

# Intersectional Pleasures of Imagining Non-Western Futures for Tabletop Role Playing Games

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

*Island Istanbul* (Working Title) is a system-agnostic setting sourcebook for “tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs)”, currently under development as part of the Speculative Games research project at the University for the Creative Arts. This practice-based research project aims to present a playable possible future for Istanbul, informed by global urban climate adaptation imaginaries (Loroño-Leturiondo, 2025) and by the ongoing tensions between Istanbul’s authoritarian neoliberal urban renewal and the city’s urban palimpsest (Oktem, 2019). It seeks to give players a sense of agency by positioning them as participants in this imagined future. In this regard, *Island Istanbul* is thematically inspired by video games like *Saltsea Chronicles* (Die Gute Fabrik, 2023) and TRPGs like *Utopia* (Markiwsky, 2021) and *SolarPG* (Aleotti et al., 2025). The project builds on the critical capacity of imagined spaces in role playing games to act as interrogations of power structures of legal, political, religious, and financial authorities (Giappone and Vella, 2021). In this regard, this study investigates how worldbuilding for TRPGs can encourage critical reflection on the ecological, socio-economic, and political uncertainties, risks, and opportunities of underrepresented non-Western urban futures. In its early stages, the project currently focuses on how to combine structured constraints with generative openness for “game masters” (GMs). While recognizing that game systems may direct game characters, player actions, and narrative expectations towards certain directions regardless of the setting (Albom 2021), the system-agnostic approach aims to provide a broad space for players to explore and change Istanbul’s speculative future despite the mechanics they play with (Baur 2012). In this regard, we are developing not only organizational tools such as maps, timelines, and encyclopedic data, but also generative worldbuilding frameworks (Baker 2017), such as roll tables utilized to provide further

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flexibility to the system-agnostic structure inspired by worldbuilding practices in science fiction TRPGs (Schrier et al. 2024). The effectiveness of these materials as GM preparation tools will be evaluated in workshops with professional GMs, with effectiveness understood as their capacity to support setting comprehension, session planning, improvisational flexibility, and adaptation across different rule systems, following Katifori et al.'s understanding of the GM as a creative facilitator of co-created play (2022). In this paper, we will outline the critical and creative processes involved in designing *Island Istanbul*, drawing on TRPG worldbuilding practices and research on urban futures in science fiction. The focus will be the development of two specific neighborhoods and related generative frameworks, and we will discuss how these can enable intersectional pleasures of imagining non-Western futures in regard to urban dynamics informing the design process.

Role-playing is regularly employed in urban-planning games to gather data on the needs and priorities of stakeholders when envisioning a city's future development (Tan 2017). Such applications typically place the urban context at the core of a sandbox-like co-creative activity. However, TRPGs with well-established complex settings have also been used to critically explore urban futures either through scenarios focused on problem solving (Shearer 2021), or by creating the speculative conditions requiring reflective dialogue (Lengyel et.al. 2023). Commercial titles, such as system-agnostic cyberpunk settings *Pan-Mexico Megacity* (ScandinavianGM 2023) and *Megacity: Lagos* (Dicegeeks 2024) aim to present grounded near-future settings and describe providing opportunities to explore diverse cultures societal structures as their main selling point. While diverse in their length and depth, these settings represent secondary worlds through a shared "outside-in" approach (Pramas 2012). Exemplified in classic titles like *Cyberpunk 2020 Night City Sourcebook* (R. Talsorian Games 1991), this approach begins with macro structures of the urban setting, such as geography, politics, and infrastructures; and zooms-in towards microstructures such as neighborhoods, buildings, and even rooms followed by actionable game content such as key characters and potential events which may populate these spaces. This selective process provides a vertical slice of the urban setting from the shared general characteristics of the world to very specific details of a few key areas. These well-established snapshots provide GMs with a framework of potential opportunities, in line with Wolf's (2013) analysis of how near-complete secondary worlds encourage speculation, as their completion seems much closer and attainable. Furthermore, this structure also parallels Boulding's (1995) possible futures framework in which broader, highly predictable conditions give birth to potential outcomes and events with gradually rising uncertainty. *Island Istanbul's* worldbuilding process follows the same principles, aiming to provide GMs detailed broader conditions accompanied by in-depth snapshots providing the impression of what it means to be and feels like living under these conditions.

The imaginary future of *Island Istanbul* builds on the critical typology for fictional cities proposed by Marji, Thibault, and Hamari (2023). This typology introduces five main categories; urban setting, urban planning, urban dynamics, urban imaginary, and architecture, with related subcategories; which are suggested to be used as a design blueprint for the creation of coherent architectural and urban settings. In developing each element of the typology, a mixed approach relying on both scientific studies and forecasts, and tropes in fictional works featuring a future Istanbul was utilized. Scenarios reflecting upon megaprojects, multilayered potential impact of climate change, and the risk of major earthquakes were selected not only due to their potential impact on the city but also due to their potential to function as social

allegories problematizing the present as a mixture of local and global risks, as well as natural and man-made factors (Nikolova 2021).

Furthermore, we used the online archive of the Turkish science-fiction society Bilimkurgu Kulübü to identify novels, short stories, games, and other media that present Istanbul as a future urban setting. The corpus was then expanded with additional works in which Istanbul appears as a speculative or future city. This allowed us to trace shared perceived contexts and recurring features through which Istanbul is imagined as an ancient city projected into the future, with its specific cultural heritage characteristics (Mochocki 2021). The analysis is qualitative and thematic rather than quantitative. The works are grouped according to recurring urban functions and spatial imaginaries and are interpreted in relation to established science-fictional urban tropes, Istanbul's social and cultural histories, and debates surrounding the city's contemporary urban development. While to some extent stereotypical, these characteristics helped the creative process in differentiating the visions for *Island Istanbul* from the established templates of future urban settings based on western/American cities (Rabitsch, Fuchs 2022).

This paper will present the creative processes behind two vertical slices focusing on two coastal districts, the historical peninsula and the coasts of the planned Istanbul Canal parallel to Bosphorus. We will explain how we utilize the critical typology of fictional cities in developing these specific locations and reflect on the challenges we faced, and present preliminary findings of our ongoing tests with professional GMs.

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