Church of Scientology during the period that Burroughs had been involved, was defending the Church from an article by Burroughs: 'I, William Burroughs, Challenge You, L. Ron Hubbard.' *Mayfair*. Vol 5 No 1, pp. 52-54, 58. Gaiman frames Burroughs' techniques as influenced by drugs and television, saying: 'Anyone who has had as many hallucinogenics [sic.] and other toxic substances as William, they're pulling in pictures from all over the place. So one of the things that happens is, you look at a cup of tea, equals this particular cup of tea, equals a blue mountain, equals Arcturus, equals the little green men.'—David Gaiman, unpublished interview conducted by Mark Rohtmaa-Jackson, 9th April 2008.

¹² Simon O'Sullivan in Henriette Gunkel, Ayesha Hameed and Simon O'Sullivan (eds.) *Futures & Fictions* (London: Repeater, 2017) p. 6

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the cut-up technique to the displacement or introduction of incongruous characters and settings, especially those taken from or inspired by sci-fi, fantasy, and other genres. This deployment, to use O'Sullivan's phrase, is applied by Burroughs as a method of escaping an impasse of a linear time, causality and destiny maintained by social control and addiction. For Burroughs this is an externally enforced system for maintaining a planetary condition (such as population control and societal divisions as well as biological and behavioural conventions). The case of *Blue Mountain Arcturus* follows a similar trajectory. Here we construct a world from past, present and/or future folkloric resources to deploy variably as a social tool, a world-building exercise, or a desired alternative to present conditions.

We had been working with some of Burroughs' techniques for manipulating events using tape cut-ups, word cut-ups and experiments adapted from the principles of Dianetics that formed much of the worldview in which such experiments could be imagined as both applicable and effective. Burroughs imagines the world as being manipulable within a 'Reality Studio,' with reality itself ('the universe') as a form of 'prerecording'¹³ akin to a 'biologic film.'¹⁴ This prerecording is, for Burroughs, the constant repetition of ideology, sometimes defined through association with monotheistic religious systems. For Burroughs repetition makes things happen, and indeed the manipulation of recordings and their act of repetition can disrupt, change or erase these happening things or even predict alternatives. His more narratively cohesive film with Anthony Balch, *Towers Open Fire* (1963), is at its heart about this process and its constant need for experimentation and invention.

Citadel of Chaos comes from such a view. Its title is appropriated from the second book¹⁵ in the successful *Fighting Fantasy* solo gamebook series, whose hero (the role played by the reader) is a magician. As such,

¹³ William Burroughs *The Ticket That Exploded: The Restored Text* (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), p. 188

¹⁴ William Burroughs *Nova Express: The Restored Text* (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), p. 6n

¹⁵ Steve Jackson, *The Citadel of Chaos* (London: Puffin, 1984). Although Jackson's citadel is *The Citadel of Chaos*, the definitive one if you like. Ours is merely *A Citadel of Chaos*; one among many.

it hints that our BALTIC citadel might exist in a universe in which magic shares with art, according to Burroughs, a ceremonial function that nonetheless is there to 'produce very definite effects' though the deployment of will.¹⁶ The will here remains undefined as the focus of the model appears to be the realisation of an artwork and/or the decimation of BALTIC through extraterrestrial accident. However, as a gaming model, the focus instead is upon events (a conflict) that have yet to take place. It can also be inferred that the events will be reliant on gaming mechanics, not least dice, and as such are semi-random, a characteristic shared by Burroughs' cut-up activities that create meaning out of randomly juxtaposed fragments of text. Jennie Skerl articulates Burroughs' work here as 'playing with' the 'demonic energy' of forces of desire, and by doing so creating a fantasy through which a new way of being (both individually and as a society) can evolve.¹⁷ Therefore, much like in Burroughs, the *Citadel of Chaos* is part of an action of searching for routes to utopia, which in Burroughs is defined more through ideas of human liberation from control.

So *Citadel of Chaos* is, under the umbrella of *Blue Mountain Arcturus*, a fiction made up of fictions that proposes to somehow bring into being (literally or perhaps just speculatively) a better world. In this case, in a terrain feature for a wargame table, and much like in Burroughs' *The Wild Boys*, it doesn't happen without pending, and cyclical, acts of violence.

Citadel of Chaos on the Tabletop: Baltic as Battlefield

The second reading comes through our fascination with the material conditions of the tabletop gaming hobby. Of course the miniature and the act of miniaturization has direct relation to the processes of museums and art galleries (not least as we are working originally with a maquette). In their discussion of the relationship of the museum to the domestic interior Didier Maleuvre describes the dollhouse in terms of how 'miniaturization of the aesthetic experience is the paradoxical result of aesthetic culture's

¹⁶ William Burroughs, *The Adding Machine*. (New York: Seaver Books, 1986), p. 60

¹⁷ Skerl 'Freedom Through Fantasy,' p. 193.

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aspiration to totalization: only when the object is small enough can it be taken in as a totality.¹⁸ Maleuve's totalizing dollhouse can be compared to the representations of key battles, real or fictional, that are replayed across the tables of wargamers: an aspiration to unravel, under the power of the player, the grand scale of historical slaughter as minutiae of decisions, surprises and luck. Maleuve's argument is that this process of representation destroys the very thing that it is representing by removing it from its proximity with experience. However as stated earlier, these wars are semi-fictionalized in order to make them gameable. When miniaturized for purposes of play, they have a more ambiguous relationship to totality: even a simple set of rules may sometimes harbour vast complex possibilities waiting to be discovered. They are played on the table as if out-of-reach, and it is through their representation that they become not only tactile but malleable. Likewise, cultural institutions might totalize moments from the world, targeted from within their offices, to tell the stories they need to tell for the reasons they need to tell them. The museum cabinet, loaded with colonial loot, may showcase a kind of military conflict continuing long after it is declared concluded. And yet the physical characteristics of the wargaming table seems to speak a different language to the museum cabinet. The wargame table is weirder. In tabletop gaming the technical aspects of the world, and the world as a living world in which things happen and interact, exist simultaneously. On the wargaming table the existence of hills might affect movement, line of sight, range and melee (depending on whether forces were fighting up-hill or down-hill). In the museum cabinet they represent only their image, as if taken out of the world. On the wargaming table such contours are still active and would also contribute to the imaginative realisation of objects *as* a world. However the hills of the gaming table are often reduced to more basic characteristics. Whilst they could indeed be finely crafted representations, they are often merely books under cloth swiftly positioned in the opening moments of a game night; there is a compromise between craft and speed.

¹⁸ Didier Maleuvre *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1999), p. 133.

Game night is tomorrow night, time carved out between work, and the landscape needs only to be good enough.¹⁹

These inconsistencies of fidelity to the world makes the tabletop an inherently weird domain of interactions, and its weirdness does something important to the world it represents. The weirdness acknowledges that the wargames table is an inconsistent technology of representation. This tabletop is a domain of different levels of focus and detail, from meticulous pupils painted onto the eyes of a soldier to abstracted oblong hills of cloth draped over piles of books. The world is fuzzy and out of focus, and visitors to this world are required to actively interpret images as much as passively perceive them. As such the realisation of a tabletop scene is a collaborative act, requiring the viewer to make material into fiction. The player of the game is implicated by having a significant amount of the work of fiction beyond the actual playing of the game. They are not only providing the conflict that is to take place but building the world through its failures of representation. In *Citadel of Chaos* the black smoke is not smoke but the stuffing used in soft toys, a failure that acts as a constant reminder of the shifting and evasion of the representation from any concept of a totality.

Citadel of Chaos: You Decide!

These material limits require a suspension of disbelief that is an effective strategy for weirdness. Making BALTIC and the Great Exhibition of the north weird is clearly a useful strategy to make it seem both representative of itself and unrepresentative of the North itself. What is the Great Exhibition really? What is our obsession with the literalness of somewhere like BALTIC? Are they a representation of cultural activity?

¹⁹ Sometimes it is not just about speed. Sometimes the failures of representation are intentional and take place at the compromises between the sculpture and casting. Horses are comparatively smaller in scale in tabletop wargames than they would be in the flesh, allowing model makers to save on expensive materials. Heads, hands and feet are generally larger to allow for expression. Often vehicles are slightly the wrong size for those that would use them.

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Wargames as rewriting the history of war, of future war and of war that can never take place. None of the characters are part of the utopia, but they are a rebellion or disobedience in the North on a small scale, built into events through collaborative intervention. They aren't a utopia but presume to offer potential roads from which utopia can be negotiated, not only utopia as a method but also utopia as a force. We feel what we are doing may be urgent. So in an attempt to switch the temporal effects of Kathy Acker's 'psychic map of the present, therefore: the future' in her 1983 rewriting of Dickens in the opening to her *Great Expectations*²⁰, the *Citadel of Chaos* is intended as a 'psychic map of the future, therefore: the present.'

In this reality Tatham and O'Sullivan's original maquette has been realised in its full glory on the side of the former flour mill and a change in the Great Exhibition of the North has occurred. The problems that held it back have been overcome, or may not have existed. Perhaps the BAE funded it, despite the petitions. Perhaps there is no BAE. . Perhaps a different government is in place. Perhaps there is no government. But whatever the changes made, here is a universe in which disaster has occurred. The aliens have crash landed in Gateshead. What happens next? A setting for conflict.

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