*Journal of American Studies* (2025), 1–20
doi:10.1017/S0021875825000283

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

# When You Say, "Thermonuclear War," I Think You Mean "the Call to Adventure"! The *Twilight: 2000* Tabletop Role-Playing Game and the Postapocalyptic World's Imaginary Spaces

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(Accepted 29 November 2024)

## Abstract

Historians of the Cold War and the nuclear age have largely overlooked the existence of tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), while films, comics, novels, and television programmes that tackled the challenging imaginary, yet all-too-possible, wastes of a post-nuclear landscape have been abundantly analysed. As cultural products and tools through which to imagine other worlds, TTRPGs offer powerful insights into how, where, and why certain groups thought about the spectre of the nuclear age and how they dealt with this threat by gaming within make-believe postapocalyptic worlds. This article draws together several threads in its analysis of the American-designed and -produced *Twilight: 2000* TTRPG's historical significance. Through analysing *Twilight: 2000* as a case study of how a TTRPG functions as a specific nuclear-cultural object in its own right, the article also locates this game as a part of a wider-reaching dystopian fantasy rooted in the massive everyday reality of atomic annihilation. Likewise, the game, its mechanics, setting, and artwork are analysed here as part of a distinctive Cold War culture that permitted participants to derive pleasure and affirmation from fictional "adventures" in the postapocalyptic environment.

In 1995, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China went to war. As the conflict spilled over into Europe, a cabal of East and West German military officers opportunistically staged a coup to force German reunification. With NATO fighting the Warsaw Pact across the continent, the war escalated into a nuclear exchange in 1997. Millions of people lost their lives, and in Europe, the United States, and the Soviet Union, civilization began to collapse. A few small groups of American soldiers attempted to survive in an irradiated, chaotic Poland, before trying to find a way back home to a fractured, devastated United States. Their stories have largely never been told beyond a very narrow community.

Of course, we all know that by 1995 the USSR had ceased to exist, Germany had peacefully reunified, and the world had not become a postapocalypticwasteland. The

scenario described above only existed as the background to *Twilight: 2000*, a tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) released by Illinois-based design studio Game Designers' Workshop (GDW) in 1984.[1] As one of a number of these socially significant, but hitherto neglected, TTRPGs which came to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, *Twilight: 2000* (hereafter *T: 2000*) used the aftermath of nuclear war as a setting in which groups of players could have vicarious adventures, tell dramatic stories, and explore the implications of nuclear catastrophe.

Given their popularity, it seems strange that scholars studying America's Cold War and nuclear age have largely overlooked such games, while films, comics, novels, and television programmes that tackled the challenging, imaginary, yet all too possible wastes of a post-nuclear landscape have been widely and deeply analysed.[2] As cultural products and tools through which to imagine other worlds, TTRPGs offer powerful insights into how, where, and why certain groups thought about the spectre of the nuclear age and how they dealt with this threat by gaming within fictional postapocalyptic worlds.[3]

This article draws together several threads in its analysis of one particular American TTRPG's history and historical significance. Through analysing *T: 2000* as a case study of how a TTRPG functions as a specific nuclear-cultural object in its own right, the article also locates this game as a part of a wider-reaching dystopian fantasy rooted in nuclear annihilation's massive everyday reality. Likewise, the game and its mechanics, setting, and artwork are analysed here as part of a distinctive Cold War culture that permitted participants to derive pleasure and affirmation from fictional "adventures" in the postapocalyptic environment.

## Role-playing games, history, and apocalyptic fantasy

What are TTRPGs? In essence, tabletop role-playing is a group activity where two or more people gather together to create collaborative stories, stories moderated by rules – frequently involving randomizers such as dice – and taking place within a fictional or nonfictional world. The games are sometimes oppositional, whereone

[1]Frank Chadwick, David Nilsen, Lester W. Smith, and Loren K. Wiseman, "Referee's Manual," *Twilight: 2000*, 1st edn (Normal, IL: Game Designers' Workshop [GDW], 1984), 23–27. Various sources use "roleplaying," "role-playing," and "role playing." For consistency, role-playing will be used through this text, unless in quotations or product titles.

[2]The literature on the nuclear age's imaginative cultural and social history is vast. Classic works include Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Spencer Weart, *Nuclear Fear: A History of Images* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Allan M. Winkler, *Life under a Cloud: American Anxiety about the Atom* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and others. See also Thomas Bishop, *Every Home a Fortress: Cold War Fatherhood and the Family Fallout Shelter* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020); H. Bruce Franklin, *War Stars: The Superweapon and the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Margot A. Henriksen, *Dr Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Jonathan Hogg, *British Nuclear Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Guy Oakes, *The Imaginary War: Civil Defence and American Cold War Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); David Seed, *American Science Fiction and the Cold War: Literature and Film* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1999); and so on.

[3]Even wide-ranging cultural studies examining films, novels, radio, and computer games such as Robert Yeates's *American Cities in Post-apocalyptic Science Fiction* (London: UCL Press, 2021) do not mention TTRPGs.

player (sometimes referred to as the gamemaster (GM), dungeon master (DM), referee, keeper, director, or a range of other formulations) has responsibility for guiding players through a scenario or adventure and providing adversity, with a structured range of suggested or predetermined outcomes.[4] In more traditional TTRPGs such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*), the DM/GM also has authority to determine the nature of in-game reality, an authority vested in them the game's original designers' higher authority. Some games, however, are much more collaborative, where each individual has a degree of narrative control and influence. The core game can then be added to with *supplements* which expand upon the basic information.

Role-playing games are a visual as well as a textual and oral medium. Artwork is used to infer a sense of place, space, setting, and values to the GM/referee and the players alike.[5] Art in TTRPGs can and does guide understandings of the fictional world in which the imaginative play takes place. It is thus crucial to analyse the interplay between words and images in game texts. Artwork in this context is used to cover illustrations, maps, and visual representations of items such as vehicles and weapons.

As Sarah Lynne Bowman, William J. White, and Evan Torner note, there is an "increasing specificity and maturity of role-playing game studies." Scholars in multiple overlapping and intersecting disciplines have transformed the field, offering "increased specificity in terms of evidence-based work and complex theoretical models."[6] TTRPGs have been analysed as educative tools, methods of mental health care, sites of identity creation, and literary objects, and in a multiplicity of other ways.[7] Monographs such as Bowman's, collections such as Torner and White's, and journals such as the *International Journal of Role-Playing* and *Analog Game Studies* have helped to solidify TTRPGs' position as subjects of academic study.[8]

In narrower disciplinary terms, TTRPGs as objects of historical inquiry have increasingly come into focus. White's study of influential design and theory forum The Forge (noted above) offers crucial insights into the recent history of

[4]"Game master" (and *D&D*'s "dungeon master") is an obviously gendered term used within a male-dominated hobby. *T: 2000* used the neutral "referee," a term located in the wargames and military simulations that formed the designers' backgrounds.

[5]I am indebted to Jon Hodgson for the discussions and invaluable insights that laid the foundation for this element of the analysis.

[6]Sarah Lynne Bowman, William J. White, and Evan Torner, "The Increasing Specificity and Maturity of Role-Playing Game Studies," *International Journal of Role-Playing*, 15 (2024), 1–8, 2.

[7]See, for a representative sample from the *International Journal of Role-Playing*, Maryanne Cullinan, "Surveying the Perspectives of Middle and High School Educators Who Use Role-Playing Games as Pedagogy," *International Journal of Role-Playing*, 15 (2024), 127–41; Orla Walsh and Conor Linehan, "Roll for Insight: Understanding How the Experience of Playing Dungeons & Dragons Impacts the Mental Health of an Average Player," *International Journal of Role-Playing*, 15 (2024), 36–60; Josephine Baird, "Role-Playing the Self: Trans Self-Expression, Exploration, and Embodiment in Live Action Role-Playing Games," *International Journal of Roleplaying*, 11 (2021), 94–113; David Jara, "A Closer Look at the (Rule-) Books: Framings and Paratexts in Tabletop Role-Playing Games," *International Journal of Role-Playing*, 4 (2013), 39–54.

[8]Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2010); Evan Torner and William J. White (eds.), *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2012).

independent/small-press TTRPG design.[9] Jon Peterson has done sterling work investigating *D&D*'s origins, evolution, and legacies.[10] Aaron Trammell's broader study of race and "geek culture" investigates TTRPGs as "white" spaces and the collisions between conceptions of race and gaming culture.[11] Trammell also explores wider historical themes, including orientalism and misogyny in TTRPGs and the spaces their participants create.[12] Connected to this article's themes, Trammell argues that the underground spaces of *D&D* are – at least in part – indebted to America's 1960s and 1970s nuclear anxieties and popular imaginaries around bunkers, mines, and other spaces of shelter from blast and fallout.[13] Histories of TTRPGs have thus moved on significantly from narrative or gazetteer-type works such as Lawrence Schick's 1991 book *Heroic Worlds: A History and Guide to Role-Playing Games* to provide methodologically and theoretically sophisticated analyses.[14]

*D&D*'s emergence in the United States (and subsequent international spread) understandably dominates historical study of role-playing's first two decades of existence. However, there were many other American games that did not hew to *D&D*'s high fantasy settings and instead offered darker, more immediate worlds for gamers to explore. Games that incorporated the threat of nuclear devastation dealt with the pressing contemporary prospect of fiery annihilation in rich and diverse ways. From *T: 2000*'s post-World War III Poland, through *Gamma World*'s far-future, surrealist grotesquery, to *Paranoia*'s Marxist (Brothers, not the father of communism) absurdism, the nuclear age and its terrifying ultimate consequences were present in a broad range of game experiences.[15] Implicit or explicit in all of these were the acknowledgement of the world around them, the Cold War nuclear standoff's threat, and an invitation to players to somehow deal with this through play.

Militaristic TTRPGs such as *T: 2000* allowed gamers to participate in a "masculine pleasure culture of war." As Graham Dawson contends, such a culture offers a mode of fantasy and play which permits personal masculinity to be secured through a variety of means, including (but not limited to) comics, films, books, toy soldiers, war games,

[9]William J. White, *Tabletop RPG Design in Theory and Practice at the Forge, 2001–2012: Designs & Discussions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan,2020).

[10]Jon Peterson, *The Elusive Shift: How Role-Playing Games Forged Their Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022); Peterson, *Game Wizards:* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021); Peterson, *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People, and Fantastic Adventures from Chess to Roleplaying Games* (San Diego, CA: Unreason Press, 2012).

[11]Aaron Trammell, *The Privilege of Play: A History of Hobby Games, Race, and Geek Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2023).

[12]Aaron Trammell, "Misogyny and the Female Body in *Dungeons and Dragons*," *Analog Game Studies*, 1 (July 2016), 23–33; Trammell, "How *Dungeons and Dragons* Appropriated the Orient," *Analog Game Studies*, 3 (Feb. 2019), 121–39.

[13]Aaron Trammell, "From Where Do Dungeons Come?", *Analog Game Studies*, 1 (July 2016), 67–74.

[14]Lawrence Schick, *Heroic Worlds: A History and Guide to Role-Playing Games* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991).

[15]James M. Ward and Gary Jaquet, *Gamma World: Science Fantasy Roleplaying Game* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR, 1978). Further editions appeared in 1983, 1986, 1992, 2000, 2003, and 2003. Greg Costikyan, Dan Gelber, Eric Goldberg, and Allen Varney, *Paranoia: A Role-Playing Game of a Darkly Humorous Future* (New York: West End Games, 1984). Further editions appeared in 1987, 1995, 2004, 2009, and 2017. Games Workshop licensed the game for European distribution and published the first European edition in 1986.

and computer games.[16] Dawson's analysis aligns with concepts of "militarized masculinity" in games that permit players to experience extraordinary situations and break societal taboos (such as killing without consequences).[17] Role-playing's formalized, mechanized, and systematized imaginative play is a distinctive, collective form of this militarized, masculine pleasure culture. This is particularly true given that until the recent early twenty-first century, role-playing was an almost entirely male hobby.[18] As Steven L. Dashiell contends by analysing conversations at the "gaming table," TTRPGs have been and continue to be a largely "male preserve," where "hooliganism" at the table is evidenced by a "reticence to apply contemporary social norms to gaming worlds."[19]

Since the 1980s, sustained scholarly investigation has explored the cultural significance of contemporary films, television programmes, novels, and comics that reveal the history and impact of different forms of post-1945 "nuclear culture." The TTRPG analysed here emerged into a renewed Cold War and widespread nuclear tension, which provoked a "third cycle" of antinuclear activism and cultural attention to nuclear issues.[20] As detente collapsed in the late 1970s, that decade's arms control achievements began to look less impressive. New generations of missiles such as the Soviet SS-20 and the US ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) were deployed, provoking fear, protest, and increased anxiety about global nuclear war.[21] Mass movements mobilized against this threat, at sites such as Greenham Common airbase in England and the West German capital, Bonn.[22] Historians frequently cite 1983 – the year before *T: 2000* appeared – as the "year of maximum danger" in the Cold

[16]Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire, and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994), 4, 233–58. See also Michael Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850–2000* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 222–61.

[17]Kevin Schut, "Desktop Conquistadors: Negotiating American Manhood in the Digital Fantasy Role-Playing Game," in J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler, eds., *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity, and Experience in Fantasy Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland., 2006), 107. This is not to say that female-identifying gamers did not participate in TTRPGs such as *T: 2000*. However, they were in a minority both specifically and – as indicated – in the hobby as a whole.

[18]Statistical reporting on the hobby's demographics in the 1970s and 1980s is almost nonexistent, and any assessment of the community's gender makeup is perforce anecdotal. However, Wizards of the Coast (then publishers of *D&D*) conducted a survey in 1998–99, finding that 81% of respondents identified as male. See Ryan S. Dancey, "Adventure Game Industry Market Research Summary (RPGs) V1.0," at www.rpg.net/news+reviews/wotcdemo.html (accessed 14 Nov. 2023).

[19]Steven L. Dashiell, "Hooligans at the Table: The Concept of Male Preserves in Tabletop Role-Playing Games," *International Journal of Role-playing*, 10 (2020), 26–39, 27.

[20]Paul Boyer, "Nuclear Themes in American Culture, 1945 to the Present," in Matthew Grant and Benjamin Zieman (eds.), *Understanding the Imaginary War: Culture, Thought, and Nuclear Conflict, 1945–90* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 81.

[21]Hogg, *British Nuclear Culture*, 133–34.

[22]See Lawrence S. Wittner, *The Struggle against the Bomb*, Volume III, *Toward Nuclear Abolition: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1971 to the Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Andrew S. Tompkins, *Better Active than Radioactive: Anti-nuclear protest in 1970s France and West Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

War.[23] Ronald Reagan's aggressively anticommunist rhetoric; a decaying, gerontocratic Kremlin; and events such as a the KAL007 airliner's destruction by a Soviet fighter pilot and NATO's Able Archer '83 exercise pulled the tripwire for nuclear war even tighter.

Games and the language of games permeated America's Cold War from beginning to end, from top to bottom of politics, diplomacy, society, and culture, spanning from the personal to the military, national, and international. American forces assigned to NATO took part in vast war games. In California, RAND Corporation "eggheads" used strategy games that – seemingly – permitted a better understanding of how to wage nuclear war.[24] Government departments, university faculties, and think tanks played out complex strategy games. "Official" Cold War gaming directly and indirectly influenced publicly available games and gaming culture.[25] Arcade games such as *Missile Command* (featuring a science-fictionalized America under attack from a similarly coded USSR) simulated nuclear war with crude pixels and an appetite for small change.[26] Board games, card games, and computer games all drew on the twilight struggle.

As Matthew Grant and Benjamin Zieman point out, "throughout the 1970s and 1980s, depictions of a future conflict gained much of their rhetorical force from imaging the horrors of the post-nuclear world."[27] Few of these depictions – bar events such as civil-defence exercises – invited people to actually participate in cocreating these post-nuclear worlds, immerse themselves in the Cold War's worst possible outcome, and tell stories of life after the apocalypse.[28] This is where postapocalyptic TTRPGs from the 1970s and 1980s have a unique social character which makes their neglect in the wider scholarship all the more inexplicable.

TTRPGs found their origins in the cross-pollination of science fiction and fantasy fandoms, wargaming, board gaming, and play-by-mail games. Postapocalyptic TTRPGs thus existed in the collision between the nuclear age's shared anxieties and a popular pastime indebted to the realms of speculative fiction and its fandoms. As Fabienne Colignon argues, the hypothesizing around total nuclear war constitutes

[23]See, for example, Stephen J. Cimbala, "Year of Maximum Danger? The 1983 'War Scare' and US–Soviet Deterrence", *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 13, 2 (2000), 1–24; Jonathan M. DiCicco, "Fear, Loathing, and Cracks in Reagan's Mirror Images: Able Archer 83 and an American First Step toward Rapprochement in the Cold War," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 7, 3 (July 2011), 253–74; Nate Jones, ed., *Able Archer 83: The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War* (New York: The New Press, 2016); Arnav Manchanda, "When Truth Is Stranger than Fiction: The Able Archer Incident," *Cold War History*, 9, 1 (2009), 111–33; Len Scott, "Intelligence and the Risk of Nuclear War: Able Archer-83 Revisited," *Intelligence and National Security*, 26, 6 (2011), 759–77.

[24]Peterson, *Playing at the World*, 376–82.

[25]Patrick Crogan, *Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation, and Technoculture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

[26]On *Missile Command*'s genesis and development see John Wills, *Gamer Nation: Video Games & American Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 87–95.

[27]Matthew Grant and Benjamin Zieman, "Introduction: The Cold War as an Imaginary War," in Grant and Zieman, 9.

[28]On civil defence as "theatre of security" see Tracy C. Davis, *Stages of Emergency: Cold War Nuclear Civil Defense* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

a fantasy while concurrently constituting a massive reality.[29] Eva Horn notes that "the bomb" is in itself a "fantasy about the end of the world."[30] Nuclear Armageddon as an apocalyptic fantasy is a popular staple, but it links directly to the shared fantasy of TTRPGs. TTRPGs represented a core element of wider cultural fantasies about atomic confrontation built on a concrete foundation of bombers, missiles, and warheads. The imaginative space of TTRPGs in the 1970s and 1980s remained anchored to the real world, but starkly diverged from it, co-opting the most dreadful fantasies about an all-too possible future.

Role-players did not consume games passively but actively engaged with the storylines and world creation. This makes TTRPGs an extremely valuable lens through which to explore how fictional worlds of play permitted individuals and groups to respond to the nuclear threat and how that threat manifested. This – of course – requires the construction of an oral history of postapocalypse gaming, something that is outside the scope of this article but which presents a clear requirement for future research.

Far from being pure escapism, these games dove head-first into the Cold War's ultimate logic, a logic that dictated planetary suicide and the collapse of civilizations, offering dystopian, nightmarish visions of the world as it might be. Regarding utopian visions – the seeming opposite of fictions such as *T: 2000* – Duncan Bell contends that they are a "diagnostic probe of the present as well as a call to act, their imaginative power is generated by the simultaneous identification of pathology and the elaboration of a hypothetical resolution."[31] This – at least in part – also applies to the dystopian visions presented in apocalyptic TTRPGS. They took the Cold War's nuclear shadow and extrapolated it into a negative future vision that demanded resolution through the process of imaginative play. Such games represented – to use Jon Hogg's framing – an "unofficial" nuclear-age narrative. They were artefacts within a wider "nuclear culture," part of "a wide variety of 'unofficial' cultures of reflection, assent, dissent, uncertainty, and resistance." "People," as Hogg points out, "were not passive during the nuclear age."[32]

## "They were sent to save Europe. Now they're fighting to save themselves."

Marc Miller, Frank Chadwick, Rich Banner, and Loren Wiseman founded GDW in 1973, and like many companies that became prominent in the TTRPG scene, they began life as a war games producer.[33] The emergence of *D&D* in 1974 provoked GDW's staff to consider this new market, an offshoot from the war games with which they were familiar. While their first TTRPG release, *En Garde!*, represented a hybrid between

[29]Fabienne Collignon, *Rocket States: Atomic Weaponry and the Cultural Imagination* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 7.

[30]Eva Horn, "The Apocalyptic Fiction: Shaping the Future of the Cold War," in Grant and Zieman, 33.

[31]Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 18.

[32]Hogg, *British Nuclear Culture*, 8.

[33]GDW should not be confused with the similarly named but separate British games company Games Workshop, known for the *Warhammer Fantasy* and *Warhammer 40,000* tabletop miniatures wargames. The title of this section is taken from Chadwick et al., *Twilight: 2000*, 1st edn, box art tagline.

strategy game and role-playing game – a common feature in this first generation of TTRPGs – Miller's science fiction game *Traveller* launched GDW as a major force in the market.[34]

War games remained a major revenue stream for GDW, but as that market began to shrink in the early 1980s, the design team decided to focus more on TTRPGs, and particularly genres that they saw as underserved by other major players such as Tactical Studies Rules (TSR).[35] GDW moved into the Cold War world at the end of 1984, with their third major TTRPG release: *T: 2000*, a game that contained a near-future take on nuclear-age perils. Set at the millennium's turn, *T: 2000* offered a gloomy vision of humanity's future, a depopulated, war-torn world ravaged by disease, radiation, banditry, and starvation. Far from *D&D*'s fantastical worlds, this was the "real world" of nuclear Armageddon brought to the gaming table. *T: 2000* was informed not only by the team's military simulation and war-gaming backgrounds, but also by the military experience of members such as Miller and frequent supplement writer Captain Thomas Mulkey, a former paratrooper and Vietnam veteran. Primarily written by Chadwick, *T: 2000* was the most successful postapocalypse and military RPG of its era, with Chadwick and the GDW team perceiving that gamers desired more military-focussed, hard-edged games than were then available.[36] Military TTRPGs had appeared in the early 1980s, but titles such as *Commando*, *Merc*, *Behind Enemy Lines*, and *Recon* had failed to make a significant impact on the market.[37] *T: 2000*, on the other hand, quickly sold out its initial 10,000-copy print run, eventually selling nearly 100,000 copies, winning the Origins Award for "Best Role-Playing Rules of 1984," and latterly being hailed by games critic Rick Swan as "easily the best of the postapocalyptic RPGs," and by early TTRPG historian Lawrence Schick as "the definitive modern military role-playing game."[38]

Despite its success, *T: 2000* was not the first postapocalyptic TTRPG onto the market. Postapocalyptic role-playing games emerged in the late 1970s, on the back of the *D&D* phenomenon; a long tradition of postapocalyptic cultural products; and a milieu infused with images of nuclear devastation in the form of films such as *Planet of the Apes* and *A Boy and His Dog*, television series such as *Genesis II* and *Planet Earth*, and novels like *Z for Zachariah*. TSR's *Gamma World* had the honour of being first the

[34]Frank Chadwick, Daryl Hany, John Harshman, and Loren Wiseman, *En Garde!* (Normal, IL: GDW, 1975); Marc W. Miller, *Traveller: Science-Fiction Adventure in the Far Future* (Normal, IL: GDW, 1977). *Traveller* – in various versions – has remained in almost constant publication since it appeared in 1977.

[35]Shannon Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons: A History of the Roleplaying Game Industry*, Volume I, *1970–79* (Silver Spring, MD: Evil Hat Productions, 2013), 167.

[36]Ibid., 167.

[37]Eric Goldberg, *Commando* (New York: Simulations Publications, Inc., 1979). *Commando* was a wargame with TTRPG elements rather than a wholehearted TTRPG. Paul D. Baader, Lawrence Sangee, and Walter Mark, *Merc* (Jericho, NY: Fantasy Games Unlimited, 1981); William H. Keith Jr., Jordan Weisman, Ross Babcock, Eric Turn, and Steve Turn, *Behind Enemy Lines* (Chicago, IL: FASA Corporation, 1982); Joe F. Martin, *Recon: The Role-Playing Game of the Vietnam War* (n.l.: Role-Playing Games Inc., 1982). In its first edition, *Recon* was much closer to a wargame than an RPG. From its 1983 second edition onwards it pivoted towards role-playing.

[38]Author unknown, *Player's Guide to Twilight: 2000*, at www.farfuture.net/Guide%20to%20Twilight%20v1.pdf (accessed 17 Aug. 2023), 5; Rick Swan, *The Complete Guide to Role-Playing Games* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1990), 231; Schick, *Heroic Worlds*, 257.

major postapocalypse setting to market.[39] *Gamma World* took place in a radioactive North America many centuries hence, where bizarre mutations were widespread and such societies as existed lived amongst a forgotten, violent past's detritus. Unlike later, more "realistic," settings, *Gamma World* encouraged a freewheeling, gonzo approach to life long after the apocalypse (a "post-postapocalypse"), as the "pure strain human," "humanoid," or "mutant" player characters were faced with even more outlandish "mutants," talking animals, walking plants, and phantasmagorical occurrences. This was the postapocalypse world as comedic freakshow, a mashup of *Mad* magazine, Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks*, and Norman Spinrad's 1972 novel *The Iron Dream*.[40]

There followed in 1980 Timeline Ltd's *The Morrow Project*, a much more hard-edged, "realistic" game, closer in style to GDW's later offering.[41] *The Morrow Project*'s setting posited cryogenically frozen survivors awaking 150 years after a global nuclear war to rebuild civilization and – even in a game valuing "realism" – battle mutants. *Morrow Project* characters were rugged elites, chosen decades before to rebuild and repopulate a devastated world. The game hewed to tropes popular in the emergent survivalist movement, with only those with the foresight and will to engage in preparedness measures having the ability to survive and thrive.

Similarly military-minded was *Aftermath!* from Fantasy Games Unlimited, who the same year released the *Merc* military TTRPG.[42] Here the apocalypse's nature was left up to the participants, but it had nonetheless predictably grim results. British reviewer Andy Slack commented that he could well see characters "fighting another survivor to the death over a can of rotten dog food 20 years old."[43] While *Gamma World* achieved a degree of popularity with fantasy gamers, neither *The Morrow Project* nor *Aftermath!* managed to carve out anything more than niche appeal. Not until 1984 would a militaristic, postapocalyptic game truly make its mark.[44]

Much more akin to *The Morrow Project* and *Aftermath!* than the gonzo *Gamma World*, *T: 2000* was unabashedly militaristic and rooted in the minutiae of tanks, rifles, artillery, and all the symbols of techno-military masculinity. Coming onto the market towards the end of 1984, the game imagined a quasi-realistic Third World War, founded in military simulation games like *Harpoon* and techno-militaristic fiction.[45] The setting owed a debt to best-selling "near future war" books such as General

[39]*Gamma World* was narrowly preceded by the obscure *The Realm of Yolmi* by West Coast Games. More concerned with puns, in-jokes, and lampooning *D&D*, the apocalypse stemmed from an outer-space gas that devastated Earth and mutated the remaining life forms.

[40]Aspects of *Gamma World* bear a strong resemblance to Spinrad's *The Iron Dream*, although without Spinrad's darkly satirical pastiche of Nazi race fantasies.

[41]Kevin Dockery, Robert Sadler, and Richard Tucholka, *The Morrow Project* (Warren, MI: Timeline Ltd, 1980). Further editions appeared in 1983 and 2013.

[42]Robert N. Charette and Paul Hume, *Aftermath!* (Jericho, NY: Fantasy Games Unlimited, 1981).

[43]Andy Slack, "Review: *Aftermath!*", *White Dwarf*, 34 (Oct. 1982), 16–17.

[44]Appelcline, 238.

[45]Lawrence L. Bond, *Harpoon* (St. Paul, MN: Adventure Games Incorporated, 1980). Tom Clancy – the 1980s and 1990s most popular exponent of this literary form – was a close friend and collaborator of *Harpoon*'s designer Larry Bond, a former US Navy officer and defence analyst, who worked with GDW when they bought the rights to *Harpoon* in 1987. Whether contemporary accounts are to be believed, *T: 2000* was an influence on Clancy's blockbuster 1986 novel *Red Storm Rising*. If nothing else, the similarities between *T: 2000*'s future history and the novel are close and obvious.

Sir John Hackett's *The Third World War, August 1985: A Future History*.[46] Significantly, *T: 2000* did not present a "worst-case" scenario of total, global nuclear devastation. Although there were strategic and tactical exchanges over an extended period, the two superpowers refrained from an all-out, world-ending nuclear war.[47] As the expanded background to the game presented in later supplements noted, "the effect was not to destroy humanity – only civilization."[48]

*T: 2000* was (unsurprisingly) militaristic, masculine, and designed to appeal to those interested in weapons technology and survival in a harsh environment. Although the game text noted that characters could be either male or female, male pronouns were used throughout.[49] One element in the basic boxed set where women were presented as having parity with male characters was in the first-person monologues narrated by a character named "Monk" that gave insights into the world. In the game's paratext, female characters fought, laboured, and dealt with adversity with little differentiation between them and male characters. Overall, though, *T: 2000* was a masculine space where female non-player characters were frequently damsels to be rescued from the appalling depredations of Eastern European others.

Significantly more text in the game described guns, tanks, and artillery than explored the world itself and only three pages of the boxed set described post-nuclear Poland.[50] Groups were encouraged to develop their own imagined postwar Poland as a place of radioactivity, frightened civilians, roving gangs of "marauders," ad hoc military units, and beleaguered cantonments. Even though subsequent supplements added considerable detail to the setting, *T: 2000*'s Poland was no more or less imaginary than *D&D*'s fantasy Greyhawk or *Traveller*'s far-future Imperium.[51] This setting allowed individuals and groups to develop their own ideas about the post-nuclear world's nature and the personalities and motivations of those who inhabited it, should they choose to look beyond the published supplements.

*T: 2000* parochially interpreted the apocalypse, presupposing the preeminence of American ideas, interests, and people. However, this is unsurprising from an American product created for a primarily American audience. The game text implicitly and explicitly assumed that players would choose US service personnel as their characters. The core assumption of almost all material published up to *Going Home* was that the player characters would be members of the US Army's 5th Mechanized Division, on their own after a final organized battle in the area around the central Polish city of Kalisz.[52] Most of the early "adventure" supplements opened with some

[46]John Hackett and others, *The Third World War, August 1985: A Future History* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1978). The book was revised in 1982 as *The Third World War: The Untold Story* to incorporate real-world developments.

[47]Chadwick et al., "Referee's Manual," *Twilight: 2000*, 1st edn, 25–26.

[48]Loren Wiseman, *Howling Wilderness* (Normal, IL: GDW, 1988), 7.

[49]Chadwick et al., "Play Manual," *Twilight: 2000*, 1st edn, 3.

[50]Chadwick et al., "Referee's Manual," *Twilight: 2000*, 1st edn, 28–30.

[51]See, for example, William H. Keith Jr's early *T: 2000* supplements *Free City of Krakow* (Normal, IL: GDW, 1985), which offered a gazeteer-esque appreciation of Poland's second city, and *Pirates of the Vistula* (Normal, IL: GDW, 1985), which detailed the world along the river Vistula's banks; Frank Frey's supplement *The Black Madonna* (Normal, IL: GDW, 1985), which detailed Silesia; and William H. Keith Jr. and Timothy B. Brown's supplement *The Ruins of Warsaw* (Normal, IL: GDW, 1985), which detailed the ruined Polish capital.

[52]Individual groups could – and did – locate their games almost anywhere. Poland and Germany were frequent choices.

variation of "The players are survivors of the US 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), which was destroyed near the Polish city of Kalisz in mid-July of 2000."[53] Little background or mechanical support was given to players who might wish to play non-American or nonmilitary characters until much later in the game's lifetime. Furthermore, the game's "campaign arc" bent towards the United States. After the four initial adventure supplements, the focus moved towards what happened after the characters had "gone home" (to the United States).

In the boxed set, the text offered a high-level, stark, and emotionless description of nuclear confrontation. To use Carol Cohn's memorable phrasing, it offered "sanitized abstractions of death and destruction."[54] Such abstractions were common throughout the Cold War space of American defence intellectuals, war planners, and senior commanders. The game thus replicated an overarching US national-security discourse that divested itself of the "emotional, the concrete, the particular, the human bodies and their vulnerability, human lives and their subjectivity – all of which are marked as feminine in the binary dichotomies of gender discourse."[55] While contemporaneous films such as *The Day After* and *Threads* vividly and viscerally portrayed the effects of nuclear war, *T: 2000* downplayed its worst manifestations.

Abstractions around nuclear war were present in a crucial visual aspect of *T: 2000* and its supplements: maps.[56] As Timothy Barney points out, no map reproduces the real; it "reduces and simplifies, spatializes and plots," and presents abstractions of what is concrete and actual.[57] Maps in the game were often abstract in the extreme, frequently adding to the wider abstracted sanitization of nuclear war present in the game through what they failed to depict.

A representative selection of maps from the basic game and its supplements helps to elucidate this point. Figure 1 shows a section of the map of Poland included with the game's original boxed set, while Figure 2 shows the US nuclear targets map included in the *Howling Wilderness* supplement.[58] The Poland map offers little in the way of visual information about the effects of war. Towns and cities that have been devastated by nuclear strikes are rendered as clusters of small dots, but beyond that there is little to indicate the impact of war or demonstrate its effects to players through the map. The US map is even more stark and of even less utility. The sites of nuclear strikes are unnamed and even states are left blank. The reader is assumed to be able to correlate the unnamed dots with a printed list of nuclear targets presented two pages later. Far from enhancing understanding of the world in which play takes place, these maps reduce understanding with information-free abstractions. These – and other – maps served only to further sanitize and diminish nuclear war's impacts.

[53]Frey, 3; Keith, *The Free City of Krakow*, 3; Keith, *Pirates of the Vistula*, 3; Keith and Brown, 3.

[54]Carol Cohn, "War, Wimps, and Women: Talking Gender and Thinking War," in Miriam G. Cooke and Angela Woollacott, eds., *Gendering War Talk* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 231–32.

[55]Ibid., 232.

[56]Maps and mapping were central components of TTRPGs from their earliest days. From maps of dungeons to be explored, to charts depicting star-spanning empires, cartography and play went hand in hand.

[57]Timothy Barney, *Mapping the Cold War: Cartography and the Framing of America's International Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 9.

[58]Wiseman, *Howling Wilderness*, 8.


**Figure 1.** Section of the map of Poland included in the *Twilight: 2000* 1st edition boxed set. Photograph of original taken by the author. The author is grateful to the copyright holders Mongoose Publishing (and in particular Matthew Sprange) for permission use this image.

Visual imagery is crucial to TTRPGs, and the nature of the art presented in *T: 2000* must be considered. Cover art is always designed to pull prospective players towards the game, while interior art serves to communicate the imaginary world's nature and scope. *T: 2000*'s box cover art by Steve Venters (Figure 3) presented a group of soldiers of the kind that participants were expected to play. Place was established


**Figure 2.** Map of US nuclear targets included in the *Howling Wilderness* supplement. Photograph of original taken by the author. The author is grateful to the copyright holders Mongoose Publishing (and in particular Matthew Sprange) for permission use this image.

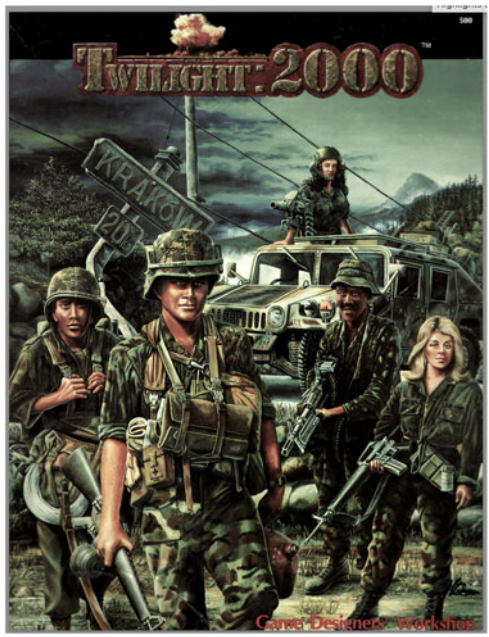


**Figure 3.** *Twilight: 2000*, 1st edition, box art (front). Photograph of original taken by the author. The author is grateful to the copyright holders Mongoose Publishing (and in particular Matthew Sprange) for permission use this image.

through the broken, tilted sign for the Polish city of Krakow, the black clouds in the background echoing a nuclear explosion's aftermath. The image presents some stark dichotomies: the characters' faces are illustrated in a somewhat naive style, largely lacking in detail and expression. Their rendering was in many ways kitsch but pretended to war photography's gravitas and immediacy. Counter to this is the detail vested in the weapons, equipment, and vehicles that adorn and surround the characters. Crucially – and this is the case throughout the game – female characters are clearly identified through traditional gender markers. All – whether wearing military helmets or not – have long hair and fatigues that more closely conform to their body shape to clearly identify them in the viewer's mind as "female."

The point noted above is crucial: through its art *T: 2000* attempted to replicate war photography's drama and pathos. In particular, it recalled the conflict in Vietnam through the subjects' poses and equipment. The foreground figure on the cover holds his M16 rifle in exactly the same way as soldiers depicted in photography from the war in Southeast Asia. The visual aesthetic of postapocalypse Poland is a desaturated, greyer version of Vietnam's hypersaturated greens, browns, jungles, mountains, and rice paddies. Throughout the original boxed set containing the various books for play, the imagery is semi-realistic, using Vietnam-era war photography and the imagery from such military exercises as REFORGER as a basis for sketches. However, much of this art was "placeless": more space was given to military equipment and vague landscapes than to specific illustrations of war-torn Poland. This changed as supplements to the game emerged, with more attention paid to artwork that referenced the spaces in which games would take place.

In Steve Jackson Games's magazine *The Space Gamer*, Rick Swan and Greg Porter offered starkly opposed reviews of *T: 2000*.[59] While Swan commented that "it certainly fills a niche and does so successfully. I hope it finds an audience with role-players and war-gamers alike. As a design, it's nothing spectacular, but as a concept, it's an innovation."[60] Porter, on the other hand, argued that, "All told, *T: 2000* is a tragic waste of 18 bucks. The nice concept and character generation system are completely overrun by innumerable flaws and hopeless violations of the laws of physics. If you insist on buying this game, read a friend's copy first. I wish I had."[61] Porter's negativity towards the game was primarily founded in his contention that there was little "realism" to be found in the "game" elements of a TTRPG that had "realistic" aspirations. Thus it was the mechanics for simulating combat as opposed to the setting, situation, or ethics that provoked his ire.

While most gaming-press reviews focussed on the on *T: 2000*'s mechanical, ludic elements, they also offered some comment on the game's real-world nature within the Cold War nuclear context. Covering the game five years after its initial release –

[59]Confusingly, there were two Steve Jacksons active in the games community at the time. One was the owner of Texas-based Steve Jackson Games, founded in 1980 and initially known for wargames such as *OGRE* and the *Mad Max* influenced *Car Wars*. The other, British, Steve Jackson was co-founder of Games Workshop and – with Ian Livingstone – co-creator of the Fighting Fantasy gamebook series, published by Penguin. To add to the confusion, the American Steve Jackson was hired to write three books in the original Fighting Fantasy series.

[60]Rick Swan, "Review: Twilight: 2000," *Space Gamer*, 74 (May–June 1985), 9.

[61]Greg Porter, "Review: Twilight: 2000," *Space Gamer*, 74 (May–June 1985), 9.

just as the Cold War was ending with the Berlin Wall's fall and Eastern European communism's collapse – British designer Jim Bambra (writing in TSR's *Dragon* magazine) praised it as being "well worth a look by anyone interested in military or survivalist role-playing." Bambra expressed unease about the setting, concluding, "While the idea of a nuclear exchange within the next 10 years leaves me feeling uncomfortable, GDW has done a good job of showing what the devastating effects of even a limited nuclear war could be like."[62] For Bambra, then, the game had an educative aspect beyond its ludic parameters.

In British reviews, anti-Americanism – or at least a disdain for things American (an occasional feature of British reviews of US TTRPG products in this period) – reared its head. Chris Felton (writing in TSR's UK-based magazine *Imagine*) nitpicked at some combat rules and noted that "being American, GDW assume assumes that everyone uses their weapons in burst [i.e. firing wildly]."[63] Reviewing the game in Games Workshop's *White Dwarf* magazine, Marcus Rowland contended that "it's evident that this game has been written by and for Americans, with little or no understanding of European attitudes or desires." Rowland – almost uniquely amongst contemporary reviewers (aside from Bambra's slight discomfort four years later) – also homed in on key moral and ethical issues within the game and its setting. "The moral stance and attitudes it exemplifies," he wrote, "are fairly loathsome." For Rowland, the setting had "evidently been designed to avoid showing the worst effects of the bomb: the random encounters don't include civilians suffering from radiation burns, blind children, and the hideously dead and dying victims of blast and heat."[64]

Many of the game's core issues sat at the heart of *White Dwarf*'s pungent review. Combat and survival were central, but the first edition gave no mention of peacemaking, rebuilding communities, or restarting civilization.[65] This gap existed in almost all the era's TTRPGs, and was not unique to *T: 2000*.[66] Rules for simulating combat were generally the most extensive mechanical element of most game rules. At this stage in the hobby's development, violence (whether that be against orcs, goblins, and demons, or marauding Warsaw Pact soldiers) remained central to the play experience, and it remains a core component of many TTRPGs to this day.[67] The thrill of winning a closely fought combat against a tough enemy was, and is, a central element of the pleasure culture of war inherent in TTRPGs. Combat was to be celebrated and revelled in, the acquisition of better magical swords, spells, or guns as a result of same leading to an increased chance of victory against even tougher opponents in future. And so the cycle would continue.

Any TTRPG's mechanics, rules, or system are crucial to understanding the ludic quality of that game. For all its claims of realism, *T: 2000*'s combat system allowed

[62]Jim Bambra, "Review: Twilight: 2000," *Dragon*, 152 (Dec. 1989), 34.

[63]Chris Felton, "Review: Twilight: 2000," *Imagine*, 27 (June 1985), 42.

[64]Marcus Rowland, "Review: Twilight: 2000," *White Dwarf*, 68 (Aug. 1985), 14.

[65]Ibid. However, the oral history of post-apocalyptic RPGs I am compiling indicates that some gamers *did* see rebuilding and restarting as elements of the game experience, generally beyond the frameworks offered by the game's supplements.

[66]I am grateful to Morgan Davie for this insight regarding mechanics in 1970s and 1980s TTRPGs.

[67]Sarah Albom, "The Killing Roll: The Prevalence of Violence in Dungeons & Dragons," *International Journal of Role-Playing*, 11 (2021), 6–24.

player characters to act more like Colonel John Matrix or Major "Dutch" Schaefer from the near-contemporaneous Arnold Schwarzenegger movies *Commando* and *Predator* than a badly equipped squad fighting for survival in a radioactive wasteland. With slightly favourable dice rolls, characters could shrug off hits from weapons designed to take on armoured vehicles and carry on eliminating their enemies.[68] The mechanics – and thus the "game" element – of *T: 2000* presented themselves as aping the "real world" of the late Cold War military, just as the setting – and thus the space in which the collaborative fictions would be created – pretended towards a "realistic" depiction of future war. This provoked – to use computer games scholar Barry Atkins's formulation – a tension "between the fidelity it [the game] displays towards the historical field, and the liberties that are taken with how a form of historical narrative may be constructed."[69]

This dichotomy sat at the heart of many period TTRPGs that attempted to balance the divergent systemic aims of "realism" and "playability." "Realism" was – in the main – taken to reflect in-game outcomes that replicated the real world with a high degree of specificity and fidelity. Ambiguity and lack of precision were as much the enemy as "unrealistic" results. In *T: 2000*'s case, this meant the rules for simulating combat and attention to the narrow specifics of real-world firearms and their effects. "Playability" covered a wide range of things, but mostly stood for mechanics that were intuitive and quick to use, and that did not get in the adventure's way. As with "realism," "playability" was very much a moveable feast. One designer's "playability" could – and did – diverge markedly from another's. However, *T: 2000*'s claims of realism in the system, the setting, and the emergent fictions were undercut by the fact that the player characters were on the borderline of being olive-drab-clad superheroes in comparison to their non-player character foes.

Moreover, in common with almost all other period TTRPGs, no systemic mechanism existed by which the psychological impact of violence, war, and devastation could influence the character beyond pure role-playing.[70] "Coolness under fire" (CUF) was the system's only psychological element, a measure of character experience, mental toughness, and ability to function in combat. Unlike physical wounding, CUF never decreased and only served to adjudicate a character's reaction to combat. The mental resilience of characters to the post-apocalypse world's brutalizing effects and its physical dangers was assumed unless players chose to incorporate

[68]A completely "average" character would be able to take a close range "average" shot (30 "hits" of damage) in the chest (30 "hits" capacity) from a high-powered rifle and have it count as a "slight" injury (less than or equal to the body area's hit capacity) and thus have no effect on combat performance. Non-player characters were significantly weaker in terms of hit capacity and were thus killed or otherwise eliminated more easily.

[69]Barry Atkins, *More than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 88.

[70]An exception is Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* (*CoC*) TTRPG, based on the works of horror writer H. P. Lovecraft. *CoC* was one of the few TTRPGs in the period that attempted to model mental damage. *CoC* gifted characters with a "sanity" score affected by encounters with unspeakable horrors, reading blasphemous tomes, or being party to particularly upsetting situations. This score took the notion of physical "hit points" and translated it to the mind in an unsophisticated way. Like physical damage, points were added/removed until a change of state (to "insanity" as opposed to death/injury for physical damage). "Sanity" (which *CoC* retains up to the current seventh edition) was a crude and often reductive attempt to model psychology which represented mental health in often unfortunate and unsympathetic ways.

psychological issues into their role-playing. No guidance existed in the game texts for such situations, and GM and players were left to extrapolate, should they choose to do so.[71]

Just as the game's setting sanitized nuclear war, so too did the game's system. As a game, *T: 2000* also replicated the overarching abstractions inherent in official simulations of nuclear war. Similar to RAND war gamers dispassionately fighting out scenarios of escalation and destruction where cities were merely targets and not home to millions of people with lives and emotions, so did *T: 2000* reduce brutal conflict in the post-nuclear wastelands to numbers on a sheet of paper.[72] It must be said that such abstractions were not unique to this one particular game system. However, unlike *D&D* and its ilk, *T: 2000* reflected very real contemporary concerns. Both the setting and the system found themselves echoing the Cold War nuclear state's speculative abstractions.

Like other forms of nuclear culture, *T: 2000* also commercialized the era's anxieties for the purposes of pleasure. The culture of preparation for nuclear war that had been present in the United States through "Duck and Cover," Operation Alert, and pamphlets on how to fallout-proof your basement was taken one step further. Now it was not a matter of preparing for nuclear confrontation but of surviving after that confrontation (and paying for the pleasure of that experience). Abstract success or failure in the game (does a character win in combat? Are the tactics deployed to defeat an enemy successful?) can be reframed not as an escapist fantasy, but as a form of subconscious training for the "inevitable."

Rowland's setting critique, the nature of the mechanics, and an examination of what those mechanics did not support force a reconsideration of what *T: 2000* was intended to do. The back cover text claimed that "*Twilight: 2000* is unique in the field of role-playing games. It's set in a post-holocaust environment, but the characters are modern soldiers thrown onto their own resources by the gradual breakdown of the command structure and civilization."[73] Although true, the game setting shied away from presenting role-players with the true nature of nuclear Armageddon. Like *Gamma World* and its gonzofication of the post-nuclear world, *T: 2000* stood at the brink and then stepped back. Unlike contemporaneous American cultural products such as *The Day After* or David Brin's novel *The Postman*, much remained in the world that was functional and identifiable.[74] Characters were assumed to maintain the military ethos of officers, organization, and orders, even if they were surrounded by collapse. As well as the physical capabilities represented through the game mechanics, mental strength and toughness were assumed by default. The characters – as evidenced through the game's setting and systemic elements – were in many ways

[71]More recent TTRPGs have grappled in a variety of ways with the psychology of characters and the ways in which the situations they find themselves in impact their mental health and well-being.

[72]John R. Emery, "Moral Choices without Moral Language: 1950's Political–Military Wargaming at the RAND Corporation," *Texas National Security Review*, 4, 4 (Fall 2021), 11–31.

[73]Chadwick et al., box, rear cover, *Twilight: 2000*, 1st edn.

[74]Nicholas Meyer (dir.), *The Day After* (ABC TV, 1983); David Brin, *The Postman* (New York: Bantam Books, 1985).

post-apocalyptic supermen, endowed by their skills, training, and equipment with the ability to survive and possibly thrive.

The game's devastated Europe represented an arena in which militaristic masculine survivalist fantasies could be played out. Europe and Europeans were of little importance in the grand scheme of things. The main through line in *T: 2000* and its supplements was to "go home." And despite brief notes that players could choose characters of any nationality, "home" was the United States.[75] While the first four adventure supplements for the game were set in Europe, from *Going Home* – the fifth supplement – the action shifted to the United States.

From the *Going Home* supplement's publication in 1986, nine further supplements focussed on the situation in the United States.[76] Postapocalypse America was divided between three major political factions: Milgov (the military government); Civgov (the remnants of civilian government); and New America (a far-right, distributed network organization). The assumption was that upon returning "home," the player characters would work for one of these competing governments and against the sinister "New America." The continued presence of Soviet, Cuban, and Mexican troops on US soil complicated the situation.[77] The latter's incursion into the United States embedded tropes about subversion from south of the Rio Grande that had been present in US popular culture and political discourse for decades.

The factionalized and balkanized United States was not only threatened from without, but dark forces with sinister motivations also threatened it from within. Although New America was fictional, real-world white power groups such the Aryan Nations and the Order clearly inspired it. As Kathleen Belew notes, such organizations adopted the strategy of "leaderless resistance," with cell-style organizing and the use of early computer networks for coordination and mobilization.[78] In the game's fictional world, this was exactly New America's strategy. The organization itself fictionalized and blended the ideologies and strategies of many diverse groups and served as a shadowy antagonist to the player characters in several supplements.[79]

Play groups who had their characters choose to "go home" and follow the published material therefore found those characters floating in a political continuum that encompassed military rule, civilian governance, and self-appointed racial puritans seeking to reestablish a white-supremacist society. *T: 2000* took a stance on contemporary, domestic US issues. The written material clearly presented New America as an enemy to be defeated rather than a form of governance to be aspired to. However, the writers positioned civilian government as – for the (fictional) time's

[75]Chadwick et al., "Players Manual," *Twilight: 2000*, 1st edn.

[76]Loren Wiseman, Frank Chadwick, John P. Brown, and Paul R. Banner, *Going Home* (Normal, IL: GDW, 1986).

[77]William H. Keith, *Red Star, Lone Star* (Normal, IL: GDW, 1986).

[78]Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 105.

[79]William H. Keith Jr. and Loren K. Wiseman, *Airlords of the Ozarks* (Normal, IL: GDW, 1987); Thomas Mulkey and Loren Wiseman, *Urban Guerrilla* (Normal, IL: GDW, 1987); Timothy B. Brown and Loren Wiseman, *Kidnapped* (Normal, IL: GDW, 1988).

requirements – something of an evil, bound to corruption and instability. In this situation Milgov and its attendant forces, structures, and hierarchies represented order, stability, and the possibility of future reconstruction.

As Eastern European communism collapsed in 1989 and the Soviet Union teetered on the brink of dissolution, Chadwick and his fellow designers sought to maintain *T: 2000*'s relevance in a changing world. The 1990 second edition modified the alternative history somewhat, positing a successful post-fall-of-the-Berlin-Wall hard-line takeover the Soviet state that ensured the continuance of communist rule and the subsequent outbreak of war.[80] The timeline had changed slightly, but the fictional outcomes remained largely the same.

The Cold War's ultimate end with the Soviet Union's 1991 collapse did not usher in *T: 2000*'s demise. Indeed, like many other of the period's cultural artefacts, it has had an extended afterlife. The third edition of 2013 (by this point GDW had long ceased to exist) was something of an outlier, jettisoning the setting's Cold War aspects.[81] Swedish publisher Fria Ligan (Free League) achieved the greatest post-Cold War success, reviving the game in 2020 as an alternative history of "roleplaying in the World War III that never was."[82] The continued appetite of gamers for *T: 2000* resulted in a crowdfunding campaign that raised nearly £400,000 for this edition.[83]

## Conclusion

*Twilight: 2000* was not unique – many other TTRPGs explored the nuclear age's risks and possible outcomes – but it was the biggest-selling and most widely played post-apocalyptic role-playing game of the 1980s. By allowing gamers to immerse themselves in a setting defined by near-future war, it brought the spectre of the mushroom cloud into homes, schools, colleges, and hobby stores in America and beyond. It and games like it represent an understudied and underappreciated facet of the nuclear age.

As a game and as a text, *T: 2000* took multiple threads from the American Cold War experience and wove them into a tapestry. Through its imagining of Europe as a site of confrontation, its mapping of Poland as a largely empty landscape, its abstractions around the horror of nuclear war and its aftermath, and its hewing to tropes of masculine militarism, it reflected wider political and cultural imaginaries about the United States' place in the Cold War world. Its vision of a hellish near-future world was far from unique. However, what it did do was invite people to take an active part in the imaginary, sitting round a table and putting themselves in the position of warriors in the wasteland armed with the symbols of American military might.

There is still considerable work to be done in dissecting and considering the societal implications of *T: 2000* and similar games from the 1970s and 1980s. Using *T: 2000*

[80]Frank Chadwick, *Twilight: 2000*, 2nd edn (Normal, IL: GDW), 6–15.

[81]Clayton Oliver, Simon Pratt, and Keith Taylor, *Twilight: 2013* (Raceland, KY: 93 Game Studio, 2008).

[82]Tomas Härenstam and Chris Lites, *Twilight: 2000: Roleplaying in the World War III That Never Was* (Stockholm: Fria Ligan, 2020).

[83]Fria Ligan, Kickstarter campaign for *Twilight: 2000 – Roleplaying in the World War III That Never Was*, at www.kickstarter.com/projects/1192053011/twilight-2000-roleplaying-in-the-wwiii-that-never-was (accessed 4 Oct. 2023).

as a lens through which to highlight key threads of analysis, this article has offered an initial exploration of this topic. Most importantly, this analysis points towards the vital need for oral histories that can be used to uncover the reception and use of these products by "ordinary gamers" in the United States and further afield.[84] There are crucial further research questions to be asked around styles, modes, and intellectual frameworks of post-apocalyptic play and how these were used – or not used – to deal with the overarching nuclear threat in the 1970s and 1980s. At the most basic level, scholars need to pay greater attention to questions of whether and how TTRPG consumers responded through play to these games as Cold War products and "realistic" nuclear-age representations.

In its first incarnation, *Twilight: 2000* offered gamers a diagnostic probe into the future, however faulty that probe might have been. It was a future in which they could play out fantasies of power, survival, and masculinity. This TTRPG took the late Cold War nuclear standoff's concrete reality and the apocalyptic fears that surrounded it, and repackaged it for the purposes of fun and adventure at the table. Such games thus constitute the ultimate analogue, collective example of the "pleasure culture of war" that saw such an expansion from 1945 onwards and deserve a far greater place in the American – and global – Cold War's social and cultural histories.

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[84]At the time of writing this oral-history project is underway. Respondents from the USA and UK who played post-apocalyptic TTRPGs in the 1970s and 1980s are being interviewed to help understand how games such as *T: 2000* were received, interpreted, and played. This oral history will be the backbone of a longer-form analysis of post-apocalyptic TTRPGs.

**Cite this article:** Malcolm Craig, "When You Say, 'Thermonuclear War,' I Think You Mean 'the Call to Adventure'! The *Twilight: 2000* Tabletop Role-Playing Game and the Postapocalyptic World's Imaginary Spaces," *Journal of American Studies* (2025), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875825000283