

Hack, Slash, Heal, Repeat: Theorizing the Concept of the Murderhobo in *Dungeons & Dragons*

Abstract: This paper works to flesh out the concept of the murderhobo particularly in the tabletop game *Dungeons & Dragons*. As a term known in the gaming world, the murderhobo has not been fully or clearly defined in game studies, though it could prove a useful topic in terms of game culture and player behavior. This paper seeks to provide an examination of the concept through a practice theory lens and relates how it could be seen in a multitude of ways in the gaming space. This investigation lays the groundwork for more purposeful discussion of the topic and its tie to game culture.

Keywords: trpg, narrative, murderhobo, playstyle, practice theory

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs), there has been the playing out of a tenuous contrast between the hero and the villain. As TRPGs have worked under the hero's journey, there has been a need for the villain to have a veritable army, surrounded by a faceless cast. To get to the penultimate battle, there is a need for the hero and their companions to cut a swath through these enemies, in order to achieve some level of glory. Thereby, TRPG player characters have been motivated by the goal and not the means to get there, meaning the player characters probably slaughtered multiple nonplayer characters (NPC) to get to the goal, and could wander aimlessly to find "trouble." These stories have come to be known by several terms, such as hack and slash and murderhobo, but generally speak to tabletop gaming that does not focus on the narrative or larger stories but glorify combat.

In this paper, I flesh out the concept of the "murderhobo" style of play in tabletop games, particularly in the framework of the game *Dungeons & Dragons*. While it characterizes a term that has been used in role-playing gaming, I provide a firm definition and characterization for the phenomenon and spark a discussion to its value in the gaming world. Further, I discuss how some tabletop gamers have moved away from murderhobo, but also how some players and playstyles still prize and emulate the style of play. While the murderhobo does not appear to open the door for expansive narrative games or deep emotional role-play, the nostalgia of the high-stakes, "us versus everyone" game still delights and attracts gamers in various ways.

2. METHOD AND FRAMEWORK

This paper operates from two fairly solid spaces- that there is a term known in the gaming world as 'murderhobo' and that term is colloquially understood but has not been fully fleshed out. This manuscript attempts to provide a starting point for the consideration of the idea of the murderhobo, focusing particularly on elements of the gaming system *Dungeons & Dragons* more than any other. While there is reason to critique the choice of *Dungeons & Dragons* versus other systems, the widespread presence of the game – in both popular culture and scholarship, allows for this theoretical explanation to be grounded in a body of knowledge that will allow for this foundational approach to, at the very least, move a discussion within the broader game field. The hope is, from this starting point, there can be affirmation, critique, or rethinking that allows for a more robust discussion of the concept of the murderhobo.

Following Bourdieu (1977), I read murderhobo as a practice at the intersection of habitus (players' learned dispositions), field (the TTRPG table and its subcultural norms), and forms of capital; at the table, rules mastery often functions as linguistic/symbolic capital that shapes who speaks, how disputes are arbitrated, and whose preferences structure play. To that end, murderhobo is looked at as a set of configured practices, a practice being what Pierre Bourdieu saw as an accepted way of doing something and serves as a collection of concrete action, a way of doing something (Bourdieu 1977). Murderhobo is then seen as a practice in gaming and would speak to the agency of the player in the eschewing of expected components of behavior. There is an ethical thread in this argument that closely aligns to expectations of "good" behavior; while this might seem at times presumptuous or filled with judgment, it goes under the premise of a Judeo-Christian ideal that practices that seem to lack compassion are "bad." *Dungeons & Dragons* is clearly a game that initially set its morality in "stark and absolute terms," so the examination of the practice occurring here conforms to that lens (Laycock 2015, 55).

3. GAMES, KILLING, AND THE ROVING ADVENTURER IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

While it is true that a common element of games is competition, it is also a common theme for games to involve an adversarial relationship. The moral concept of "good" versus "evil" makes for an attractive draw for many players, as they see their characters aims and goals as ultimately on the side of right, ultimately coloring the actions of the opposition as morally questionable. Games have long benefited from the value in what is deemed a virtuous goal, and players who not only want to "win" but further what is perceived as "right." As Hollander (2021) notes, it involves a circumstance where "a cosmic struggle is presupposed, where good and evil are personified, easily distinguished, and locked in a combat in which mortal heroes—whether or not they are religiously motivated— must participate" (320).

The foundational joy that emerges from play that highlights concepts like the murderhobo emergence from the hero's journey (Campbell 1973). Williams (2019) explains what the journey is:

A hero, male or female, young or old, rich or poor, encounters a change in circumstance leading to a significant life problem. Sometimes the change is intentional, and the Hero is motivated to attempt and endure the process of change. Other times, the change is unwanted, leaving the Hero shocked, anxious, and in grief. Regardless of intention, the changed circumstances create a significant life problem: A situation where the Hero's existing knowledge and skills are no longer efficacious. (524)

In short, the journey is about challenge and growth, and that it only comes through conquering what is perceived as fantastic circumstances, both within (internally) and without (externally). The path to the end goal is supposed to be challenging, in order to highlight the uniqueness of the hero, else everyone would be able to accomplish the feat. When set as an external challenge, the journey normally occurs facing some Other that is either immense or numerous, and it stands in the way of whatever might be the goal (or the final step before the goal). In more action-based stories, this requirement of the story is not as necessary, but the framework of the idea, that through practice one can become a hero, becomes central to a certain ideal surrounding fantasy gaming. Beyond that ideal, all other elements of the journal, including others in the story, become optional.

There can then be an expendable subset of characters in any game, and this is evident in most gaming systems. Early TRPGs clearly made the distinction between player characters (PCs) that were controlled by human players and non-player characters (NPCs) that were controlled by the game master or Dungeon Master. Or as Kosciesza (2023) notes, NPCs are “any game agents who are not controlled by players and emphasize that NPCs often have both narrative and gameplay functions” (192). There has been a perception of non-player characters not being very well-developed, and serving as either background characters, living “window dressing” to give some depth to the scene, or purposeful to the plot (e.g., delivering key information, someone who needs to be saved, etc.). Daviault (2012) sees this as NPCs “being a part of the landscape and just as important as the richness of the environments” (442). With antagonistic NPCs, beyond the main enemy, there is a larger sense of these characters being unimportant; games have often represented multiple characters with a single set of gaming statistics, demonstrating how general these NPCs are. As such, it is not beyond the realm of belief that characters see little value in these characters that lack depth and feel their in-game deaths have little impact on the overall point of the broader game, as their purpose is to augment the experience of the player (Kosciesza 2023). This allows for the player to engage in behaviors that would be seen as “problematically intoxicating” and antisocial, but in still within the spirit of them being a hero (Bowman 2024, 163).

Because of this, “killing” takes on a different meaning, that does not necessarily align with general norms. If an NPC is seen as antagonistic or threatening, extinguishing its life is not perceived as unjustified or unprovoked “killing” or “murder.” Warpefelt (2016) notes how in the case of adversaries, many of these individuals in games are in some way “faceless” or nondescript – without names or backgrounds that any players could recognize. Players can depersonalize their efforts as right because of the aims and goals on one level. However, there is additional justification because of the devaluation of NPCs as some sort of stock characters, who are both easily replaceable and of less value (Stenros 2013). While this relationship by its very nature does not set up players to be on a killing spree, it reinforces the depersonalization of the NPC, and how it serves a function, which allows it to be dehumanized, in order to make it a potential valueless target for the player. Even given this depersonalization of the NPC, players will still refer to their actions as “killing,” meaning they acknowledge the act. This type of play and mindset creates the perfect space for the murderhobo.

4. THE MURDERHOBO CONCEPT

The murderhobo is a concept in games where the characters are understood “as killers for loot and experience, without a permanent base of operations, as.... Monsters exist for the purpose of being killed by travelling heroes and deserve their death by being in general evil and aggressive” (Harviainen, Granvik, and Korkeila 2025). The idea emphasizes, in part, the imagery of the hobo – an individual subject to homelessness (or defiantly not putting down roots) and indefinite wandering in search of something. Players do not need to be concerned with the cause and effect of their entry into the adventure – their role is to defeat monsters and to receive some form of capital for their efforts. The murderhobo has “no regrets or particular insight into their own behavior” (Hutchings and Giardino 2016, 13). Essentializing the murderhobo campaign (a game session with this mindset) allows players to ignore the motivations and drives of the story antagonist, and to disregard the potential emotional toll efforts have (Bowman 2024).

While often discussed in the context of gaming, there is no official definition of what constitutes a murderhobo campaign. To summarize an analysis of the style, I present three components for a foundational definition of a murderhobo campaign, based on a sense of practice.

Adventure first. A common idea that speaks to the murderhobo theme shows an appreciation for the idea of adventure over all else. The character, via the player, hears the “call to adventure” that brings them into a particular circumstance (Campbell 1973). In this sense, players appreciate the fact that their characters are adventurers and not heroes, which in many ways is a nuanced difference. For sure, adventurers can become heroes, or commit heroic acts, but this is not a requirement of the character. As Gillespie and Crouse (2012) state, original player characters are presented as “tomb robbers and dungeon explorers, not high fantasy heroes” (448). In the murderhobo campaign, comic book style heroism is not required. If the goal is to retrieve a certain item, then the characters venture off into the dungeon and do so (Hollander 2021). Moreover, in these styles of games, the resolution (village saved, person rescued) is often engaged in the table as something of a rushed afterthought compared to the length and excitement of battle. This diminishes the importance of the return in the hero’s journey.

Death is an inevitability. This idea reinforces death as a distinct possibility for anyone in the game – the players, the enemies, or civilians. Adventuring is a deadly business. The Dungeon Master should not, then, be a force to try and preserve the character and prevent them from experiencing death. From the perspective of a murderhobo campaign, this should not be the case, and this is indicative of a game master watering down a game for the sake of players. A miscalculation or thoughtless mistake could be the death of any enemy, any noncombatant, or any player character.

Fighting for fighting’s sake. This theme harkens back to the DNA of the game, remembering *Dungeons & Dragons* as a wargame. As such, fighting should be a key part of gameplay, and a central focus of any game session. This notion highlights the importance of combat and relate directly to “battles” and “fights” as something that should be revered. Combat can be a “hack and slash,” or a style of play in which battle and combat is the primary function and any other actions (such as diplomacy or puzzle solving) are secondary. This view allows for the alignment of “us” versus “them,” and any enemies are seen as simply antagonistic sources of gold, treasure, and experience points. Enemies become cannon fodder. Imprinting them with racial or gender tropes humanizes them and makes it more difficult to justify what *Dungeons & Dragons* has historically referred to as a “wandering monster,” a random enemy that is placed in the players’ path to be killed (or avoided) for experience and gold (Svelch 2023, 47; Trammell 2018).

As Gillespie and Crouse (2012) note, old school gaming is typified by the dungeon crawl which “requires fighting monsters, avoiding traps, and collecting treasure” (455). The murderhobo extends this belief, exemplifying these actions without any consideration of consequence. However, by doing so, the player becomes not an adventurer, but a remorseless killer.

The idea of individuals being impacted by characters that they play, and that impact manifesting itself, at least temporarily, in their day-to-day circumstances is commonly known

in the role-playing world as bleed (Montola 2010). While much of the research on bleed looks at emotional impacts of action, there has long been a concern of a correlation between particularly violent gaming and violent acts (Chen, Mao, and Liu 2023). However, most research affirms that bleed effects are temporary, and not indicative of long-term behavior change (Hugaas 2024). Research has shown any causal link between tabletop gaming and real-world violence. Because of the prevalence of the unproven claim, that violent murderhobo behavior would start to turn players into homicidal, amoral killers, TSR (the company that initially released the game *Dungeons & Dragons*) made certain to downplay adventuring and reinforce heroism in its 2nd edition, in response to the Satanic Panic (Laycock 2016). This trend to read player characters in post-3rd edition *Dungeons & Dragons* modules as heroes rather than adventurers increased in the subsequent editions. A more heroic, and less murderhobo infused, game makes it more difficult for players “to engage in mere emotional tourism or exploitation of the subject matter of the game,” as their actions have distinct consequences (Hutchings and Giardino 2016 ,13). Does removing murderhobo elements can take away from the “hack and slash” potential of a game, which some players still enjoy? Players will sometimes argue against, for example, a more cerebral game session with puzzles or a session focused on diplomacy, questioning if these circumstances can be seen as “fun.”

5. PUSHBACK TO THE MURDERHOBO CONCEPT

Prior to recent developments in tabletop gaming, murderhobo campaigns could flourish. As Albom (2021) notes, TRPGs such as *Dungeons & Dragons* saw “sensation-seeking [as] a motivator through an absence of consequences; a lack of clear ramifications facilitates players to choose actions that violate conventional norms with impunity” (20). Contemporary TRPGs do not wholly support a murderhobo approach to gaming as in the past. For example, in many *Dungeons & Dragons* games since the 3rd edition, pre-designed modules have addressed the consequences of PC actions, such as modules which at the end note that unnecessary killing might lead to vengeance from another character, creating a new, dangerous story for the future. Even killing that needs to occur in order to advance the plot has consequences, and newer game developments clearly speak about what these outcomes might be (e.g., saving someone from a monster, but the victim seeing the killer brings out antisocial tendencies in them). This is a generic observation about post-3e adventure design; detailing specific instances is beyond this article’s scope. Wanton killing, with PCs that do not choose other means (such as diplomacy or subterfuge) could lead to the players being recognized as violent murderers, bullies, or enemies. The broad idea of the hero justified by their ends and not their means is no longer what is commonly seen.

These literary constructions would discourage any murderhobo like tendencies, forcing players to be aware of how their actions have long-term consequences. In theory, this is not too far off what was initially intended. *Dungeons & Dragons*, for instance, is well immersed in Christian moral rhetoric, though methods could be medieval (Johnson 2020). One can point to the moral structure of the original alignment system (good, neutral, evil), or a game “packed as it is with angelic and demonic powers, who oversee the (justly rewarded/punished) souls of the departed” as clear examples of this (Hollander 2021, 319). Moreover, there has been greater push in contemporary TRPGs for the importance of narrative, and the value of a full, articulated story (Yessler & Crag 2024). With depth of story is more meaningful interaction either pinned on NPCs by the Dungeon Master or the players. Narrative encouragement provides contour to the creation of campaigns, meaning NPCs are not just faceless quest givers and enemies. The deeper narrative take has made for moral considerations of tabletop games, and how behaviors, particularly antisocial behaviors, should be considered (Hollander 2021).

6. NOSTALGIA AS MURDERHOBO DEFENSE

Recently there has been a rise in appreciation for the murderhobo, particularly in various TRPG subcultures. Of note is the Old School Renaissance, or OSR, which is a cadre of tabletop gamers who revere the “old ways” of playing this style of games, particularly *Dungeons & Dragons* (Mizer 2019). They were borne out of shifts that occurred in the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, upset over what they perceive as an attempt to “rule-ify” everything (Maliszewski 2009). Some of this dislike of shifts resulted in the creation of brand-new game systems. For instance, Pathfinder (operating on the heavily *D&D* influenced d20 model) was in many ways a copy of the system of the 3rd edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, due to the loud disdain many had for the 4th edition (Dashiell 2026; White et al 2024). While some of these adherents loudly defame what they see as a game system going “woke,” the vast majority of those who are aligned with OSR simply have a nostalgic relationship to the game (Dashiell 2026).

Much of the connection between older interpretations of games, such as murderhobo campaigns, and older players falls under what Proctor (2017) refers to as totemic nostalgia. In this concept, members of a fandom community pin their attachment to the fandom with memories, experiences, and structures that speak to earlier connections of games. Individuals tend to visualize their early experiences through a hazy comfortable lens and cherish those moments. They link those positive historical connections to their deeper connection to the game. The murderhobo unites these ideas, seeing past depictions of adventure (separated from heroism) as nostalgic, but also cementing the notion of “only a game” by contrasting the lack of post-game ramifications highlighted in older interpretations of game systems. Thereby, circumstances like murderhobo campaigns, which might be ethically problematic, are seen through a gauze of early play and initial instruction. As such, the experience becomes familiar and a key part of the game for those players. Players are then encouraged by “the liminality of similar first play experiences” and would express dismay if those were not possible (Gillespie and Crouse 2012, 465).

What must be considered, particularly when looking at potentially problematic topics, is the complicated nature of nostalgia. Klopper (2016) notes how nostalgia is a “lying memory in the face of empirical circumstance,” meaning the unclear connections with partial considerations might not mesh with the actual truths of the experience. For instance, it is very possible that many early players did not enjoy murderhobo play at all, which can prove to be action oriented, fast and unforgiving, particularly for newer players. Further, gamers are likely to forget their overall newness to the system, and how the linguistic and symbolic capital of various discourses excluded them from certain conversations at the table (due to their naivete) but combat circumstances did not have the same effect (Dashiell 2017). In short, the notion of “murderhobo is better” could be linked to the newness of the experience, and how it clouds the inability of the moment, while focusing on what individuals can do with a roll of a die. In many ways this reinforces the agentic imagination of players, “the active ability of social actors to shape their identities through immersive imagination” that brings them back to their initial love of the game (Fuist 2012, 114).

7. CONSCIENCE, KILLING, AND GAMING ENJOYMENT

If one is involved in a murderhobo campaign, it is required that you dehumanize all the NPCs who you encounter during the gameplay. To “save some” introduces an ethical code into the game, something more nuanced than the “good” and “evil” binary mentioned before. That

creates additional conversation and consideration which might add unnecessary discourse to the game. The “hack and slash” is only possible if you do not see the antagonists as parts of communities who have their own drives and motivations. An adherent to the fringe OSR would see this as simply playing the game in a fast-paced and fun way, whereas outside the game this behavior would be seen as antisocial. As discussed before, a main reason Dungeons & Dragons migrated away from the murderhobo type of campaigns is due to the Satanic Panic, which fueled an idea of a dangerous magic circle— those who kill in the game could become killers. But there is an attachment to the wanton abandonment from consequence that is apparent in murderhobo gaming, which is seen in a host of digital games (Bartel 2022; Hull et al 2014).

The murderhobo concept is inherently violent, and with its mention comes the promise of blood, aggression, and very little empathy. The murderhobo speaks to players not necessarily being heroic, just adventure seeking. This might encourage a gritty reality which requires violence, while expecting little empathy. As such, the value associated with the murderhobo is also one that implies an appreciation of the components of the murderhobo, which tend to be read as masculine. This could speak to the male preserve effect that is embedded in the game system, where the hero’s journey foregrounds qualities and characteristics that have been traditionally coded as masculine (Dashiell 2020). But there has been a notable shift in tabletop culture, and more evidence that players are far more invested in narrative elements of tabletop gaming than in early years of play (Lorenz, Hagitte & Brandt 2022, 2; Salthouse 2025). As Cover (2014) notes, some contemporary players “may be more interested in progressing the storyline, while other may want to explore territory, and others may be primarily interested in developing their characters” (122). What this means is that some games may have little to no battle at all, based on the social and narrative contract determined by the GM and the players. This could note an absence of murderhobo style campaigns in general, dependent on the wishes of those who play.

And that is a significant point, as some players may wish to have a combat-oriented game for any number of reasons. And this does not mean that these game sessions are “easier” or less involving forms of discourse that are part of the game (Cover 2014; Hendricks 2006). Even battle-heavy games are open to long discussions about rules disputes and correcting inexperience (gamesplaining), meaning the murderhobo campaign cannot be essentialized as a speedy affair with dice rolls and cheers for success (Dashiell 2017). At the end of the day, tabletop games are interactive spaces, and the collective worldbuilding might differ in many ways in a murderhobo campaign, but it still meets the criteria of a tabletop game.

8. CONCLUSION: SO GOETH THE MURDERHOBO?

Gary Gygax, one of the creators of Dungeons & Dragons, is quoted as saying that part of the great appeal of the game is that ordinary people can “become super powerful and affect everything,” which definitely aligns with the general thought of the murderhobo (Kushner 2003). A lot of early gaming set about portraying the notion of good and evil, marking the antisocial elements through their clear motives or their species, with the idea of “evil races” (Strzelczyk 2022). This allowed the early player to see the world in black and white and easily come into a gaming situation with a known objective, allowing everything else to be collateral damage (or collateral gain). The murderhobo allows for the powerful character to interface with the world and be a threat to evil and a symbol for good. With the components of adventure first, death as inevitable, and fighting for fighting’s sake, the player could have his character easily barrel into a town and dispatch anyone within their site with a “it’s them or us” mindset. This was defined as enjoyable in the past by many gamers.

The modern gamer is often much more driven by the story, and wants to see the development of their character, and the narrative that connects them to the gaming world. Part of this will involve building relationships, and self-exploration through interaction. This can only be done with a more hands-on approach with NPCs that was the norm in the early years of tabletop gaming, and it requires contact with others, not allowing for a “swing first and ask questions later” approach. Some contemporary gamers might have personal issues with a murderhobo approach to gaming and might struggle to find purpose in a scenario where the time and energy put into a character is because of the expectation of them living, and not the inevitability of death for that character. There is a drive in *Dungeons & Dragons* towards meaningful death being “pivotal,” according to Sidhu and Carter (2021), something that rampant murderhobo actions can muddy.

This paper serves to provide more context on what the murderhobo concept is and situate the concept in tabletop gaming, particularly *Dungeons & Dragons*. It is important to note that the concept is far more widespread than *Dungeons & Dragons*. Beyond OSR adherents who still might enjoy murderhobo campaigns, some popular digital games, like *Diablo 3*, operate under a murderhobo principle (Harviainen, Granvik, and Korkeila 2025). Thus, the murderhobo concept is a configured practice the gaming world, and it could see a resurgence. Situating and providing contour to the concept should prove beneficial to further research on gameplay, motivation, and gaming style.

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