

# Through The Mountain Of Qaf\*

## A walk around roleplaying

By

Keith Hackwood

*“You see things and you say, ‘Why?’ But I dream things that never were and I say, ‘Why not?’”*

*George Bernard Shaw*

Indulge me, if you will, in a little voyage around the roleplaying game, taking in, in particular, the aspects of what I will call *character* (including the PC, as well as the player of the PC). I want to think about the *how* and *why* of character in roleplaying - how does someone come to create the particular character they create, and why - what is going on at the various levels of awareness, and why are they drawn to roleplaying at all?

Roleplaying as we know it evolved out of wargaming and the use of massed-battle miniatures colliding with a particular set of cultural conditions, wherein fantasy was not only possible but made probable by the early seventies reaction and response to the ‘failure’ of the psychedelic promise of the high sixties, a sort of proto cultural individuation process (this, I’d argue, is a deeply significant moment in the growth range of north American euro-centrally focused culture - a moment akin to, say, the birth of rock and roll). What occurred in those breakthrough moments in the environs of Lake Geneva continues to reverberate and unfold in the collective consciousness of our contemporary time - it released a liberatory wave of fantasy and play, a wonderful freeing up of imagination from ‘Newton’s Sleep’, as William Blake presciently put it; and yet that tsunami of freed-up creativity and novelty soon became wrapped in an industry even more horribly marked than most by a deeply narcissistic shadow (evidenced in, for example, the rapid descent into arcane and destructive law suits about ‘ownership’, subsequent edition wars, forums dominated by explosions of ego, a massive sense of entitlement and specialness, ‘I’m right, you’re wrong’ thinking and the ever so tedious zealotry of the legions of rules fundamentalists). Why did that happen? Clearly this ‘hobby’ evokes tremendous energy and passion in its various audiences, it still burns a trajectory of imagination and innovation too (despite the heavy hand of necro-corporatism that this very magazine seeks to slough off) and perhaps that is, microcosmically, part of what’s at work in gaming sessions and groups themselves. Or even, within the individual players themselves.

Does fantasy (and note that I’m using this term in its broadest possible sense - meaning anything that is not literalism and ‘realism’) in general and roleplaying in particular *necessarily* evoke these shadow forms, and if so how does that impact on the characters we create? We’ve all made characters -yes? And we all understand that they will engage in their game-world with other characters (who have other players, or are played by the DM/GM/CK whatever) - so roleplaying is, above all, relational. It occurs in a context of imagination and communication (otherwise it becomes symptomatic of a personality disorder, straight fiction or a computer game), and the distortions (to use that term) that both are prone to. A simple example may serve at this point - imagine a group of players each with a PC, and a GM playing an NPC in an encounter. First the scenario requires that it be imagined, invested with psychic juice, *animated*, we might say, and this process will occur slightly differently for each player (and therefore each PC) - one may feel threatened, another excited, a third may be really confused or unable to imagine it at all - in addition the GM may have a version of how the encounter *should* play out (if it’s from an authored adventure or module, the author(s) may also have layered in meanings,

limitations and expectations of their own). So we have our scenario (or a plurality thereof), and almost immediately we start relating - this could take the form of questioning ('how big is the wyvern?', 'can I see with my infravision?', 'I slowly draw my sword, what's the wizard doing now?' etc) or imposing (often from a GM position, 'none of you were expecting the jet of magical flame that strikes you from behind - everyone make a dexterity check or take 8 points of damage'). Thus the game proceeds.

Now my focus here is less on the game play (the *ludus* aspect of roleplaying) and more on the interpersonal (of those embodied players in the room, or 'virtually' present) intrapersonal (within each player individually) and 'inter-character' dynamics that are apparent. Let's look at some terms - firstly imagination as it exists in the people playing the game. They will have distinct tastes, inclinations, desires and aversions, be drawn to certain archetypes and distanced from others (so most ten year old boys will avoid playing a character who is a girl at all costs), be familiar with certain artistic or narrative oeuvres and ignorant of others (have they read Moorcock? Did they ever see Star wars? What do they think of Buffy?), feel themselves to be vulnerable in certain ways and powerful in others, and so on. They will also have their own level of emotional, psychological and mental intelligence, have more or less lived experience and wisdom, and be more or less well endowed with charisma. They may also, of course, be having a great day/week/year or they may have shown up to play partly to distract them from their terminal illness/overwhelming depression/recent divorce. In short, before we even sit down there's a hell of a lot going on, and to insist that the game as it is experienced isn't emerging out of that context is a sort of monumental denial. Put another way, we're all role-playing all the time (playing the roles we feel drawn to or stuck with in life, husband, teacher, slave, dreamer, survivor etc) so when we roleplay, that comes with us. It's part of the deal.

Now, the players may already have existing relationships with one another also - they may be related, or friends, or work colleagues. They may also be strangers, or never actually meet in an embodied sense (i.e. they play by post or email or via skype). I could go on, but you know what I'm getting at - the issues present *in the room* are direct correlates of the issues that are faced *in the game*. How do these PC's know each other? Why are they adventuring at all, and why here and now in this alien forest or that squalid dungeon? How do they get on? What's their shared history? What will Vipas the Elf Mage do if Deletor the barbarian decides to smack the pompous gimp right between the eyes? These things, even before any 'plot' or narrative hook or otherwise arising situation develop, are the meat of the game, and of roleplaying itself. To some extent then, it could be said that a player is always roleplaying his or herself, because their roleplaying happens through the lens of that very self.

In terms of character creation there can be many ways that this emerges, marked on a scale ranging from deeply unconscious to wholly aware of the 'choices' being made at each turn. So a person who is depressed and beset with social anxieties may create a character defined by exuberance and boundless charisma (compensatory character?), or they may opt for a silent and withdrawn assassin-type (reverse-compensatory character?). They remain a person experiencing social anxiety and depression, but now they have a potentially workable PC, a nascent symbol of some 'otherness' inherent in their own imagination. (an act of naming something that was previously unnamed in themselves). In some small way they have an opportunity, perhaps, to transcend the limitations of lived experience through the imaginal world. They have bought a ticket to ride through the matrix of mirrors, to *pretend* a new host of possibilities. But they also stand on shifting sands, a hair's breadth from recreating their 'real life' experience - sliding back into their woundedness even inside the game world, failing the imaginal leap and falling back into an old familiar pattern - so my PC is always excluded or pushed around by others, or is judged and rejected (just as I felt/feel). It's worth remembering the old adage about groups (of any and all sorts) being perfect vessels for the repeat of our family experiences (so if you were the 'seen and not heard' child in your family of origin, in a new group setting you will be unconsciously constellated in that role anew - you will re-create it (in order to heal it, confront it, confirm it or whatever); same if you were the joker or the people-pleasing attender to everyone's needs, and the list goes on and on). So roleplaying situations, it

seems to me, are perfect environments for these dynamics to play out, and create myriad causes (in uniquely sophisticated ways) for this material to emerge and engage us.

I'm not for one moment trying to suggest that roleplaying is essentially a therapeutic mode (although I know full well that it has such a mode), merely that because it involves people and imagination it will (and does) inevitably enter into the soft and invisible areas where the majority of people I've ever met or played with encounter their own vulnerabilities, as well as their capacity to access unmediated joy. To roleplay is to descend into the psyche's recesses (why do you think it all started in squalid verminous dungeons for chrissakes?) and often to perish - to undergo the transformative process of the little death, the psychic stripping bare, and thereafter to embrace the connectivity and joy of proceeding, of living while you're alive. But I digress!

Back to considering character creation and the processes involved. What if as we build our character for the game we draw upon the 'characters' within ourselves, our subpersonalities, as some would call them? So we may actualise a PC out of material drawn from our inner hero, and our rebellious adolescent subpersonalities - making a warrior type with a penchant for exploring, hitched up to the notion of the rugged individual who takes no shit from anyone - a chaotic neutral ranger maybe. But then in gameplay that PC is suddenly thrust into a leadership role for the badly-mauled party he took up with - what happens then? Does the definition of the character shift, or is there a limitation reached (might our ranger discover in himself a tendency towards good, is the situation just narrative expression of the tension inside him - loner v protector, freedom v service? And do these possibilities say anything about us as the player? If the PC emerged in some way from our own latent (or well known) subpersonalities, then as he grows in the game, does he become a vehicle for expressing further subpersonalities? In his leadership position might the PC be reflecting something we are dimly conscious of in our own 'real life', a tension between not feeling good enough and feeling really empowered, for instance? Suddenly how we play the ranger PC in this game-moment, the choices he makes (to lead, to renounce the party and go off alone, to breakdown or freeze and do nothing) become overlaid with the dynamics of our own psychic processes, and even with those of the other players and the group itself (some groups demand leaders and after all, somebody has to do it).

I'm aware that this places the events of play under an inscrutable gaze, and naturally enough, most of the time it wouldn't be wise to ponder these dynamics whilst actually playing - the ludology of roleplaying is a sublime thing indeed; instead what I'm trying to do here is take a few generic and familiar 'everygame' moments, and reflect upon them from this particular point of view. The fruits of so doing, I think, are the deepening of our connection with the game (since we become aware of ever more levels of motility and presence, of fields of meaning) and the honing of our self-awareness as players (and, dammit, as people - since that is what we are). We become better agents of the game (and I believe that from an imaginal point of view the game itself, through the group it forms around it, is an active participant in this process) and more complete agents of our own lives - not in some grandiose and inflating way (although plenty of that seems to go on around gaming) but in terms of participating (as opposed to being passive) and enjoying, freeing up, rather than hardening in form.

Roleplaying, at its best, produces what the Sufi-anarchist philosopher Hakim Bey (a.k.a. Peter Lamborn Wilson) terms a 'Temporary Autonomous Zone' or TAZ, the characteristics of which are that it is celebratory of the life-force, that it embraces its impermanence (like life itself, it consists of moments passing away, of bardo) rather than making attempts to 'fix' itself as eternal, and that this process arises out of the transpersonal realm (by which I mean that each participant permits her own freedom and that of her fellows, by choosing not to place limitations upon that emerging force). It is for precisely these reasons, I'd suggest, and not for the ludicrous tabloid floridity of demon-possession and manifestly evil death-cults, that D&D underwent an assault from the American fundamentalist Christian right during the 1980s. Not because of the risk that 'the children' would lose their souls to satan, but rather because of the fear that they might awaken to their imaginations like

putting matches to so many Molotov cocktails, and that the youth might then erupt in incandescent cartwheels of bliss, rejecting all that limited and repressed them. No church, no state, no controlling order wants that! It's not the satanic they saw in D&D but the archetypal expression of Eros (which sounds weird, since that roleplaying form is usually associated with ubergeekdom, that most un-Erotic of paths!). Sadly, that limitless life-potential at the heart of roleplaying, instead becomes ameliorated and, as the Situationists would have it, recuperated, often by the 'industry' which seizes upon a living form and proceeds to squeeze it to death in the name of the dollar (a dollar incidentally, which even as I type this, is now dying itself). This creates a world of dead forms - more 'consumer choices' than ever it trumpets, and yet the choices are no real choice at all, since lacking all joy and animating spirit, they simply rattle their bones towards death. No surprise there, it's the advertiser's trick par excellence, manipulating form and process so that we run from the open arms of free Eros towards the gaping maw of Thanatos instead, and we willingly pay top-dollar for the experience.

So, to conclude this ramble around the roleplaying game, we know that roleplaying is relational and imaginative, and that by attending to our own (and the group) psyche in an interested and open way we come to have more fun, to dream better and play better; we also know that the cultural context in which roleplaying arose was a moment of far-seeing clarity, gone almost as soon as it arose, and that ever since there has been a hardening of hearts and forms, a growth of the cynical and cold necrophilia of capital, that is only now swallowing its own fecal tail and starting to choke. I have said only a little of what I believe the potential of the roleplaying game to be - that instead of remaining yet another recuperated product badly built out of our squashed desires, it could in fact be a *detournement* of that very process, a radical means by which we (as characters in our own lives, as well as participants in a game) associate, organise and direct our own imaginative processes, dreaming new worlds and forming new collectives with the express purpose of making joy. I happen to think that the potential is way in excess of that, but we have to start somewhere!

I'd like to end as I began, with a couple of quotes:

"You should find out and understand who you are and what you are made of. You should find out what your mind is made out of, what your mind's projections are made out of, and what your relationship with your world is made of."

**Chogyam Trungpa**

"Down with a world in which the guarantee that we will not die of starvation has been purchased with the guarantee that we will die of boredom."

**Raoul Vaneigem**

\* - *'Through the Mountain of Qaf' is a quote from Henri Corbin's translation of the tale of 'The Crimson Archangel' - Qaf is the cosmic mountain that encloses all spheres of reality - it indicates a world of projected illusion, beyond, behind and beneath which a successful traveller will find, perhaps, the spring of life.*