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"World-Building through Garments and Accessories in Dungeons & Dragons Illustrations"

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Abstract

In tabletop role-playing games, the game master and players in a group are encouraged to construct their own fictive world in which they can play. By using a critical world-building approach, we analyse the garments and accessories in the illustrations in *Player's Handbook* (2014) for Dungeons & Dragons (5th edition) and find that clothes have four conspicuous functions in establishing a world of possibilities from which a group of players can build their game world. The four functions are: to convey that the world is one of action and magic, to provide a range of cultural and historical alternatives to the traditional pseudomedieval fantasy world, to communicate what is important about particular groups, and to maintain a difference between female wizards as physical and sexualised and male wizards as people of knowledge and military competence.

Keywords: critical world-building, roleplaying games, game worlds, clothes, pictures

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World-Building through Garments and Accessories in Dungeons & Dragons Illustrations

> *Two human-like figures are engaged in battle with a fire giant. The colours are vivid, but the picture reveals little about the location of the fight. The combatants' garments provide greater insight into the fictive world. Billowing cloaks emphasise the action of the fight, and the dress styles reflect different cultural backgrounds. The woman's simple tunic and bits of fur secured with leather straps require no advanced tailoring; the man's outfit suggests more sophisticated techniques and craftsmanship; and the giant, using a dragon skin for armour, implies a society which rewards martial prowess and where wearing the skin of a defeated foe symbolises power.*[1]

This reading of the cover image from *Player's Handbook* (2014) for the tabletop roleplaying game Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) highlights the important role garments and accessories play in building an imaginary world. Roleplaying games, particularly D&D, have greatly impacted the development of the fantasy genre. Since its creation in 1974, more than fifty million people have played D&D, according to a widely cited infographic from the game's publisher (Corliss 2021). Gaming groups play in innumerable worlds that are partially shaped by game-book elements, such as descriptions, mechanics, flavour texts, and illustrations. Illustrations provide immediate impressions of the fictive worlds and in those illustrations, clothing, in particular, conveys essential information about physical and technological environments,

[1] When we use *male* and *female*, *man* and *woman* in discussion about individuals in the illustrations, it should be read as a shorthand for how we interpret the way they are coded. Many characters are not clearly coded as male or female and in these cases, we use other terms to refer to them. In a Dungeons & Dragons context, we also prefer the term *people* for the contentious term *race*.

social and cultural norms, and personal and communal aesthetics. Thus, dress provides valuable knowledge about the world. Accordingly, our article focuses on what depicted garments and accessories reveal about the roleplaying world, specifically examining how individuals portrayed in the game-book illustrations are dressed. The aim of this article is to answer the following questions:

- What do the garments and accessories worn in the illustrations in *Player's Handbook* contribute to the fictive world(s) in which 5th edition Dungeons & Dragons games take place?
- What do these contributions say about the world(s)?

We begin by presenting the two parts of our study's analytical perspective: world-building and depictions of clothes. The first part explains the concept of a fictive *world* in a D&D context, along with an outline of the idea of "critical world-building" and how it can be applied to illustrations to gain insights into the D&D world. For the second part, we address what clothes can tell us about their context and what considerations are necessary when analysing depictions of clothes (rather than actual garments). Then we turn to the world-building contributions of clothes in the *Player's Handbook* illustrations, focusing on four key findings. First we discuss the most conspicuous role of clothes, as conveyors of action. The second finding involves cultural evocations imparted by various types of garments, and the third concerns the construction of group identities through dress. Finally, we turn our attention to one of the most iconic fantasy figures, the wizard, and how their dress code captures a view on gender.

The scope of our analysis is by necessity limited. *Player's Handbook* most clearly defines the type of world in which the game can be set, and is most widely read among players and game masters alike. We have examined the garments and accessories in its 81 unique colour illustrations of people and analysed their implications for world-building. For a more comprehensive study, it would be possible to take into account a greater number of source books and published adventures, as well as illustrations from other game editions. Such a study would no doubt yield valuable results but would not fit within the confines of a single article. Although we agree with Kristian A. Bjørkelo's point that other roleplaying games deserve more critical study (2022, 112), D&D is currently the most popular tabletop roleplaying game. We therefore

decided to start our investigation of world-building in game book illustrations with the game whose historical significance, according to Bjørkelo, "is hard to overstate" (113).

Analytical Perspective: Critical World-building and Depiction of Clothes

Worlds and World-building

To discuss world-building requires an understanding of the term *world*. We distinguish between fictive worlds and the *actual world* in which we live. No fiction is set in the actual world, although it can be set in a fictive version of it. Fictive worlds can be restricted to a single story and consist of a single room, or they can span an entire franchise and several universes. Stories in D&D games can take place in a wide range of settings. They can be part of the official "multiverse" of the game, including numerous "planes of existence" (going by names such as *Feywild*, *Shadowfell*, and *the Abyss*) as well as other settings (for example, Krynn, Eberron, and Ravnica). Since they are all potentially accessible to a party of player characters within one "game campaign," however, we consider them as parts of a single game world, a world being the totality of settings available in a campaign.

World-building can refer to a number of different processes, depending on whose activities one is interested in. This article is part of the theoretical and practical explorations of "critical world-building" introduced by Stefan Ekman and Audrey Isabel Taylor (2016). They propose that there are at least three kinds of world-building: *authorial world-building* refers to the creative processes of the producers of worlds (such as authors, film makers, and game masters) and *readerly world-building* to the cognitive re-creation that takes place in the minds of consumers (readers, audiences, or players). This article focuses on what Ekman and Taylor call *critical world-building*. When engaging in critical world-building, the critic analyses the fictive world by examining the various elements that constitute it in one or more media, how these elements combine into a whole, and how the parts and the whole interrelate.

Fundamentally, critical world-building is an analytical and reflective approach to a fictive world that aims to understand the world based on its presentation, rather than focusing on how a creator

constructs a world or investigating how audiences translate signs into the experience of a world. Ekman and Taylor have also demonstrated how world elements that are not part of a narrative – such as maps, illustrations, and epigraphs – can provide a basis for critical world-building analyses (Ekman 2018, 2019; Ekman and Taylor 2021). In this article, we move beyond the previous examples and show how a critical world-building analysis of a particular aspect of non-narratival illustrations – the clothes worn in pictures – can provide significant information about a fictive world.

We also extend Ekman and Taylor's previous work by drawing on Kendall L. Walton's concept of "props." A prop, according to Walton (1990), is a real thing that generates fictional truths (21), and that can intimately connect the perceptual experience with the imagined world (295). In other words, a picture is "real" (it exists in the actual world) even though it depicts a fictive world, and can provide the viewer with information about that world. The picture can also make it feel as if the viewer looks at the fictive world: the act of seeing is both actual and fictive. As such, illustrations are powerful world-building elements, arguably with a greater degree of perceptual immediacy than textual descriptions. We therefore suggest that illustrations of garments and accessories should occupy a central position in understanding the construction of the fictive world in *Player's Handbook*.

World-building in D&D is often framed as a social endeavour to which the game books, game master, and other players contribute in different ways. The game-book worlds consist of elements such as game mechanics, descriptions, and flavour texts (short pieces of fiction that capture aspects of, for instance, a particular character class). The game master "might set the campaign on one of [the official] worlds or on one that he or she created. [...] Ultimately, the [game master] is the authority on the campaign and its setting, even if the setting is a published world" (*Player's Handbook* 2014, 6). Thus, although the world-building for any given group is a *social* act, in which the imagination of designers and players are combined (Pearce and Artemesia 2009, 31), the power to shape that world is unequally distributed. Most power resides with the game master, but other players can also contribute to the world, before and during play (Cover 2010, 139, 142; Hammer 2007, 71; Jara 2006, 45; Mackay 2001, 30–32). Ultimately, however, the world that is constructed by a group is a collective endeavour.

Rather than using, for instance, ethnography or interviews to examine the collective world-building of one or more groups, we decided to use a critical world-building approach to investigate the world presented in a game book. The game books provide input and guidance for the collective world-building process, a starting point for the players' and game master's imagination (Nikolaidou 2018, 221; Jara 2013, 45; Hammer 2007, 70). Dimitra Nikolaidou therefore argues that the "primary source for a study on [tabletop roleplaying game] settings is the game book, the published material necessary for a group to begin playing" (2018, 221). The most fundamental source of world information for the D&D game is *Player's Handbook*. Although there are numerous source books and adventures published for the 5th edition, *Player's Handbook* is the only game book that is strictly speaking necessary to play the game. One of the book's functions is that it "provides necessary background information [...] about the setting of the game and the kinds of individuals that will be encountered and offers a sense of the narrative hooks and histories that already populate the world of D&D" (Garcia 2019, 19). It is, in other words, a key component in the world-building of a D&D game. Studying the world presented in *Player's Handbook* means examining all the various options available for a world rather than looking at a certain world collectively created by a particular group. It is a critical world-building approach, not to a single, fictive world but to a *world of possibilities* presented through the many alternatives provided by the book. The world of possibilities presented in *Player's Handbook* recalls Brian Attebery's model of the fantasy genre as a fuzzy set, with a typical "prototype" in the centre surrounded by a cloud of genre possibilities that become less typically fantasy the further from the prototype they are (1992, 12–16). In *Player's Handbook*, there is what we call a "baseline" epic fantasy world, with various alternative versions closer to or further away from it, all of them available to a player group.

Garments and Accessories

The illustrations in *Player's Handbook* are among its most prominent world-building elements, and in those illustrations, clothes provide a great deal of cultural meaning. We agree with Giorgio Riello's assertion that "material culture seeks [...] to understand the role of [a] garment

within a specific society and time" (2011, [6]), even though, in our case, the society and time are part of a fictive world. Clothes communicate information about the context in which they exist, and through a cross-disciplinary study of fashion and dress even a single garment "can be used to illustrate, and interpret[,] a wide range of topics in fashion, including aspects of technology, social history, art history, sociology, psychology, anthropology, design history, cultural theory, cycles of production and consumption, as well as economics" (Mida and Kim 2015, 76). By applying different analytical and interpretive perspectives on the clothes worn in the illustrations, it is possible to reveal what the world can be like (or even *must* be like). Lou Taylor (2002) observes that clothing is embedded in a broader cultural context and she forcefully argues for the importance of analysing it from a multitude of social and cultural perspectives. We assert that this position also has significant implications for the analysis of clothing in fictional worlds. A garment becomes a piece of a world-building puzzle, implying or indicating what its cultural context is like. This context is not only material. Clothes can deliver political messages and reveal social norms (for instance by being revealing) and their design combines function with the symbolism and aesthetics of a particular time and place (Mida and Kim 2015, 16).

There is a doubleness in the normative and aesthetic context implied by the illustrations of clothes. Regardless of the medium, the elements that form fictive worlds reflect both the nature of the worlds themselves and the actual-world context in which they are created. The notorious "bikini-mail" that has long plagued fantasy illustrations not only suggests a fictive world in which protection in combat is less important than displaying the female physique but also signifies an attempt to appeal to a particular readership and a tradition of objectifying the female body. Our analysis focuses on what the clothes say about the fictive world while not denying implications about the actual-world social system of which the illustrations are part. An example of a female archer in the *Player's Handbook* (137) provides a striking example of how the era of the bikini-mail is not quite over. The sharp clash between her bare arms and midriff and her leather gloves, metal pauldron, and sword indicates that the fictive society to which she belongs prioritises light dress – for aesthetic, repressive, or practical reasons – above safety. It is possible to consider her dress a reaction against social norms, but given her apparently dangerous

situation, that seems unlikely. The illustration is situated in an actual social context in which norms of sexualisation, aesthetics, and modesty struggle to find an uneasy balance, but a detailed discussion of this balance is beyond the scope of this article.

Another key point underpinning our analysis is that we do not examine clothes but illustrations of clothes, and these are two very different things. In their discussion of superhero costumes, Jonathan S. Marion and James Scanlan point out that "in-print versions are only beholden to imagination whereas live action adaptations must contend with the limits of real bodies and physical properties" (2021, 389). On the other hand, Lydia Edwards demonstrates how women's posture in 17th-century portraits carries implications about both social norms and specific properties of the garments they wear (2017, 14–15). The fictive clothes in the *Player's Handbook* illustrations are definitely imaginative first and limited by bodies and physical properties second, but we argue that they, like Edwards's examples, can be analysed for what they reveal about their (fictive) context. Illustrations of clothes are meant to be *read as* (representations of) clothes. Their properties and what we can learn from them differ from what physical clothes tell us, but their appearance and context nevertheless contribute to the world-building and add to the sense of the fantastic. Therefore, we do not critique the clothes in the illustrations for how closely they mimic physical objects, that is, for how practical and feasible they are as physical garments.

Our discussion is limited to garments and accessories, and therefore largely excludes weapons, armour, and other equipment. By *garment*, we mean an item of clothing, such as a shirt, dress, or coat, that covers some part of the body, and which is primarily used for cover, protection, and as a form of expression in terms of style and culture. In short, they can "protect, adorn, mark or obscure the body" (Mida and Kim 2015, 27). *Accessories*, on the other hand, are typically used to complement or enhance an outfit rather than cover the body. They include items like jewellery, hats, belts, and scarves. They are often used for both functional purposes and as a means to add style or flair to an ensemble, but they usually lack the primary function of providing coverage or protection. In some instances, the distinction between clothes and armour, or accessories and weapons, is meaningless or hard to draw; we therefore occasionally comment on what some people may consider armour or weapons.

Findings: Four Functions

By analysing the illustrations of clothes in *Player's Handbook*, we have identified four conspicuous world-building functions that garments and accessories have. Our selection consisted of all colour illustrations in which there are people with discernible dress. The pencil drawings were omitted because they largely apply a parodic or comic-strip style or a meta-perspective to the game (e.g. 7, 290–92). We then performed a careful analysis of the garments and accessories in each illustration, digitally enlarging some pictures to examine details.[2] Our findings were interpreted in relation to other information in the rule book (the immediate context), to dress history in the actual world, and to the fantasy genre more broadly. Each individual's clothes provide information about gender roles, culture, ethnicity, status, and much more, but we also discovered four overarching ways in which garments and accessories contributed to the world of possibilities. Clothes convey a sense of action by communicating movement, magic, and fast-paced events; suggest possible types of fictive societies by evoking actual-world cultures; provide identifying information about various groups; and, through distinct differentiation in dress, establish differences in gender expression between female and male magic-users. These four functions are discussed below.

Conveyors of Action

The most striking function that garments and accessories have in the illustrations stresses the underlying nature of the game-world as a world of action, movement, and power. One thing about various garments and accessories that separates the illustrations in *Player's Handbook* from actual clothes is the way in which they portray movement. In the initial description of the fight from the cover of *Player's Handbook*, we point out a combatant's billowing cloak. In fact, not only the cloak but the bottom part of a tunic and the fur brim that emerges below the armour appear to be flapping in the wind. The hero seems to be in mid-jump, and the garments emphasise the sense of movement. The first illustration inside the book ([1]; detail from illustration on p. 188) shows another fight. The main figure wears several pieces of fabric that stream away from the body in

[2] For copyright reasons, illustrations are not reproduced.

different directions. A long piece of blue fabric, possibly a tagelmust (a North African face veil and head wrap), billows like a pennant towards the viewer. The two ends of something scarf-like, patterned in red and white and partly hidden under the armour, stream in opposite directions. They are not meant to signify wind but movement. Together with the sword that has just wounded two enemies, they could signal that the fighter is moving quickly. The clothes constitute a key part of showing motion and combat action.

The billowing clothes, while an artistic matter on one level, contribute to the world-building. We are not making a point about correctness in illustrations, or the artists' skills and choices in portraying clothes. The movements and airflows that are captured in many of the images stand out as central aspects of what the world is like: it is a world in which things happen and they happen fast. Heroes jump through the air as they attack, spin around to meet opponents, ready their bows as the wind tears at their clothes. This sense of action is an important part of the life of the many heroes that we see populate the world – heroes whom we are invited to join in the game.

The action does not have to be one of physical movement. Magic forces are also symbolised by clothes that billow around the mystical practitioners (our catch-all for the various wielders of mystical forces presented in D&D). The elf who uses magic to open a portal (25) has a long, thin shawl in the same blue shade as the rest of her ensemble. It hangs loosely over her arms, its ends streaming away from her body as if carried by an invisible wind. The suggestion is possibly that magic forces give rise to physical wind, and, taking other illustrations into account, the greater the forces, the stronger the wind (cf. also 232). The illustration for the Monk class (76) depicts a female practitioner whose skirt and hair undulate as if in water while she draws on some magic force. A practitioner who casts the powerful Prismatic Spray spell wears a cloak that streams out behind him as if there were a strong headwind (268), illustrating the power of his magic.

Not every fight or magic spell in the *Player's Handbook* illustrations relies on some form of billowing textiles to convey a sense of action, but it is a common function of the illustrated garments. Wide robes, tunics, sleeves, even various adornments (e.g., 193) suggest movement. Even when the person in a picture is standing still, the most conspicuous feature of all manner of dress is the way flowing fabrics and furs are combined into multiple layers that do not completely cover each

other. There is a prevalence of cloaks, robes, and capes that can signal various levels of wealth, status and protection. This baseline dress code, while adding to the pseudomedieval character of the mainstream epic-fantasy world, also serves the purpose of conveying movement and magic. Their presence in the world emphasises that it is a world of action.

Cultural Evocation

Secondary worlds are never created completely *ex nihilo*, unconnected to the actual world. Mark J. P. Wolf points out that fictive worlds are incomplete and explains that if the logic of the world is not enough for readers to fill in the gaps, they will turn to their actual-world knowledge instead (2012, 54). But rather than relying only on details from the actual world, genre worlds often draw on a common context to provide a basic understanding of the fictive world. The fantasy genre has long relied on what is "essentially a simplified version of the Middle Ages" to "[fill] in the empty fictional space" (Attebery 1992, 132). According to Helen Young and Kavita Mudan Finn, the view of the Middle Ages has long been Eurocentric, as have the pseudomedieval constructions that are based on it. They observe how this is changing, however, seeing the presence of "counterstorytelling that is committed to undoing the storying of the 'European Middle Ages" and to generating new stories about the past and, through them, the present and future (2022, 5). This "counterstorytelling," they suggest, can be found in various forms of popular culture, including fantasy literature, and we see it echoed in the range of different garments and accessories depicted in *Player's Handbook*. The book's introduction acknowledges that the worlds of D&D "begin with a foundation of medieval fantasy" (*Player's Handbook*, 5), but although the basis for this medieval fantasy is still largely a simplified version of the European Middle Ages, it also contains possibilities to generate other kinds of fantasy worlds.

Ensembles as well as details of dress can call to mind – evoke – natural, social, or historical contexts beyond the immediate situation they are meant to portray. On the most basic level, depicted garments evoke actual materials through their appearance, be they sheer or opaque, heavy or light – we associate what we see with our actual experience of various fabrics. We also relate materials to appropriate

circumstances. Heavy furs and light fabric can suggest environments and climates, either sunny and hot or icy and cold. Combinations of garments and accessories, or particular styles, can evoke entire cultural contexts, including, for example, the conditions for producing particular fibres, whether silk, wool, or linen, or the technology required to produce a certain item of clothing – or to keep it clean.

White garments provide a noteworthy example of how items of clothing signal a dramatic difference between the actual (nonmagical) world and the magical world of possibilities communicated by *Player's Handbook*. White clothes are by no means uncommon in the illustrations, not least shirts and blouses. The halfling and the ranger in their exposed white shirts (26, 89) indicate that they disregard the problems of soiling what are very visible garments. In the actual world, laundering before the invention of the washing machine and modern detergents was time-consuming and labour-intensive, and white clothes were not meant for roaming the roads or forests. White collars, cuffs, and other accessories, common in *Player's Handbook* (e.g., 55, 79, 120, 130, 140), would have signalled high social status in our own world in the past. In the world of D&D, however, keeping a white garment clean even when one is traveling or adventuring is apparently not a problem. Indeed, the spell for cleaning common objects, Prestidigitation (267), has no resource cost and can be among the first spells some practitioners learn. Thus, keeping white clothes clean in this world is not a challenge; wearing white is not an automatic status symbol.

Clothes can even evoke entire cultural and historical contexts. Most people are dressed in variations on a Western European, pseudomedieval style, with long dresses, robes, or tunics, shirts and jerkins, and some sort of cloak. But there are other clothes portrayed, with sartorial styles evoking other places than Western Europe, other times than the medieval, and other fantasy worlds than those emulating Tolkien's Middle-earth. A few are akin to that of the fur-cloaked hero on the cover: tanned hides stitched together or secured with straps, affording some protection against cold and weapons (e.g., 40, 48). Others evoke English Regency (early 19th century) dress, such as the halfling wearing tan breeches and waistcoat, a white shirt with a tall collar and cravat, and a blue tailcoat (120). Yet others evoke the cultural history of Asia, Africa, or the Americas by, for instance, portraying people wearing something that evokes a ghutra headscarf

held in place with a red agal (156), or a Japanese ō-yoroi armour (140). Occasionally, these images tap into stereotypes in the same way that the pseudomedieval aesthetic does, by combining some well-known cultural features with some widely-held misconceptions and modern (often Western) norms and sensibilities. A female fighter battling a skeleton (148) is dressed in what appears to be an approximation of some type of Middle-eastern or South Asian head jewellery, such as a South Asian tikka or matha patti, and a kind of veil or headscarf that vaguely resembles an Indian ghoonghat or a Muslim hijab that might have come undone in the fight. Her kohl-rimmed eyes and bands of gold sequins add to an overall impression of Arabian Nights. Just as the pseudomedieval style is a melange of actual European cultures and time periods, often with modern sensibilities, this Arabian Nights style is an evocation of the "Oriental" – a mixture of features that draw on the Muslim world without necessarily aiming for cultural consistency or historical accuracy.

Using clothes and other material culture to evoke Oriental equivalents to the Occidental pseudomedieval risks exoticising the source cultures. Aaron Trammell points out that "overtones of orientalism pervade the text" of *Player's Handbook* (2016, n.p.). The game book employs an "earnest multiculturalist ethic of appreciation," but Trammel concludes that it "often surreptitiously produces a problematic and fictitious exotic, Oriental figure" (n.p.). Although Trammell uses several illustrations from *Player's Handbook* to make this argument, it is regrettable that these illustrations are generally just listed and labelled rather than engaged with critically. His critique of the orientalism in the D&D *Oriental Adventures* (1985 [for D&D 2nd edition]; 2001 [for D&D 3rd edition]) is well-argued, but we would nevertheless like to suggest that using garments and accessories to evoke other cultural contexts in which play can take place is on the whole preferable to offering a solely Western-European pseudomedieval world.

Clothing is also used to evoke a sense of the "primitive" in contrast to the "sophisticated" or "modern." Most people in *Player's Handbook* wear outfits that indicate advanced skills in fabric production, dyeing, design, and tailoring. However, some beings, often coded as enemies, are depicted in simpler attire. These simpler types of dress can be read as being grounded in, and perpetuating, negative assumptions about indigeneity, and they construct a clear opposition between cultures with greater and lesser access to material wealth and dressmaking

skills. The simplest garments are the loincloths, which range from very basic (188) to more elaborate, featuring bright colours and decorative elements (193). They are combined with pieces of armour or, in the case of a female druid (67), other garments that suggest a certain level of craftsmanship.

Only slightly more advanced garments suggest societies with small, possibly even nomadic, communities. A half-orc's tunic, though requiring more tailoring than the loincloths, is still relatively simple (40). It appears to be made of roughly cut, tanned, undyed hides, sewn together with thick thread or leather strips. Lighter stitching or other decorative features surround the short sleeve's opening. The boots seem to be made of soft leather, wrapped around the calves and feet, and fastened with straps that possibly secure a harder sole. The half-orc also wears a light-coloured necklace, perhaps made from animal claws, teeth, or bones. These garments and accessories can be effectively produced on a small scale with limited technology, using materials that do not require farming or animal husbandry. Such an outfit implies a society where production of clothes constitutes a minor part of the economy, requiring little specialisation and dedicated resources. It is not a society of towns and cities – perhaps without settlements at all. Some decorations or accessories may carry social, ritual, or aesthetic significance, but in this context, garments are valued more for their protection – from the environment and from attacks – than for their elegance and style.

Compared to the pseudomedieval baseline that dominates the clothes in the world of possibilities, this style comes across as simpler and having less flair. By far the most common characteristic of clothing in *Player's Handbook* is the overlapping layers that do not completely cover each other, featuring what appears to be a variety of fabrics. There are many cloaks, capes, and billowing, fluttering accessories that span the spectrum from inexpensive to sophisticated based on the apparent material, thereby signalling everything from concealment and protection to high status and affluence. The simplicity of the loincloths and the half-orc's tunic, even of the druid's (sexualising) attire, stands in stark contrast to this dominant style. The picture of a warlock (105) thus comes across as a notable amalgam between two kinds of cultures. The warlock's outfit consists of overlapping layers and flowing fabrics, including grey gauze and a wrapped sleeveless top with a red border, accentuated shoulder points, and

a tall mandarin collar. The garments are tattered and worn, however, and among the accessories are several bone items, a severed hoof, a pale lizard, and some dark feathers. Around the wrists, grey strips of fabric appear to be wrapped, to which sharp pieces of bone are attached. Through this dress, the warlock presents a space that is distanced from both the dominant style and culture, and the less complex economies indicated by simpler dress style. The outfit evokes a sense of mystery by subverting the dominant fashion while retaining its standard features.

Group Commonalities

How one dresses affects how one is perceived, and this is no less true for fantastic beings. Clothes and accessories, from military uniforms to jewellery brands, can be used to signal membership in any number of social groups, such as subcultures, peer-groups, and professions. The various groups that are part of the world of possibilities can also be analysed through how they are portrayed. The dress styles of fantastic peoples provide clues about what is important about them. We exemplify this with what the drow (dark elves) and the halflings wear.

There are three drow clearly visible in *Player's Handbook*, but the way they dress hints at the complicated relationship between drow and other elves in the game's history. The most well-known and popular dark-elf in D&D lore is Drizzt Do'Urden, who first appeared in *The Icewind Dale* trilogy (1988–90) and has since featured in numerous stories by writer R. A. Salvatore. Drizzt's tale is one of finding himself in opposition to the rest of the drow community, deep underground, while constantly confronting the prejudices of people who dwell above ground. The racial stereotyping of dark elves as evil has begun to dissolve in the 5th edition D&D, something indicated by the choice of having Drizzt illustrate the section about elves as playable people (21). Drizzt embodies a conflict of belonging, welcome neither below nor above ground, and his clothes underscore this. His dress is similar to the two other drow in the book: a female who illustrates the rogue class (94) and a male seen in the background of a tavern brawl (126). All three wear black leather, some of which is armour, possibly with dark clothes underneath. Their decorations differ, however. The rogue is outfitted with metal pauldrons, wrist guards, and knee guards, all adorned with

a web pattern. This design presumably signals her allegiance to the spider goddess, Lolth. On Drizzt, we can only see leather armour and clothes, and his leather garment is cut to echo the leaf shape and vein pattern favoured by some other elves (e.g. 206, 217). He also sports a green, rather than black, cloak, further signalling his liminal status. The brawling drow's armour similarly suggests the leaf shape, but the pattern is ambiguous, somewhere between veins and webs. The uniformity in dress – black leather armour – indicates that the three of them belong to the same group, but details in that uniform suggest differences in where they *want* to belong.

Halflings, finally, wear clothes that present them as agrarian middle class or bourgeoisie. The halfling way of dressing differs radically from the drow, not least in their often being portrayed without armour (except for the occasional pauldron). Their level of apparent affluence, as expressed through their dress, ranges from the halfling that illustrates the Guild Artisan background (132) to the member in a band of adventurers (16). The former sports a striped shirt of shiny fabric with elaborately worked edgings and slits, an embroidered waistcoat that is worn open, trousers largely resembling jodhpurs, shiny black shoes, and a cloak with a jewelled clasp: a great deal of work and skill has gone into this ensemble, and were it not for his mace and bedroll, he would come across as a wealthy shop-keeper rather than an adventurer. The latter wears a dark tunic reinforced with a lighter garment on top, a broad leather belt, trousers, and boots, and rests against a bedroll. The lack of bedrolls among other people, coupled with at least three halflings sporting them, hints at a halfling predilection for both travel and comfort. Moreover, their attire positions halflings as the modern middle class, not rich but well-to-do, and meticulous about their appearance. Halflings want to be seen as neat, tidy, and clean: they wear garments which reflect a great deal of sartorial expertise. Even when adventuring, they wear white shirts, often with fancy, tall collars. They patch their clothes, as much for mending as for style (cf. 26, 156). Halfling dress thus signals their values and social situation, but it also distances them from the pseudomedieval baseline. Their style tends towards late 18th or 19th century rather than the Middle Ages. The Regency halfling has already been mentioned (120), and the Guild Artisan in jodhpurs – historically, these came to Britain in the late 19th century – and modern shoes appears as late Victorian. Other halflings have similar details that

mark them as closer to our actual present. These later-era clothes are easier for us to identify even though they have been dragged through a fantasy filter. Halflings, for all their imaginary qualities, become more solid as people to us, less the shades of black, white, and grey of the drow. In *The Hobbit* (1937), Tolkien creates his hobbits as Victorian anachronisms in Middle-earth, with Bilbo being "almost aggressively *middle* middle-class" (Shippey 2001, 5–6; 2003, 72), and this tradition has been maintained in the dress code of the halflings in *Player's Handbook*.

Each people's way of dressing thus tells us something about their function in the world. The drow dress to situate themselves in the conflict between the subterranean drow and the elves above ground. Halflings dress to align with (actual world) Victorian middle-class values of presentability and economic standing. They both dress as part of their group, however, and thus offer information about that group in the world of possibilities.

Magical Looks for Him and Her

Despite the attempts to make D&D 5th edition into a gender-neutral game and game world, the dress of the heavy-duty magic-users is still divided along gender lines. Numerous studies have addressed D&D in terms of gender, often in relation to its art and gaming practices (e.g., Olson 2012, Garcia 2017, 2019; Stang & Trammell 2019; Brennan 2020; Carlson 2020; Johnson 2020). Daniel Carlson (2020) argues that the 5th edition of the game has improved in terms of gender equality, but Garcia demonstrates that women are still underrepresented in illustrations (2017, 239–40). And although we did not see major gender differences among most types of characters, one kind of character displays a remarkable difference between male and female garments. Male and female wizards may be equally powerful, but they apparently follow very different dress codes.

Examining wizards in the illustrations comes with a number of challenges. The game offers a great range of magical or mystical powers to all kinds of character classes, making it difficult to identify what type of mystical practitioners a particular illustration presents. Familiarity with what weapons, armour, and spells are available to the respective classes helps exclude some illustrations from consideration, as do other attributes. For example, a mace and lute signals that a

female mystical practitioner is a bard (202); the swarm of insects conjured by a female spell-caster indicates the Insect Plague spell, unavailable to wizards (253); eerie white eyes suggests that the caster is a warlock and that the energy crackling around her hand is an Eldritch Blast, which is available only to the warlock class (44). After having eliminated those pictures that we deem are clearly not wizards, we are left with the illustrations listed in table 1. Of these, a sufficient number are coded as belonging to the wizard class to suggest a pattern regarding the iconic wizard's robes.

Female		**Male**					
Page	Dress	Page	Dress	Page	Dress	Page	Dress
25	Gown	9	Robe	116	Robe	223	Coat (?)
138	Gown	16	Robe	134	*	241	Robe
169	Gown	38	Robe	199	Coat	262	Robe
171	Gown	73	Robe	200	Robe	268	Robe
232	Gown	112	Coat	205	Robe	297	Robe
[320]	Robe						

Table 1: Illustrations with possible wizard figures

Gown: *combination of loose, light fabrics with tight-fitting garments that emphasise the waist, bare shoulders, arms, and/or decolletage.* Robe: *wide, calf- or floor-length garment covering the entire body, generally with a cowl or hood.* Coat: *long garment, typically with long sleeves and open down the front, worn on top of other clothes.*

* *Nothing prevents this character from being a wizard, but nothing suggests it, either. His outfit departs from the typical robe/cloak dress of other wizard characters.*

The wizard's robes as portrayed in fantasy art in general have a long tradition and emerge in *Player's Handbook* with particular attention given to the shoulder region. The male wizard's robe is a wide, calf- or floor-length garment covering the entire body (e.g., 200), generally with a cowl or hood. Historically, it harkens back to the robes of the medieval clergy and, from the twelfth century, the scholars at the early European universities (Grollemond 2023, n.p.). In the *Player's Handbook* world of possibilities, it has occasionally been combined

with the layer-upon-layer fashion to present as a long overcoat on top of a long tunic, kilt, or other open garment, and often evoking some other culture than the European (e.g., 112, 199). It can be extensively worked and decorated (e.g., 16, 262), fairly plain (e.g., 116, 297), or somewhere in between.

A common feature that sets the wizard robe apart from its historical origin is the focus on the shoulders. The camping wizard in chapter two (16) offers the most conspicuous example. The red robe with incredibly wide sleeves and gold decorations features a stiff, structured collar that flares over the shoulders and reaches far down the chest, perhaps all the way to the waist. The collar is lavishly trimmed with precious stones and patterns in gold. Other robes show the same focus on shoulders and neck: a golden border and elaborate designs (205), embroidery recalling Celtic knotwork patterns (200), a wide collar covering the shoulders (possibly with a thrown-back hood), edged with gold bands (199), and strips of multicoloured beads (112), to mention a few examples. It is possible to draw parallels between the shoulder emphasis of the robes and the ubiquitous pauldrons of other classes, an imitation of military dress in civilian fashion – but it has also been suggested to us that the shoulder emphasis may be influenced by the online game *World of Warcraft* (2004). Although we can observe a difference in wizardly shoulder focus between illustrations from early D&D illustrations of the 1980s, and those of the 4th (2008) and 5th editions, we are unable to confirm such influence and would welcome more research in this area.

Female wizards dress quite differently, mostly expressing an "enchantress" role rather than powerful wizardry. Although presumably as powerful as their male counterparts, there is a group of female magic-wielders who have been given very distinct attire. The female elf (25) provides a typical example. Elsewhere, we have described her as wearing clothes more in line with generic fantasy costumes: a dress with a sleeveless top and halter-neck, layers of heavier fabric over lighter skirts, combining a modern evening gown with a traditional Japanese style of layered, loose-hanging fabric (Ekman 2019, 126–27). Several components of the dress appear not to make practical sense and seem to be products of the artist's fancy: the wide sleeves attached only to embossed leather bracelets and loosely attached belts weighted down with a scroll case and a girdle book all seem poised to slip down. The ensemble combines the fluttering of loose, light fabrics with tight-

fitting garments that emphasise her waist and leave her shoulders bare, much more revealing and sexualising than the male robes (for variations on this theme, see 138, 169, 232; with a notable exception on [320]).

The difference between male and female wizard fashion suggests a certain entrenched inequality in the world of possibilities. *Wizard* comes from the word *wise*. Wizards are (meant to be) people of wisdom, if not of the game statistic Wisdom. The historical connection between the wizard's and scholar's robes undergirds that impression. The male wizard is a person of learning and knowledge, something also conveyed by his clothes. The female wizards give another impression. Through the diaphanous veils, the finger-loop sleeves, and the tightness around waists and torsos, their key characteristic becomes sex appeal, the ability to enchant. Even when clearly associated with learning and sagacity (138), the female sage is dressed in a tight, long skirt, with a leather bodice that draws attention to her bust and leaves her shoulders bare. The few women in robes remain exceptions, the odd ones out and not paralleled by any enchanting male counterparts. In the wizard class, the dress code still maintains a distinction between men and women that recalls the problematic gender inequality of previous editions.

Conclusion

The world of possibilities that *Player's Handbook* introduces to players is structured much like Attebery's (1992) fuzzy set: a centre of common expectations and a generous fringe of alternative possibilities. From our study, we can see how the pseudomedieval baseline style comes with a great range of options, sometimes in a single picture, such as the robed, female practitioner ([320]), sometimes in an opposing pair, such as the half-orc in the very simple outfit and the one in an expensive suit of armour (40, 82). The first example reminds players that robes can be worn by women, the second that there is no set role for half-orcs. Garments that evoke other cultures than the European Middle Ages are common if not predominant, as are garments that evoke more recent times.

The visual elements in rulebooks, particularly clothing in illustrations, play a crucial role in shaping and conveying various aspects of a game world. David Jara points out that although a rulebook

cover can be separated into its pictorial, verbal, and typographical components, it still works as a unity in framing player expectations (2013, 46). In a similar way, a fictive world and its effects cannot be considered by only examining a single type of element. We do not claim that the clothes alone make the world of possibilities in *Player's Handbook*. However, we do argue that in a fictive world built from a combination of abstractions (rules), examples (flavour text), and verbal descriptions, an image carries a great deal of information and contributes much to the total understanding of that world. "Fashion", according to *The Routledge Companion to Fashion Studies*, "does not only manifest culture, it shapes and produces it" (Paulicelli, Manlow, and Wissinger 2021, 1). We agree. The garments and accessories in the illustrations are manifestations of implied cultural and other contexts in the fictive world, and as such, they bring those contexts into being.

In our study, we show how depictions of garments and accessories reveal insights not only about the wearer and their immediate surroundings but about the fundamental nature of the fictive world. In *Player's Handbook*, the clothes in the illustrations have four key functions that contribute a core aesthetic to the world of possibilities, as well as alternatives to it. Their most striking functions are the sense of action – both physical and magical – that they establish, along with their ability to evoke a wide range of cultural contexts by drawing from actual-world cultures. Clothing also reinforces group identities: the drow's ambivalence towards other elves and the halflings' Victorian, middle-class values. Finally, we observe that through their dress, women of magic are still often portrayed as sexualised and physical, while male wizards are linked to knowledge and military competence. However, exceptions to these standards and defaults exist, presenting alternatives rather than inconsistencies. The garments and accessories in the *Player's Handbook* illustrations offer a world of possibilities where the core aesthetic is accompanied by options for players to choose from when they design their own characters and their own worlds.

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