The Killing Roll: The Prevalence of Violence in *Dungeons & Dragons*

Abstract: This research project explores the prevalence of violence and its facilitation in the popular tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D). Violence within the system's 5th edition core rulebook, the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b), is analysed using textual analysis with insight from previous research on common violence motivators of heroism, hatred, and sensation-seeking curiosity. Overall, the study concludes that the *D&D* system facilitates playing violence, specifically through heroic motivation based on androcentric perceptions of chivalric fantasy ideals. This study also finds that the system spotlights combat over nonviolent interactions. Future research could investigate how participant agency may affect violence in similar traditional RPG systems, and why choosing violence in a no-consequence game could reflect real-world behaviours.

Keywords: *Dungeons & Dragons*, violence, tabletop role-playing games, textual analysis, combat

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) are open fantasy worlds where, in theory, anything is possible. Players create fictional characters and then embody them within a codified virtual reality. However, I have always experienced a prevalence of violence when playing these games. This study aims to investigate how violence is facilitated by the game itself. I define role-playing games (RPGs) as games where players embody their characters, where there is communal role-play, and where the setting is open-ended with multiple paths to resolution.

Perhaps the most famous of these RPGs is *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*). First published in 1974, it would "forever alter" the gaming landscape by pioneering the structure of both TTRPGs and pop culture in general (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 4). As an analog system, *D&D* only requires a pen, paper, dice, and imagination. A small group of players sit around a table and collaboratively create a story within a world narrated by a Dungeon Master, or DM. Players verbally express their character's actions rather than physically perform them, and game mechanics (such as rolling dice) are highly visible. These mechanics result in a keen awareness of the game's fictionality. The introduction of the game's 5th edition *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) states that there are "three broad categories of activity in the game: exploration, interaction, and combat" (6). It is reasonable to expect that violence forms an intrinsic component of gameplay. Having essentially invented the genre of codified role-playing games, *D&D* is arguably one of the most popular systems existing today and "has stood as a metonym for the hobby of role-playing itself" (Torner 2015a, 160).

Like other TTRPGs, *D&D* is often perceived as a trivial and escapist hobby. However, players" apparent enjoyment of the game's unavoidable violence may be important for understanding broader social attitudes. Currently, little research exists on the prevalence of violence in RPGs. I aim to help fill this research gap by exploring whether *D&D*'s structure fosters violence. I hypothesise that this game's rules limit some narrative choices while facilitating more violent options. As Dormans (2006) describes, RPGs are "rule-based simulation "engines" that facilitate playful interaction" (par. 1). Their controlled rulesets can affect narrative (Torner 2015a, 163). RPGs are important to study because of their widespread popularity. We need to understand how the structures influence the way people play these games.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A brief history of *D&D* helps contextualise this study's focus. More in-depth histories of the game and its influence can provide additional nuance (e.g. Trammell 2018a; Witwer 2015). *D&D* emerged by melding the statistical combat methods of strategic board game communities with role-play. Published in 1974, *D&D* was the first commercially released RPG. Stang and Trammell (2019) suggest that the game's structure and themes would have been influenced by its authors" personal backgrounds as middle-aged, Christian, married, and White Americans. Also of influence was the "boys-club nature" promoted by the original publisher, Tactical Studies Rules (733). Therefore, the research used to analyse the motivators present in the system must be from relevant cultural contexts.

RPGs are distinct from other game structures in that they are socially (and sometimes physically) immersive activities. Players have the perceived freedom to choose what their characters do. Therefore, the study of violence in *D&D* rulebooks should consider play state and immersion theory. The role-playing nature of RPGs mean that they require a level of imagination to play. Players are encouraged to create characters with personalities, beliefs, and desires that may not coincide with their own ideals. By acting out these characters, players enter a "magic circle" play state separate from the rest of the world (Mortensen 2009, 60; Zook 2012). This separation allows RPGs to create spaces for cultural production (Garcia 2017, 234). It should be noted that the concept of the "magic circle" is somewhat deceptive because it implies that a game has nothing to do with reality (Mortensen 2009, 61). But this is not clearly or simply so. Since play is representational, the participants' memories and past experiences influence how they might perform their character (Whitlock, Voorhees, and Call 2012). There is an ongoing back-and-forth between play-world and real-world experiences. This nuance is important for future research into how player agency facilitates RPG character violence. Because play is out of the ordinary, it allows the user to move into a "state that follows different rules" (Mortensen 2009, 10). However, the imagined world of the RPG still requires some rules to remain intact (Costikyan 2002, 22; Mortensen 2009, 61). Torner (2014a) discusses how game rules may influence player actions by facilitating or preventing certain behaviours for their characters. The rules that structure a game often work with the "building blocks of culture," affecting the types of play produced (par. 1).

The RPG medium facilitates immersion. Stenros (2013) discusses this embodiment as part of an aesthetic of creation, not observance. Unlike other entertainment, RPGs work with a first-person audience (Montola 2012, 90; Stenros 2010, 301). Academically, immersion theory is complex and debated because it can define many different experiences (Bowman and Standiford 2016; Calleja 2011). Rather than redefining it, Bowman and Standiford (2016) established six significant categories for immersion types in RPGs: activity, game, environment, narrative, character, and community. Immersion works as a form of engagement. Players are engrossed yet aware that they are pretending (Bowman 2018, 3). Poremba (2007) discusses that these "brink games" border the double-coded line between game and reality and allow expression of traditionally taboo behaviour. Brink games also cause a "bleed" between game and reality, which can blur the line between character and participant (Montola 2010, 2). Nephew (2006) furthers this concept, explaining that there is an intertwined relationship between character and player in an RPG (120). Although some RPG texts clearly state that there is a distinction between player and character, the distinction is pointless when engaging in the performative aspect of the experience, which is the central point of the game (123). As an example, much of the *Player's Handbook* (2014b) refers to actions being undertaken by "you," as opposed to "your character." Nephew (2006) notes that in her experience of playing TTRPGs, players express the actions undertaken by their characters by using first-person pronouns. By doing this, the player identifies with their character and becomes the activity itself (123). Furthermore, the values and traits a player chooses for their character are implicitly self-reflexive (124). Players can hide behind their character persona and allow their unconscious desires

to become manifest (122). In sum, in-character choices may have out-of-character emotional backing that emerge from the player's real-world experiences and fantasies.

Violence has broad dimensions, occurs on multiple levels, and involves multiple systems. This study uses Wallace's (2003) definition of violence as both the covert violence of destructive misinformation and myth and the overt violence of physical assault. Wallace discusses violence from a multicultural approach, where attitudes, beliefs, and traditions are passed from generation to generation and culturally influence behaviours towards the "diverse and different other" (4). She notes that covert violence typically precedes and "may actually set the stage" for the manifestation of overt physical violence (8). Her small case study in the US noted that the country has a significant culture of violence, involving implicit understandings around the use of physical force, displays of power, and the spread of myth and misinformation (6). Violence against the "diverse and different other" has been institutionalised and codified in the US. Other research on Western culture has identified three covert motivators for overt violence in war, sport, and, literature: heroism, hatred, and sensation-seeking (e.g. Galinsky 1972; Kerr 2005; Stang and Trammell 2019; Trammell 2020; Trammell 2018a; Stevens 2015). To date, RPGs have not been included in this research. It is not clear if these three themes are relevant to RPGs, or to the same degree.

Heroism, the first theme, has roots in Western concepts of masculinity (Galinsky 1972; Garcia 2017; Mangan 2003; Nauright and Chandler 1996; Nephew 2006; Trammell 2018a; Stevens 2015). Connell (2005) suggests that many characteristics of masculine identity are invisible and hegemonic in our society. Trammell (2018) discursively traced the culture of masculinity across all editions of *D&D*, focusing on its connection to militarism and violence. He concluded that while current editions of *D&D* contain more inclusive vocabulary and no longer assume its players are White males, conventional masculine overtones of military and patriarchy are still prevalent in the texts (130). Looking at historical context, we can see how the imperial mentality fostered by ancient heroic characters such as Herakles influenced modern RPGs. Galinsky (1972) notes that audiences find Herakles' associations with strength and prowess powerfully appealing. Mangan and McKenzie (2003) discuss how masculinity evolved during nineteenth-century British imperialism, where violence was deployed to assert moral and physical superiority. Hunting was viewed as training for war. This link caused enemies to be viewed as "[beasts] on two legs" (109). Heroes were the civilised explorers who tackled the primitive and foreign unknown. Nephew (2006) highlights that mainstream culture viewed (and still views to some extent) *D&D* players as social misfits, foolish, and feminised (128). This could explain the male-orientated and explicitly militaristic settings of early *D&D* editions, as the designers tried to contrast perceived outlier inferiority with traditional cultural concepts of individual heroism. Galinsky (1972) discusses how individual heroes in Ancient Greece such as Herakles worked for "glory and honour," desiring eternal recognition over long life (9). Portrayed as a saviour, Herakles' violence was justified by the fact that he was freeing the world of evil monsters (24). Captain America, who helped form the modern superhero genre, appealed to American audiences through idealised masculine tropes such as courage, justice, and mercy, even within a juxtaposed context of violence (Stevens 2015, 46). Outside of stories, male heroism is celebrated in war and nation-building through memorials such as ANZAC Day or the Arc de Triomphe (Connell 2005, xvi). The culture of masculinity legitimises violence by encouraging hero tropes and promoting power fantasies where characters can chivalrously and valiantly save the day.

The second theme, hate-caused violence, is both a stand-alone motivator and an instigator for heroism violence (Baumeister and Butz 2005; Beck and Pretzer 2005; Kerr 2005, 39; Sternberg 2005). Beck and Pretzer (2005) suggest that hate can emerge from feeling wronged or mistreated. If the person thinks that their grievance is legitimate, their violence may feel justifiable (72). Baumeister and Butz (2005) echo this sentiment. They suggest that people may resort to violence when their image feels threatened or attacked. Hate can also validate heroism through individual and group categorisations

that mark "the diverse and different other" as evil (Wallace 2003, 4). Groups often define themselves by identifying (or inventing) who they are not (Baumeister and Butz 2005, 91). This distinction between the self and the other creates a boundary, allowing for overgeneralizations, stereotypes, concepts of hierarchy, and antagonising narratives (Beck and Pretzer 2005; Trammell 2018b). Stereotypes often reduce the individual diversity of the othered group into a set of defining attributes that are assumed to make up their underlying and unchanging "essence" (Trammell 2018b). The belief of superiority over othered groups builds up over time and can legitimise their subjugation (Kerr 2005). In RPGs, perceived differences are built into the use of race categories and traits. Hodes (2019a) discusses how *D&D* was strongly influenced by works such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, incorporating past prejudices and pseudoscientific theories about racial hierarchy into a quantitative system. Fluid ethnicities are turned into fixed races with inherent biological differences (Hodes 2019a, par. 22; Trammell 2018b, 444). Distinctly different characters, especially those defined by the system as innately evil or lesser than the players" own characters, are easily dehumanised and therefore more convenient to attack without emotional concern (Hodes 2019a, par. 62). Other research suggests that *D&D* draws on misogynistic concepts of control and power. Stang and Trammell (2019) researched the female monstrosity in a prominent *D&D* rulebook called the *Monster Manual*. Historically, the term monstrosity categorised and controlled those considered non-normative by the church and state. Stang and Trammell's case study of the Hag monster revealed underlying misogynistic hostility towards unregulated (and therefore dangerous) motherhood (740). Connell (2005) aptly states that "there is a dimension of masculinity in the culture of imperialism," which reflects how differences facilitate violence (xvi). The *D&D* hero is hypermasculine and xenophobic (Stang and Trammell 2019, 742). Hatred of difference and perceptions of superiority in a fantasy RPG world can help individuals reduce complicated struggles between groups to simple binaries of good opposing foreign evil (Jewett 1984, 11).

Sensation-seeking, the third theme, is a motivational behaviour caused by the desire for new information and experiences (Kerr 2005; Litman 2005; Oosterwijk 2017). Media studies reveal that people want to watch interesting information like the socially negative stimuli of a violent movie gunfight (e.g. Berlyne 1966; Hoffner and Levine 2005). As a biological characteristic, Oosterwijk (2017) suggests that the ability to adapt through experiencing socially negative information means we are more likely to survive. Since the events of *D&D* take place in the separate "magic circle," players can indulge their enjoyment of experiencing violence through a relatively harmless medium (Baumeister and Butz 2005). Kerr (2005) further suggests that people may be violent to gain the thrill of doing something taboo. Play violence, as seen through the sanctions of violence in sport, promotes fun and allows individuals to experience power within the confines of a separate environment with its own rules and norms (Kerr 2005, 42). The magic circle means players can explore powerful or negative emotions through their character without social sanction (Montola 2010). Research relevant to this study is Trammell's (2020) investigation of the relationship between torture and play, specifically in relation to minority groups. He defines torture as a "long-term form of discipline that uses coercive techniques to subjugate people" (37). Trammell argues that in all acts of play, regardless of their innocence, we are subtly disciplining people to engage in unspoken rules. He concludes that game systems based on White and colonial norms rely on excluding and ignoring the trauma of minority groups. With consideration of the concept of play violence as discussed by Kerr (2005), I further argue that game frameworks such as *D&D* deliberately juxtapose pleasure and torture. Players are facilitated to derive affective pleasure from the subjugation of the other and are motivated by sensation-seeking desire without consequence.

Violence, both covert and physical, is prevalent in media and games. In traditional Western culture, themes of masculinity, White superiority, and imperialism have influenced the creation of game systems such as *D&D*. Combat and violence are the hallmarks of the male fantasy (Nephew 2006, 132).

The ways in which players can experience a game's virtual world are shaped by its culturally informed rule systems. With this in mind, this study seeks to unpack the following questions:

1. To what extent does the structure of the chosen *D&D* rulebook facilitate violence?
2. How does the *D&D* rulebook text present violence?
3. What sanctions exist in the *D&D* rulebook for when violence occurs?

3. METHOD

This study's primary goal was to determine whether the primary *D&D* rulebook facilitates violence, and if so, how. First, I read and annotated the *D&D* 5th edition *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b). I also read the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and *Monster's Manual* of the same edition for personal contextual reference. These three texts are canonically considered to be the core rulebooks for the current *D&D* system. On its own, however, the *Player's Handbook* is the text most players read to either play or run a complete game.

In my annotation, I analysed what portion of the text addresses violence, whether implicitly or explicitly. Since the text uses descriptive words and phrases, some mentions of violence were identified through the surrounding context. I also counted phrases I deemed explicit in facilitating violence to quantify representation whenever possible. Among other words, these phrases included combat, attack, enemy, monster, weapon, damage, and foe. To balance analysis, several phrases not indicative of violence were counted: adventure, friend, love, trust, and exploration. The counting did not include the table of contents, the index, or any paratext. In cases where the text was ambiguous, I gave the book the benefit of the doubt and assumed that these passages were not referencing violence.

My deeper analysis focused on mechanics that facilitate violence, such as the combat structure. While a full analysis of *D&D* spells is beyond the scope of this project, I have given an overview. First, the 361 spells in the *Player's Handbook* were categorised by whether they aided violent activity. Then, analysis was further broken down into how violent-categorised spells facilitated violence and the percentage of spells in each category by level.

I also briefly highlighted the effects of paratextual influence within the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) by looking at the layout of the character sheet. Jara (2013) discusses that RPG paratext can frame perceptions of the game, influence expectations, and affect story production (39). Unlike novels or films, RPG textbooks are a structure from which the main narrative is constructed during gameplay. Peripheral frames in RPG textbooks can influence participants before the game begins and so shape the narrative. Therefore, determining the genre, theme, and mood indicated by a text can help us understand what expectations players have about the game and what narratives will be deemed appropriate.

After determining how many mentions of violence occurred within the text, I analysed these mentions of violence for motivators invoked. Based on my research of common motivators for violence and the historical context of *D&D* as discussed in the literature review above, I focused on themes of heroism, hatred, and sensation-seeking. A key assumption of my project was that people play *D&D* according to the pre-established rulesets that its rulebook defines, which structures and limits what behaviours players give their characters. My analysis considered that this system encourages personal immersion and communal cooperation and that players know they are engaging in events separate from the real world.

4. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

An overview of gameplay and basic vocabulary is helpful to understand *D&D*. At its core, *D&D* is a numbers game. Players create their character by choosing their "race" (species) and "class" (general profession). *D&D* has diverse demi-humans (fantasy races resembling humans) from elves to goblins. Classes are also more fantastical than real-life jobs, such as "cleric" (magical priest). A "build" is a character's overall skills and job that contribute to how the player wants their character to operate. Because *D&D* happens around a table, players verbally describe their character's actions. When an action's outcome is uncertain, participants roll a 20-sided die (known as a d20) to see if they succeed. The higher the number, the better. A character's abilities can modify the die number and affect the final outcome. Players can choose what their characters are good or bad at by assigning numbers to ability scores. For example, a player may choose for their burly fighter to have a high strength ability score or for their wizard to have high intelligence. The numbers for each ability score affect the final outcome of the relevant die roll. Dice rolls are also affected by whether a character has an advantage or disadvantage to succeed. For example, when a target cannot see a character in combat, the character is deemed more likely to hit and has advantage on attacks: they roll two dice and use the higher number. Conversely, a character with a disadvantage takes the lower number of the two dice.

The descriptive language of the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) means that overall analysis must rely on paragraph context. Quantitatively, a count and analysis of violent text revealed that less than a quarter of the material in the *Player's Handbook* is violence-based. However, violence was found to make up the majority of the text's examples, options, and descriptions. Even simple examples, such as the use of dice, have higher ratios of violent to nonviolent examples: "players roll dice to resolve whether their attacks hit or miss, or whether their adventurers can scale a cliff, roll away from the strike of a magical lightning bolt, or pull off some other dangerous task" (5). In this example, two of the three specific suggestions explicitly involve violence or conflict. Also of note is the proportion of violent classes. Of the 12 classes available in the *Player's Handbook*, three specifically mention the word "warrior" in their overview and five more have combat-based descriptions (45). Almost every class has explicitly combat-based skills (59, 61-63, 71-75, 78-81, 84-88, 91-93, 96-98, 102, 107). Bard and druid do not have explicit combat skills. However, they each have an ability (Bardic Inspiration for bards and Wild Shape for druids) whose description either uses combat structure terminology or has an explanation on how to use the ability in combat (53, 67). Both of these classes also offer specialised subclasses with explicit combat abilities (55, 69). There are no completely non-combat classes in the *Player's Handbook*. Each class description starts with three descriptive examples to inspire players with ways to play their character. Of the 36 total examples, 26 are violence-based. If a newer player only had these examples as a reference, they would be exposed to few non-combat ways to play. While the *D&D* rulebook overall does not have much violent content, the ratio of violent to nonviolent material in its examples and class options limits choice and points towards violence as a major factor in gameplay.

Further quantitative analysis was conducted by counting the instances of 18 different phrases in the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b). Of these, 13 were categorised as facilitating violence. To aid in preventing bias based on unequal analysis focus, a further five words were counted that were deemed as aiding non-violent resolution and/or relating to a non-violent activity as defined by the game. Similar phrases were included when counting each word. For example, the phrases "violence" and "violent" were counted together. Contextual investigation of the phrases "hate" and "blood" found that there were too many instances of surrounding context not implying violence to be included in this quantitative part of the study.

Table 1: Violence Phrases and their Number of Instances within the *Player's Handbook*			
Attack	827	Foe	47
Damage	799	Enemy	34
Weapon	529	Fight	33
Combat	109	Violence	21
Evil	100	Harm	16
Monster	99	Slay	8
Battle	61		

Table 2: Anti-Violent Phrases and their Number of Instances within the *Player's Handbook*

Adventure	209	Friend	16
Love	36	Trust	14
Exploration	19		

Cross-comparison of the chosen phrases reveals a higher quantity of violent to nonviolent phrases. As mentioned previously, the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) states that there are "three broad categories of activity in the game: exploration, interaction, and combat" (6). Within the text, the term "combat" occurs almost six times as often as "exploration." Another cross-comparison of note is that the term "enemy" occurs twice as often as "friend." If we combine "enemy" and "foe," the two terms occur five times as often as "friend." Collectively, "damage" and "attack" have over 1,600 instances within the text. Discussing certain concepts more often, the text inadvertently places more importance on them. This influences the player's expectation of the game. The high use of terms such as "monster" or "evil" relates to Stang and Trammell's (2019) concept of *D&D* categorising the non-normative as monstrous, as well as relating to the violence motivator of hate as discussed below.

5. STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

When analysing the structure of the *D&D* system, we must keep in mind Torner's (2014a, 2014b, 2015b) three-part series about uncertainty in analog RPGs. Torner (2014a) begins his series by stating, "design matters. Few doubt it does. A game's design is an immanent force that acts on its players, so that their play might produce emergent effects" (par. 1). The border between knowledge and uncertainty is a cultural choice, and its use affects game design and outcome. Within games, Torner (2014b) touches on Costikyan's eleven sources of uncertainty. Sources such as randomness are based on pure chance. Regardless of how strong a *D&D* character is, their player could still roll a very low number on the die. Analytic complexity (player decision based on complex context) helps players skew this randomness through their ability modifiers (par. 6). In sum, a game's design facilitates and limits what and how character tools are available to players, affecting gameplay. With this in mind, the following analysis and discussion explores how *D&D*'s structure both facilitates and skews uncertainty in favour of violence.

The combat sequence is the most structured portion of *D&D*. The *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) contains a nine-page chapter just to cover its basics, with specific rules that limit how and when characters can act. As an overview: when combat begins, each player rolls a die to determine turn order, known as the initiative roll. The DM must also roll dice for the initiative of the

NPCs they control. During combat, each character can only act on their allocated turn, one at a time. Each character has access to multiple types of activities on their turn through actions, bonus actions, movement, and reactions (189-190). "Once everyone has taken a turn, the fight continues to the next round if neither side has defeated the other" (189). The text contains no advice on how to peacefully end combat. Attacking is considered "the most common action to take in combat," and always requires dice rolls to "[determine] whether the attack hits or misses" (192, 194). Other possible combat sequence actions, such as the hide or search actions, also require dice rolls to determine the outcome (192). Based on how combat can take more than one round to complete, how each character can perform multiple actions involving dice rolls on their turn, and how the alleged most common action in combat always requires dice, it is reasonable to expect that combat is when the most dice are rolled in *D&D*. Reversely, in a role-play sequence a player might only be asked to make one die roll for the entire activity. As discussed above, dice rolls are modified with ability scores, which can affect the outcome. Players may choose ability scores that beneficially modify their character's combat actions because these rolls are statistically used more often. It should be noted that for some classes, combat-benefitting ability scores may also be those considered more conventional for role-play activities, such as intelligence-based wizards or charisma-based warlocks. In sum, the amount of dice used in combat may affect what ability scores players choose during character creation so they can more favourably skew the uncertainty of random dice rolls.

The reliance on dice to drive narrative in combat sequences can also reduce violence from a morally engaging activity to something inhuman and inconsequential, which complicates the experience of death (Torner 2015a). The goal becomes eliminating opponents' hit points, turning combat into an automated grind that "removes bodies" corporeality, names, and integration into wider systems of meaning" (168). Stang and Trammell (2019) analyse how *D&D* opponents are translated into statistical tables. Appendix D of the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) contains statistical tables of common creatures and monsters encountered within the *D&D* setting. Many of these creatures' abilities use combat terminology, such as the owl's Flyby ability stating that "the owl provokes no opportunity attacks when it flies out of an enemy's reach" (308). These tables teach players that monstrosity can be coded into a simple list of numbers (Stang and Trammell 2019). By dehumanising opponents in such a way, the text allows players to perceive the creatures their characters encounter as different, lesser, and not worthy of moral consideration for violence and death (Hodes 2019a; Jewett 1984; Kerr 2005).

I argue that *D&D* combat's meticulous structure is in fact biased against a peaceful resolution. The clear segmentation between each character's turn favours action over speaking. While a character can speak during combat, they can only make "brief utterances and gestures" on their turn (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 190). The *Player's Handbook* (2014b) does not discuss a character speaking outside of their turn, limiting dynamic conversation. Outside of a character's turn, the text only mentions reactions as "an instant response to a trigger of some kind, which can occur on your turn or on someone else's" (190). The chapter on combat lists two possible reaction options: Attack of Opportunity (attack someone as they move out of reach) or dismounting a mount if it is knocked over (195, 198). Elsewhere in the text, there are 33 options for how to use reactions. Most of these have to do with attacks, such as Barbarians who take damage then being able to "use your reaction to make a melee weapon attack against that creature" (50), Only 2 of the 33 listed options can be considered not combat-based, and both have to do with reducing falling damage (79, 239). There are no rules on improvising reactions. These findings indicate that the text does not allow dynamic conversation during combat, and typically only legitimises violent actions outside of a character's turn.

Time and involvement affect combat resolution. When a combat sequence begins, the game structure includes everyone nearby regardless of previous involvement. Some players may choose for their character not to fight, but this can affect the player's experience of the game. Torner (2015a)

highlights how combat has a mechanical break in time, distancing it from the rest of the game's narrative (164). Therefore, players who do not participate in the combat cannot participate in that portion of the game. The system's extensive combat rules and "programmed inability to exit the time scale" extend how long fights in the game take in the real world (Torner 2015a, 164). While role-play scenes can occur in real-world time, combat can take much longer. Torner (2015a) further discusses time penalties in combat -- if a character misses their attack, the fight will take longer to complete. We can apply the concept of time penalties to characters who choose not to fight. A character who does not participate in combat may both cause it to be more difficult in-game and to take longer in the real world. Finally, *D&D*'s single-narrative nature affects narrative with regard to combat. Since combat is more mechanically complex than other parts of the game, it takes longer to run. Any character engaging in combat sways the narrative's direction.

Spells and magic are a major part of the *D&D* system. A full analysis is beyond the scope of this project, but a brief overview of the spell list may complement discussion on the game's facilitation of violence. For this study, all spells in The *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) have been analysed and placed into three different categories. First, directly damaging spells are those whose only result is dealing numerical damage or lowering success for opponents to succeed in violent activities. Examples are Fireball, which deals 8d6 (i.e. roll eight six-sided dice) damage to targets who fail a Dexterity Saving throw, and Bane, which negatively affects an opponent's attack rolls and saving throws[1] (241, 216). Second, combat-based spells are those that do not necessarily do numerical damage, but whose effects facilitate violence. For example, spells like Blur give an advantage only helpful in a violent scenario because it affects attack rolls (219). Meanwhile, Blade Ward's description is heavily structured for combat through the use of combat terms such as turns and rounds (218-219). Third, utility spells are those that do not give advantage in combat, or may even prevent violence. The effects of Animal Friendship, for example, end if anyone harms the target (212). Spells that could facilitate violence through combat advantage but do not have descriptions that indicate violence -- for example, Greater Invisibility (246) gives a character advantage on all attacks against creatures that rely on sight, but the spell description does not discuss this -- have been categorised as utility spells to ensure no bias through ambiguity or my personal application of the spells in gameplay. Of the 361 spells featured in the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b), 107 are directly damaging, 115 are combat-based, and 139 are utility (207-289). Overall, 62.4% of the text's spells are orientated towards violence.

By individual spell level, proportions vary. Spell level is not the same as a character's class level. To avoid confusion, this study will use ordinal numerals for spell levels and cardinal numerals for class levels. Full casters (bard, cleric, druid, sorcerer, and wizard) are classes that can cast from class level 1, have access to cantrips, and are able to cast a higher level spell every two class levels. A level 9 druid, for example, has access to 5th level spells. Half casters (paladin and ranger) can cast from class level 2 and are able to cast a higher level spell every four class levels. A level 9 ranger, for example, has access to 3rd level spells. Finally, third casters (eldritch knight and arcane trickster) are subclasses that can cast from class level 3 and are able to cast a higher level spell every six class levels. A level 9 arcane trickster rogue, for example, has access to 2nd level spells. Other nuances not covered by this study include the limited number of spells a character can cast each day and that each class only has access to a portion of the total spells available.

In sum, characters have delayed accessibility to each higher spell level, affected by class. The higher ratio of violent to nonviolent options at 1st spell level limits choice for newly created characters.

1 Saving throws are described as dice rolls "you are forced to make...because your character or monster is at risk of harm" (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 179). While saving throws can be used in non-violent scenarios (e.g. a constitution save to not become inebriated after several drinks), saving throws are more often used as attempts to mitigate damage or other harmful effects.

With the exception of 2nd level spells, the ratio remains above the overall average of 62.4% until the 5th spell level, or a minimum of class level 9 for full casters. Based on the exponential experience required to gain each new level, a player who begins gameplay at class level 1 will have already been playing

Table 3: Categorisation of *D&D* Spells in the *Player's Handbook* by Level

	Directly damaging spells	Combat-based spells	Utility spells	Total number of spells	Percentage of violence-oriented spells to total spells
Cantrip	12	4	11	27	59.3%
Level 1	22	20	20	62	67.7%
Level 2	16	18	25	59	57.6%
Level 3	14	17	19	50	62.0%
Level 4	8	16	11	35	68.6%
Level 5	10	12	20	42	52.4%
Level 6	8	9	15	32	53.1%
Level 7	7	4	9	20	55.0%
Level 8	5	6	7	18	61.1%
Level 9	5	9	2	16	87.5%
Total	107	115	139	361	62.4%

their character for some time by the time they reach level 9 and have access to this higher (but still less than half) percentage of nonviolent spells (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 15). Also of note is the high ratio of violent options for 9th level spells. Full casters can start casting 9th level spells at class level 17, which the *Player's Handbook* refers to as the "fourth tier" (16). At this point, "characters achieve the pinnacle of their class features" (16). Only 2 of the 16 available 9th level spells are considered nonviolent. The most powerful magical spells in the game, wielded by only the most powerful characters, strongly skew towards violence.

Even utility-categorised spells may spark violence. The mechanics of certain charm spells, such as the 2nd level spell Calm Emotions or the Friends cantrip, can easily increase hostility (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 221, 244). These spells give characters advantage when persuading targets, or simply allow characters to pacify targets. However, both of these spells only have a duration of a minute, and "when the spell ends, the creature realizes that you used magic to influence its mood and becomes hostile towards you" (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 244). While it is not discussed in the *Player's Handbook*, my personal experience has found that role-play situations (as opposed to combat sequences) typically are treated as happening in real time. Players only have a minute of real-world time to find a way to effectively solve the issue or to leave the scene entirely. Both of these spells are categorised by this study as utility, but neither lasts long enough to resolve issues non-violently. Based on the spells' written descriptions, using them may cause the DM to try and force a violent encounter as the target becomes even more hostile.

An overview of the character sheet gives insight into how *D&D*'s paratextual structure facilitates violence. Stat sheets are a form of paratext that frame participant input and guide interpretation (Jara 2013, 44). There are several variants of the fifth edition *D&D* character sheet currently used, which all

draw from a similar overarching format (Wizards of the Coast 2016). Numbered abilities make up the first page, qualitative characteristics and backstories are on the second, and the third page consists of spells the character can cast. My overview focuses on the first page. Along the left side are a character's ability scores and their modifiers. Scores such as Strength and Constitution are placed higher than Intelligence and Wisdom, favouring physical over mental attributes. On the page's middle column are places to write modifiers for armour class (how difficult it is to hit a character), initiative (who has benefits to attack first in combat turn order), speed, hit points, death saves, attacks and spellcasting, and equipment. With just these two columns, many non-magical (and even magical) characters would have all of the information necessary for combat. The first page's right column has several text boxes for personality traits, only large enough for a sentence, as well as a large text box for features and traits. By prominently placing the content needed for violent activities and minimising the space for personality-based information needed in role-play scenarios, the page favours knowledge needed for combat over role-play. The framing of this paratextual structural device may influence story formation and expectation of narrative towards violence by both DMs and players.

6. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

So far, our analysis shows that the text facilitates violence through its structure, descriptive examples, and available choices for creating characters. But how does the literary nature of the text motivate players to violence? My analysis of paragraph context suggests that violence is most often explicitly themed through heroism tropes, with implicit roots in hatred and encouragement of sensation-seeking due to a lack of consequences.

> Adventurers are extraordinary people, driven by a thirst for excitement into a life that others would never dare lead. They are heroes, compelled to explore the dark places of the world and take on the challenges that lesser women and men can't stand against. (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 45)

Within the text, words such as "mighty adventurer," "glory," "wealth," and "hero" promise players the fulfilment of typical hero narratives (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 16, 19, 30, 36, 45, 56, passim). Meanwhile, the military overtones within *D&D* parallel concepts of imperial heroism (Trammell 2018a). Descriptive class examples such as "his spear flashes like his eyes as he jabs again and again at a *twisted* giant, until at last his light overcomes its *hideous darkness*" [emphasis added] paint characters as good, moral heroes defeating evil foes through martial combat (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 82). The *Player's Handbook* states in its introduction that "each player creates an adventurer (also called a character)" (5). Such terminology places characters as imperial explorers of the wild unknown. In juxtaposition to the civilised and known world, places encountered in the fantastical lands explored by these adventurers are part of savage and primitive nature (Mangan and McKenzie 2003). Furthermore, the reduction of *D&D* opponents into statistics reflects narratives of dehumanisation, differentiation, and quantification, creating abject bodies and ways to control the Other (Hodes 2019b; Stang and Trammell 2019). Opponents are "reduced to that of an animal and placed outside the Christian moral order" (Stang and Trammell 2019, 731). Building on Stang and Trammell's (2019) research, I argue that the text themes opponents as monstrous animals and characters as heroes who explore and tame the unknown other.

D&D class descriptions display heroism tropes. Some descriptions draw from the traditional association of warfare violence with masculinity, such as fighters being "well acquainted with death, both meting it out and staring it defiantly in the face" (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 70). Other

descriptions such as monks and paladins promote morality, saying that "monks . . . are driven by a desire to accomplish a greater mission than merely slaying monsters," or that "paladins are united by their oaths to stand against the forces of evil" (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 77, 82). In a world of magic and the divine, heroic violence is legitimised and incentivised by creating a clear polarity between good and evil, demonising outsiders as villains (Beck and Pretzer 2005, 73).

The game displays clear lines between good and evil, stemming from and perpetuating stereotypes of superiority, racism, and control (Garcia 2017; Hodes 2019a, 2019b; Long 2015; Nephew 2006; Stang and Trammell 2019; Trammell 2020; Trammell 2018a; Trammell 2018b; Wallace 2003). Like the violence of Herakles and Captain America being justified through their upholding of law and goodness, I argue that the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) utilises institutionalised racism to validate violence as chivalrous and heroic. To understand this, we need a brief discussion on the racial and sexist prejudices laid against minority and non-normative bodies within *D&D*.

Long (2015) and Hodes (2019a, 2019b) suggest that *D&D* took heavy inspiration from racially-charged texts such as *Lord of the Rings* and made hateful ethnic stereotypes concrete. As Long (2015) highlights with the lack of diversity in *D&D* artwork, the *Player's Handbook* largely reinforces Whiteness and Eurocentrism as the normative within the fantasy genre (140). Amongst non-White demi-humans, negative stereotypes are rampant. Hodes (2019a) discusses how Tolkien's Orcs were based on the British imperialist perception of Mongols in the early 20th century, and later the "yellow peril" of threatening Asians (par. 18). Pseudoscience theories appeared in systems like *D&D* about "martial races" who were strong, tough, savage, and naturally inclined towards violence (par. 29). While the human race in *D&D* gains a general ability score increase for all of their abilities, other demi-humans are given distinct stats that benefit certain professions (par. 22). Traits for half-orcs within the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) include strength and constitution score increases, preferred for fighting classes (41). Their special traits include "Menacing" and "Savage Attacks," reflecting imperial ideas of the primitive Other (41). Furthermore, half-orcs are linked to evil alignments, and those "raised among Orcs and willing to live out their lives among them are usually evil" (41). Two other non-White demi-human races, tieflings and elven drow, are also described as evil. Tiefling evil is of a supernatural nature reflective of Christian illustration, as "the evil of their heritage is plainly visible in their features, and as far as most people are concerned, a tiefling could very well be a devil straight from the Nine Hells" (33). Meanwhile, drow "are a race of demon-worshiping marauders dwelling in the subterranean depths of the Underdark, emerging only on the blackest nights to pillage and slaughter the surface dwellers they despise" (24). The text discourages players from having evil characters by stating that an evil alignment is "not an ideal adventurer" and that "generally, evil alignments are for villains and monsters" (123). Yet, while "humans, dwarves, elves, and other humanoid races can choose whether to follow the paths of good or evil, law or chaos," races like Orcs are "inclined toward evil" and "even if an orc chooses a good alignment, it struggles against its innate tendencies for its entire life" (122). The concept of evil in *D&D* is revealed to be based on race, not morality. Not only are the primary non-White demi-human races specifically depicted as evil within the text, but players are encouraged not to choose them because of that evil.

We can find further undertones of imperialism by considering the cultures that the text depicts for these non-White demi-humans. The *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) states that tieflings are "lacking a homeland" or culture, instead subsisting "in small minorities found mostly in human cities or towns, often in the roughest quarters of those places" (42, 43). Both half-orcs and drow have their own communities, but these are rife with slavery, subjugation, and sexism. While drow "society is depraved and preoccupied with the favor of Lolth, their spider-goddess, who sanctions murder and the extermination of entire families as noble houses vie for position," half-orcs are created from the unification of orc and human tribes, forming "a larger horde to the terror of civilized lands

nearby" (24, 40). The text continues by stating that not all drow are hated because one "broke the mold," "rejecting his heritage," and becoming "a model for those few drow who follow in his footsteps, trying to find a life apart from the evil society of their Underdark home" (24). This implies that a character from one of these races must leave their communities behind to be considered good. Even then, based on the "innate tendencies" these races have, the text reasons that they cannot fully choose their alignment (122). Long (2015) concludes, and I agree, that non-White demi-humans are depicted in the text as less civilised, less common, and less good than Eurocentric fantasy races (141). When basing *D&D* races off real-life groups, portraying their identity as innately evil and uncivilised can negatively impact the conscious or subconscious perception of those real-life groups (Trammell 2018b). I argue that these descriptions are a form of covert violence that rationalise and legitimise racism within and outside of the game. Amongst playable options, there exists a hierarchy of civilised over uncivilised and good over evil that strongly correlates to colonial mindsets of non-White inferiority.

To discuss how the covert violence of prejudices against these demi-humans may lead to physical violence, we must go beyond Trammell's (2020) investigation of the relationship between torture and play. He suggests that play functions as a historical tool of subjugation and that the threat of torture lingers as a form of social control. The *D&D* system framework may have a disciplinary apparatus that conceals the possibility of torture within its play while exerting social and behavioural pressure on players (45). It also excludes and ignores the trauma of minority groups to create its narrative (48). Importantly, Trammell concludes that "play reduces humans to objects because play is violent" (48). By perceiving specific groups as both morally and culturally inferior, players are legitimised to objectify and enact violence upon those who require control. The nature of the magic circle means responsibility for such actions may be left with the character and not extend to their player. With this lack of responsibility in mind, I believe that that implicit torture within game systems may also be in place for players to derive affective pleasure without consequence.

The text also explicitly legitimises violence through heroism rooted in hatred of the other. It is easier for a player to feel like a hero when they are indisputably sure that their character's opponent deserves to be killed. From quantitative analysis above, we already know that the terms "monster" and "evil" collectively feature 199 times in the text. These terms create a dialogue within the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) of constructing unnamed and monotonous opponents as objectively evil (5, 7, 11, 24, 41, passim). *D&D* simplifies the real world's complexities into a fantasy dichotomy of heroes and villains that is typical of many hero stories (Stevens 2015, 28). The paladin class is the clearest example. For them, "the presence of strong evil registers on your senses like a noxious odor, and powerful good rings like heavenly music in your ears" (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 84). Their abilities are part of a larger game structure that makes tangible the concepts of evil and good within a framework of divinity. Throughout the paladin section, the text describes the class with terms such as "blessed," "divine," "holy," "justice," "prayer," "righteousness," and "virtue" (82-88). These terms are in contrast to descriptions given of their enemies as "evil," "darkness," "forces of evil," "hideous," "noxious," or "wicked" (82-88). These terms have strong religious connotations and are reflective of conventional ideals of beauty. Similar to Stang and Trammell's (2019) discussion on how the *Monster Manual* text acts as a way to order the nonnormative outside of church regulation, so too are paladins in some ways examples of a larger tendency in *D&D* to uphold concepts of the church institution. Under this pretence, heroic violence is not just about saving the day but about producing, stabilising, and subjugating the objectified other. It is also interesting to note that 73% (or 33) of the 45 spells available to paladins are categorised as combat-based. If we use the same spell guidelines as stated above to categorise the paladin's non-spell class abilities, over half can be considered combat-based. In sum, I argue that paladins effectively show *D&D*'s facilitation of violence through the good/ evil dichotomy.

While St. Jacques and Tobin (2020) suggest that the possibility of character death affects how players approach *D&D* (25), the limited out-of-character consequences for violence in the game may lead to players thinking that their characters can get away with unconventional or violent activities. In terms of physical danger, combat always has a risk of physical injury or death. As the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) states, "the thrust of a sword, a well-placed arrow, or a blast of flame from a fireball spell all have the potential to damage, or even kill, the hardiest of creatures" (196). However, the text also quickly goes on to state, "unless it results in death, damage isn't permanent. Even death is reversible through powerful magic" (197).

It is difficult to permanently die in *D&D*, especially at higher levels of the game (St. Jaques and Tobin 2020). The *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) implies that characters can walk away from most or all fights without any lasting injuries, which I argue complicates the risk factor when making decisions. A player knows that their character can be fully healed after doing something dangerous, so players lack the self-preserving incentive to avoid it. As Jones (2018) discusses, the ability to magically heal also plays into notions of ableism by portraying lasting disability as undesirable and magically solvable hindrances rather than permanent conditions that can be included in gameplay (par. 20). Even when in-game events occur that should cause a character to die, St. Jacques and Tobin (2020) point out that some participant groups may choose to bend or ignore the rules to prevent the death (23).

The text also lacks social or legal consequences. With descriptions such as, "the DM narrates the results of their actions," suggested outcomes of player choice throughout the *Player's Handbook* are vague or nonexistent (Wizards of the Coast 2014b,181). There are no examples that specifically mention consequences for violating conventions of violence. It is true that the DM may choose for actions in their game to have such ramifications, but there is no frame for it within the text. The lack of consequences, both social and physical, may favour sensation-seeking behaviour as players can experience activities considered dangerous or inappropriate in the real world. The *Dungeon Master's Guide* (Wizards of the Coast 2014a), another text that is designed to help the DM run a game within the system, does bring up the concept of consequence "so that the players feel like their successes and failures matter" (81). However, it features very few specific examples, and only has half a page on how to include consequences in combat (242). A lack of real-world ramifications can affect how players act. Trammell (2020) discusses that torture and appearing to enjoy another's suffering is seen as less civilised and so is societally policed and sanctioned (44). However, in games like *D&D*, players' real-world identities take a back seat to the characters they play. They can engage in and show pleasure in suffering under the pretence of being in-character.

As Torner (2015b) discusses, the use of uncertainty in RPGs is a reflection of the cultural and political periods in which they were produced (par. 1). Games work as non-threatening systems where we can experience uncertainty but still have accurate expectations about what will occur (Oosterwijk 2017; Torner 2015b, par. 4). In *D&D*, uncertainty involves both the mechanical unknown of dice outcomes and the social unknown of in-character ramifications. Above analysis has shown us that the random uncertainty of dice rolls can be somewhat overcome in violent scenes through analytic complexity. Torner (2015b) further points out how statistical tables and heavily structured combat in *D&D* projects the unknown of combat into mathematical spaces where enemies can be explored, mapped, and killed (par. 7). The lack of consequences within the *Player's Handbook* (2014b) for performing violent actions and the legitimation of violence against opponents declared evil also removes social uncertainty. Even concerns of personal injury and death are removed (197). I conclude that the *D&D* system minimises the uncertainty surrounding violence.

Looking beyond *D&D*, violence within TTRPGs has been critically commented on by metagames such as Tynes' (1996) *Power Kill*. The metagame works as a social commentary, attempting to display the conventional violence and criminality of many TTRPGs. Designed to be a role-playing

supplement to any TTRPG system, it encases the events of the TTRPG story as part of a delusional fantasy experienced by schizophrenic criminals. The DM takes on the role of a counsellor during this part of the game, putting the crimes that the players' characters performed within the fantasy world into real-world context. At the end of this metagame system description, Tynes states that "the actions taken by characters in [normal role-playing games] would almost always be completely unacceptable in the real world; it is only the shoddy trappings of genre conventions that allow RPG players to consider their stories 'heroic' or 'dramatic'" (par. 39). *Power Kill* is designed to highlight how behaviour deemed violent and illegal by current society is reframed by TTRPGs as acceptable and even encouraged.

7. LIMITATIONS

Due to this project's scope and size, I could not exhaustively cover the *D&D* system. Future research could consider whether more intensive analysis of both the *Player's Handbook* and other texts within the system may alter present findings. Furthermore, the communal nature of *D&D* makes outcomes subject to player agency. Future research should consider how players and their collective interactions affect the practical application of the text's rules.

8. CONCLUSION

From a quantitative point of view, the *D&D Player's Handbook* facilitates violence through the higher ratio of violent to nonviolent options and examples. The game's structure facilitates a single narrative where combat overshadows other parts of the game. The length and disconnect of combat, the difficulty of peaceful resolutions, the prevention of characters talking to each other, and the reduction of opponents to numbers that must be eliminated for the story to progress all direct the game towards more violent narratives. A lack of nonviolent character types means players are encouraged to create violent characters. We have seen that heroism, implicitly rooted in hatred, is a strong violence motivator built into the basic organising languages of *D&D*'s *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b). Meanwhile, sensation-seeking is a motivator through an absence of consequences; a lack of clear ramifications facilitates players to choose actions that violate conventional norms with impunity. Racism is subtly legitimated through linking minority-inspired ethnicities with "evil" creatures, which reflects concepts of covert violence. *D&D*'s structure facilitates violence through character creation, narrative expectations, and system structure. The significance of these findings is far more nuanced than can be encapsulated in this summary. Rather than being an endpoint, this article aims to act as a conversational basis for future work on the interconnected problems and opportunities this tendency towards violence poses, as well as how the convention for violence in TTRPGs like *D&D* may speak to larger aspects of society and development.

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