

Univerzita Karlova

Pedagogická fakulta

Katedra anglického jazyka a literatury

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

The Language of *Dungeons & Dragons*: A Corpus-Stylistic Analysis

Korpusově-stylistická analýza jazyka hry *Dungeons & Dragons*

Tomáš Košťál

Vedoucí práce: doc. PhDr. Markéta Malá, Ph.D.

Studijní program: Specializace v pedagogice

Studijní obor: Anglický jazyk se zaměřením na vzdělávání – Pedagogika se zaměřením na vzdělávání

2021

Odevzdáním této bakalářské práce na téma Korpusově-stylistická analýza jazyka hry *Dungeons & Dragons* potvrzuji, že jsem ji vypracoval pod vedením vedoucího práce samostatně za použití v práci uvedených pramenů a literatury. Dále potvrzuji, že tato práce nebyla využita k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

V Praze dne 19. 4. 2021

The gratitude I would like to express to doc. Malá for her guidance, motivation and enthusiasm from the beginning of (and even prior to) supervising this thesis to its completion greatly exceeds the limitations of a single language. That said, thank you.

ABSTRAKT

Cílem této práce je popsat jazyk stolní hry na hrdiny (tabletop role-playing game) *Dungeons & Dragons*. Práce vychází z existujících teorií zabývajících se studii textů z pohledu registru, tvorby vyprávění a nástrojů a metod k analýze textů za pomoci korpusů. K analýze hry kombinuje kvantitativní (analýzy n-gramů a slovních seznamů za pomoci konkordancí a kolokací) a kvalitativní metody (subjektivní interpretace vybraných rysů stavěných na osobní zkušenosti s materiálem). Hru *Dungeons & Dragons* reprezentuje korpus, který sestává z 29 po sobě jdoucích epizod internetového pořadu, jenž se věnuje hraní této hry, *Critical Role*. Analýza registru přináší funkční interpretaci situačních i všudypřítomných jazykových rysů hry; v druhé části analýzy se pak zkoumají jazykové prostředky, jimiž se dosahuje účinek vyprávění a míra jakou se na tvorbě vyprávění podílejí jednotlivé druhy účastníků hry. Práce také ukazuje, že některé výsledky se dají zobecnit na celý žánr her na hrdiny, jehož je hra *Dungeons & Dragons* ikonickým příkladem. V poslední řadě tato práce vyhodnocuje, jak vhodné jsou užití analytické metody pro studium daného typu textu.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Dungeons & Dragons, stolní hry na hrdiny, registr, vyprávění, korpusová stylistika

ABSTRACT

The goal of the thesis is to describe the language of the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*. Taking the existing theories pertaining to the study of texts from the perspective of a register, the creation of a narrative and common corpus-assisted tools and methods of analysis as its starting point, the thesis combines corpus-assisted quantitative (n-gram and word-list analyses with the help of concordances and collocations) and qualitative (subjective interpretation of select features based on personal knowledge of the material) methods to analyze a game of *Dungeons & Dragons* represented by a corpus comprising 29 consecutive episodes of an internet show dedicated to playing the game, *Critical Role*. The register analysis gives a functional interpretation of the situational and ubiquitous linguistic features of the game; in the latter part of the analysis, the linguistic means through which narrativity is achieved are examined, as is the degree to which various types of participants contribute to its creation. The thesis also demonstrates that some of its results can be generalized to tabletop role-playing games, of which *Dungeons & Dragons* is an iconic example. Lastly, this paper evaluates the appropriateness of employing these methods of analysis in the study of this type of text.

KEYWORDS

Dungeons & Dragons, tabletop role-playing games, register, narrativity, corpus stylistics

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Tables and Figures.....	7
List of Abbreviations.....	8
Introduction.....	9
Research questions.....	9
Hypotheses.....	9
1 Theoretical background.....	11
1.1 <i>Dungeons & Dragons</i> – the game.....	11
1.1.1 General information.....	11
1.1.2 Before gameplay.....	11
1.1.3 The fantasy world.....	12
1.1.4 Gameplay.....	15
1.2 TRPG as a register.....	18
1.3 TRPG as a narrative.....	20
1.4 Corpus stylistics.....	23
2 Material and method.....	25
2.1 Corpus.....	25
2.2 Method.....	27
3 A linguistic analysis of <i>Dungeons & Dragons</i>	29
3.1 Register analysis.....	29
3.1.1 The situational features of <i>Dungeons & Dragons</i>	29
3.1.2 The linguistic features of <i>Dungeons & Dragons</i> identified on the basis of n-grams and their functional interpretation.....	31
3.2 The fantasy world: starting from a word-list.....	38
3.2.1 Proper nouns.....	40
3.2.2 Space and time.....	41
3.2.3 Common objects and phenomena.....	43
3.2.4 Verbs.....	45
4 Conclusions.....	48
4.1 <i>D&D</i> as a representative of a specific register of TRPGs.....	48
4.2 <i>D&D</i> as a narrative co-created by the GM and the players.....	48
4.3 The applicability of corpus stylistic quantitative methods.....	49
References and sources.....	50
Appendices.....	52
Appendix 1: The composition of the corpus.....	52
Appendix 2: The most frequent 4-word bundles with annotation.....	53
Appendix 3: The most frequent noun lemmata with annotation.....	54
Appendix 4: The most frequent verb lemmata with annotation.....	56

Tables and Figures

Tables

Table 1: Functional classification of the top 52 4-word lexical bundles	31
Table 2: Frames in the 52 most common 4-grams	35
Table 3: Types of speech in the 52 most frequent 4-grams	36

Figures

Figure 1: The functions of the most frequent nouns	39
--	----

List of Abbreviations

AC	armor class
CRPG	single-player computer role-playing game
dx	x-sided die, such as d6 (a six-sided die)
<i>D&D</i>	<i>Dungeons & Dragons</i>
<i>D&D 5e</i>	<i>Dungeons & Dragons, the fifth edition</i>
DC	difficulty class
DM	Dungeon Master
GM	game master
HP	hit points (representation of character health and durability)
NPC	non-player character
PC	player character
RPG	role-playing game
TRPG	tabletop role-playing game

Introduction

In the linguistic tradition to attempt to map and ultimately fully understand all of language, countless text types have been, are and will yet be analyzed by various means. It is the purpose of this paper to take a small step forward within this gargantuan undertaking. Tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) have already received some attention in this respect and it is the goal of this thesis to expand upon it.

Building on both theoretically and practically oriented literature on corpus stylistics, as well as publications dealing with the issue of the narrative, this paper will utilize corpus analysis tools on a portion of a campaign of *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* as an example of TRPGs to help describe them from the perspective of a register and their potential for narrativity while illustrating the general applicability of these methods to this area of language. Specifically, the following research questions will be answered and hypotheses tested.

Research questions

- a) **TRPGs as a register** – What are the observable situational and linguistic features and their functional relations in *D&D* as a representative of the register?
- b) **TRPGs as a narrative** – To what degree does the construction and exploration of a fantasy world in *D&D* display the features of a narrative?
- c) **Methodology of linguistic description of TRPGs** – Are corpus stylistic methods adequate and sufficient to answer the questions above?

Hypotheses

- a) *D&D* (or more generally TRPGs) can be described as a unique register defined by its situational features, such as the addressor and addressees and their relationship, which are expected to be functionally related to specific language structures, such as questions and descriptive language.
- b) *Dungeons & Dragons* can be considered to create a narrative.

c) Quantitative methods are adequate for objectively outlining prominent features of the game, but they must be combined with qualitative ones so as to reach meaningful conclusions about this area of language.

1 Theoretical background

1.1 *Dungeons & Dragons* – the game

1.1.1 General information

Dungeons & Dragons is a popular tabletop role-playing game, which in itself already includes multiple problematic terms evading universally accepted definitions. Zagal and Deterding (2018) amass a quantity of points of view examining what a game is in general, a role-playing game in particular and what role-play as such refers to. Conversely, the focus of this section is a comprehensive overview of what the game of *Dungeons & Dragons* entails.

The fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, commonly abbreviated as *D&D 5e*, is rooted in a trio of core rule books called *Player's Handbook*, *Dungeon Master's Guide* and *Monster Manual*, all published in 2014. Since then, numerous additional books have been published, providing optional rules, supplementary materials, stories and more. Similarly to other role-playing games (RPGs), it is not the game's design for all of its many rules to be rigidly followed, nor does one even need to read all the rules (Wyatt et al. 2014, 4). It is first and foremost “an exercise in collaborative creation (...) in worlds of swords and sorcery” (ibid. 4-5).

According to Wyatt et al. (2014), the gaming process is as follows. A player (of whom there can be one or several up to a potentially unlimited number, though realistically, it is rarely over five or six) creates their character (PC – player character). This is a fantasy adventurer who exists in a world borrowed, modified or built from scratch by another participant in the game called the Dungeon Master¹ (DM), whose role will be examined later.

1.1.2 Before gameplay

Guided by rules but ultimately only limited by one's imagination, a player chooses typically, though not exclusively, a humanoid race for their PC to have – humans, elves and dwarves are among the most common. Each race comes with their unique cultural traits, physique, life span and mechanically relevant boons, such as the ability to see in the dark or in some cases banes, e.g. sunlight sensitivity (Wyatt et al. 2014, 11).

¹ Certain terms will be capitalized throughout this thesis in accordance with the source material.

Having decided on their character's race, the player's next step is to choose a so-called class. This is similar to a profession or a specialty, determining or at least influencing the PC's likely lifestyle and countless combat capabilities. Its class determines the type of weaponry and armor with which it is proficient, its potential access to magical powers as well as their source and the general skills it might have at its disposal. The PC's level dictates how many class features are available to it and in some cases how potent they are. The barbarian, for instance, is a fierce, brute-force driven melee combatant class, while the bard is someone whose musical talents are magical – literally (Wyatt et al. 2014, 11).

Knowing their combination of race and class, the player then determines their PC's so-called ability scores, namely Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom and Charisma. This can be done at random using dice or they can be chosen through other systems (Wyatt et al. 2014, 12-13). These scores are relevant to most tasks which the PC attempts to accomplish and are likely to constitute a noticeable part of the language.

Since the PC's life started far before the beginning of the adventure, players usually create a backstory as well as a set of personality traits, flaws, fears, desires etc. so as to refine what their characters are like. This and all of the above is then recorded in what is referred to as a character sheet. This assembly of sheets of paper serve the purpose of storing all relevant information about the character, including their equipment, their abilities, their personality traits and their story if it exists in a written form (Wyatt et al. 2014, 13-14). Electronic alternatives exist as well. The whole process may vary greatly in length and detail from game to game and from player to player.

1.1.3 The fantasy world

All of this occurs before the actual game starts and there is a quintessential element to character creation: the world in which it lives. This is the domain of the Dungeon Master, who may draw from a plethora of published materials which describe a fantasy world and its various realms and spheres of existence, including its history, gods, curses, magical artifacts, specific locations and mythical creatures which reside there. Alternatively, they might create a completely original world of their own which they cultivate over time, create maps for (or repurpose existing materials in) and whose maintenance may become a hobby in and of itself. Certain (if not all)

elements of player character creation are influenced by the world which the DM intends to present to the players. This process is not directly present in the text analyzed later in this thesis even though it is indirectly observable in the way each character is portrayed.

The prototypical *D&D* world is a pseudo-historical one with people fighting with spears, halberds and bows, wearing predominantly metallic armor, depending on horses and wagons for land transportation (unless they can utilize magical means of travel), with great kingdoms and dynasties and similar features which people associate with medieval history. Since the authors of the rule books did not see historical accuracy as their first priority, nor are the vast majority of players or Dungeon Masters qualified to, the end product of a world tends to be a convenient mixture of various existing time periods combined with fantastical elements creating a world loosely approximating the actual world; laws of physics apply in the fantasy world as far as the DM understands them or chooses to employ them.

The nature of this quasi-medieval fantasy world notably affects the language utilized by both the DM and the players in multiple ways. Given the presence of real historical inventions no longer relevant in a currently living person's life, a number of obsolete words are likely to appear in a game setting. A more avoidable variant are archaisms, which might be added for flavor. In some cases, TRPG participants might favor a high frequency of obsolete words and archaisms in their speech, possibly as a means of further increasing the feeling of authenticity of the fantasy world which they imagine to be inhabiting.

Another iconic linguistically pertinent feature are fictional languages and place names. The issue of the former can be and often is solved by remarking what language one is speaking and then communicating the message in whatever language the participants normally use – for the purposes of this thesis, English. A player might say, “‘Hi there!’, I say in Common² and then I switch to Gnomish and say, ‘You still owe me twenty gold pieces!’” However, when describing someone speaking a language a PC does not understand, one – typically a DM – might opt to use a sequence of fabricated nonsensical expressions in accordance with what the language is roughly meant to sound like rather than simply stating the creature says something the PC does not

² “Common” is a simplified take on a global lingua franca within *D&D* (and similar fantasy settings) as “the language of humans.”

understand (in the literary spirit of showing rather than telling). A middle ground can be reached by equating a fantasy language with a real-life one, such as having “Zemnian” as a tongue spoken in part of the kingdom and using Modern German instead³. Salient complications stemming from the usage of fantasy names include problematic spelling and potential incomprehensibility when produced in connection with obeying unfamiliar grammatical and phonological rules. Their employment, on the other hand, helps with immersion into the game and can be expected to be found in most gameplays.

When it comes to an individual PC’s speech, a tendency to incorporate accents or even dialects and especially abnormal voices is evident. In some cases, it is influenced by regional factors much like in the real world, but on top of that, in a fantasy world, it might be supplemented or replaced by the PC’s race or chosen entirely at random (probably based on the player’s own capabilities and preferences). With that in mind, a propensity towards portraying dwarves as speaking with a Scottish accent and inhabitants of the fictional realm of Barovia with a thick eastern European accent shows similarities between otherwise unconnected groups of players. In the case of the show whose textual analysis is the main aim of this paper, the players implement a Texan drawl, a noticeably somewhat inconsistent Irish accent, a non-specific Slavic accent, and a progressively thicker German accent, including limited German vocabulary, not to mention the plethora of voices and accents the DM alone utilizes to bring his non-player characters (NPCs) to life.

The features described above are emblematic of two of the main three components of discourse implemented in a *D&D* session: narration (in terms of lexis used) and character dialogue (with regard to speech patterns), while it is meant to be perfectly immaterial to the third: procedural instructions related to the game mechanics (almost exclusively given by the DM) and the responses to them. Even under these circumstances, however, some players may choose to “stay in character” and respond to instructions as well as narrate their intended courses of action in their PC’s accent, never compromising its general manner of speech for the duration of the session even though it is not to be considered in-character speech.

³ This is an example from the game analyzed in this thesis.

1.1.4 Gameplay

When everybody feels reasonably well prepared, the game proper can commence at last (Wyatt et al. 2014, 15). A group of players together with the DM will traditionally sit around a table. Within the game setting analyzed later in this thesis, a very large table upon which there are materials relevant to the content of some of the discourse, i.e. maps, notes and character backstories. A socially distanced version of this is possible since there is technically no need for multiple people to interact with the same objects, with the exception of those who require visual aids to assist their imagination, such as battle maps to keep track of where everybody is in a tense situation. Connecting over the internet is another option which the format of the game allows comfortably. The group examined occasionally opts for a hybrid setting of one of the players joining over the internet while the rest are present in person.

Wyatt et al. (2014, 6) offer a simple summary of the procedure of gameplay: the DM outlines the surroundings – what the PCs (together as a whole referred to as a party) see, hear, smell, or experience in any way; the players will then describe their intended courses of action (either individually or as a unit) and occasionally involving chance, the DM will then narrate the success, failure or unforeseen outcomes of their actions. A potential scenario is that as the party is walking through a thick forest, the DM mentions that some of the PCs can smell smoke. As they find their way into a clearing, the DM describes a tree house on fire, at the end of which a small boy in stained clothes is looking down in tears as he is visibly having a harder time to breathe with each additional second. As they look around, they notice a decrepit ladder lying on the ground. A player decides their character will attempt to lift the ladder and position it by the tree house in order to be able to climb up and save the child. The DM then asks them to roll a d20 (a twenty-sided die used in *D&D* for determining outcomes of most actions) and add their Dexterity modifier to see whether the PC responds quickly enough and prevents its own fall as one of the rungs breaks under its foot.

There is no ultimate victory or defeat in *D&D*, only individual stories with (or without) their own endings often leading to more stories or so-called side quests. *Player's Handbook* does not lie when it says, “if everyone had a good time and created a memorable story, they all win” (Wyatt et al. 2014, 5). This never-really-ending story is called a campaign. It can be as short as a

single session or it can last years and stretch over hundreds of (often weekly) sessions. A campaign is likely to end in one of three ways: all PCs die, the players are no longer able or willing to continue, or a satisfying enough point in the story is reached leading either to a mutual agreement or the DM's unilateral decision to end it.

The Dungeon Master is meant to be the ultimate authority in any campaign. They control the vast majority of the fantasy world, wherefore they understand it the best. They decide what happens (Wyatt et al. 2014, 6). Furthermore, they prototypically either have the most extensive knowledge of the originally intended rules or their own house rules which they choose to apply instead. They are also required to do by far the most out-of-game preparation and are expected to remember (or record) everything that occurs during the adventure so as to retain their informational supremacy. This is likely to be reflected in any exchange between a player and their DM.

The majority of the gameplay will revolve around one of the three pillars of adventure: exploration, social interaction and combat (Wyatt et al. 2014, 8). Time frequently works differently in each flavor of gameplay. In exploration, one might gloss over a two-week in-game journey with a handful of quick remarks over a few minutes of real time. Social interactions are likely to be on a 1:1 scale of in-game to real time. In combat, on the other hand, time slows down, often spreading less than a minute worth of events the characters experience into well over an hour of the players' time. This is largely due to the fact that *D&D* combat is a turn-based strategy with strict rules (all of which can be broken if it suits the DM), where everybody gets a turn each round of combat, which takes six seconds in the game world, but might take several minutes in the actual world especially to indecisive players or those whose characters can do absurd numbers of activities.

There are a number of game mechanics occurring in any *D&D* game and they all prototypically include dice, specifically the d20. Whenever a player is required (by the DM) to make an **ability check** to see if their character succeeds at the task it has elected to undertake, such as jumping across a moderately wide canyon (Wyatt et al. 2014, chapter 7), an **attack role**⁴ when it is attempting to land a strike (magical or otherwise) against someone or something (ibid.

⁴ "Making an attack role" is a collocation used in the source material, such as Wyatt (2014, 205).

chapter 9) or a **saving throw** as the character is exposed to a harsh environment or a creature attempting to affect it somehow, for instance a dragon unleashing its fire breath in the PC's direction as the character desperately struggles to dodge out of the way (ibid. chapter 7), the d20 roll is combined with their character's standard ability relevant to the check, attack or save. A required number is determined prior to the roll, whether through the **Difficulty Class (DC)** for the sake of ability checks and saving throws or **Armor Class (AC)** for attack rolls. In the fire-breathing young red dragon situation, a DC 17 Dexterity saving throw might be necessary in order to avoid the brunt of the intolerably hot cone of fire so if the elf rogue PC attempting to save itself has a +8 to Dexterity saving throws due to its dexterous nature in combination with the fact that it happens to be good at dodging physical threats coming its way, the player needs to roll at least a 9 on the d20 in order to be successful in this situation. If, however, the same breath targets a clumsy dwarf paladin in full plate armor with a -1 to Dexterity saving throws, that player needs to roll at least an 18 on the die to get the total needed to succeed. At times, a considerable amount of math is involved in playing the game and is therefore represented in the discourse.

There are other types of dice completing the iconic set associated with many tabletop role-playing games in general and with *Dungeons & Dragons* in particular. The d4, d6, d8, d10 and d12 are used primarily for determining the damage caused by individual attacks and abilities or spells, and the so-called d100 (which is a combination of two ten-sided dice rolled together, one of which determines tens and the other ones) for the purposes of percentages in situations where the d20 is not exact enough. Objects and creatures in *D&D* have **hit points (HP)** roughly illustrating how difficult it is to destroy or kill them (Wyatt et al. 2014, 6).

Playing *D&D* can be an exercise in social skills, eloquence, problem solving, improvisation, imagination, acting, focus, physics, chemistry, survival know-how, game rules, note taking, simple addition and subtraction or all of the above and much more, all of which is present in the text under scrutiny later in this thesis.

1.2 TRPG as a register

Following Biber and Conrad (2009, 31), a register can be defined as “a language variety associated with both a particular situation of use and with pervasive linguistic features that serve important functions within that situation of use”. This definition is quite flexible and allows for a particular type of text to be its own register or a subregister of a more general text type. This can be illustrated on the terms RPG and TRPG. Given the wide variety of media relevant to role-playing games (RPGs), such as computers, scripted games and tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs), strictly textual common ground would be difficult to describe accurately in terms of their linguistic features, their functions and the situational contexts in which they occur, as the three elements necessary for the study of a text from the perspective of a register (Biber and Conrad 2009, 6). If any linguistic features were shared, they would probably pertain to the use of personal pronouns. When creating a fictional character and playing as it, a player will often be addressed as *you* by the game. TRPGs could then be described as a subregister of RPGs, focusing on how the linguistic features of the general register are applied in this specific subregister.

Alternatively, TRPGs could be set as the register of interest, allowing for a much more specialized sample of texts to begin the analysis. This is where clear similarities among various TRPGs can probably be seen much more easily in terms of linguistic features used and the functions they have. The majority of TRPGs are heavily inspired by *D&D* if for no other reason than because *D&D* was the first game created that would be described as a TRPG from today’s perspective (Cover 2010, 166). The description given in Section 1.1. summarizing the gameplay of *Dungeons & Dragons* applies to TRPGs in general in many respects. A high degree of interactiveness is expected where players directly affect the fantasy reality, since this is what distinguishes the game genre from reading a novel, for instance. A number of players are typically present together with a game master⁵ (GM) who controls many if not all aspects of the game, including organization, education, guidance, adherence to and enforcement of the rules, social leadership and other aspects of being the designated authority, all of which is certain to be reflected in the linguistic features of the GM’s speech and the way the players communicate with the GM.

⁵ Multiple terms exist for the position of a game controller, supervisor, rule enforcer, etc. across various TRPGs, “game master” being a relatively universal one.

According to Biber and Conrad (2009, 6), linguistic features found in any text are there for a reason – to fulfill a function. Although there are certainly differences among individual TRPGs depending on the setting, the genre, the participants and their age, experience, expectations, etc., many functions will be shared. The players will always cooperate with other players, inform the GM of what they wish to do, etc. and the GM will for instance always communicate information to the players since they rely on the GM as their sole source of what is happening in the game at any given moment.

Situational context will typically be predictable as well. People, at least some of whom know each other in advance, will meet in an organized social gathering for the purpose of playing a game – one which was probably chosen prior to the gathering. They are likely to be seated for most of the meeting, typically in one room, around one table as the name of the genre suggests. They will devote a dominant portion of their time, attention and most importantly discourse to the game even though they will probably be unable to resist an occasional out-of-game exchange. They are likely to experience some emotions on account of the game, whose nature will depend both on the genre of the game in general and the current passage in particular. As stated above, there is a popular alternative – especially lately – of playing online, which is certain to bring additional linguistic features into the mix and could potentially warrant a separate register.

On the whole, the TRPG register is likely to share linguistic and situational features with several other registers and can be seen to be a combination thereof, especially: spoken dialogue, novels (fiction) and manuals (cf. Jara and Torner 2018, 265-282). Much like in any informal conversation, there will be a lot of first and second person personal pronouns, questions, features of unprepared speech, such as incomplete sentences, multiple people speaking simultaneously, miscommunication, etc. (cf. Biber et al. 1999, 1038 ff. and Biber and Conrad 2009, 88-92). A parallel to a novel can be seen in that there will be long passages of narration and description, characterised, among other linguistic features, by “a high frequency of first and third person pronouns [...], past tense verbs [...], adverbials of time, markers of personal stance” (Biber and Conrad 2009, 135). A noticeable portion of the language used will be dedicated to communicating what must happen using precise terminology and references to given rules

reminiscent to a manual. One or more of the examples above can also be used to distinguish the TRPG from any one specific register mentioned.

Dungeons & Dragons can be examined as a further specified register or a subregister of TRPGs. With its unique terminology and rules, distinguishing it from other tabletop role-playing games on the level of specific linguistic features would be a fairly simple task. Even more discrete registers within *D&D* could be established based on the edition played, participants (e.g. veteran players, beginners or actors) or the focus of the game (e.g. exploration, combat, role-play). For the purposes of this paper, the focal point is set on *D&D 5e* in general as a representative of the TRPG register.

1.3 TRPG as a narrative

This section will be based on Cover (2010) and her definition of TRPG as “a type of game/game system that involves collaboration between a small group of players and a game master through face-to-face social activity with the purpose of creating a narrative experience” (ibid. 168). Throughout the book, Cover rejects previous efforts to either classify RPGs as narratives or claim they are not narratives in absolute terms and instead focuses on the participants having a narrative experience, even if, as she remarks, not every session will be successful in creating it (ibid. 172; cf. a similar approach to the narrative as “a pervasive activity that people use to make sense of themselves and their surrounding world” in Page 2015, 439). In order to closely examine the means through which a narrative experience is created on a textual level, Cover (2010, 94) proposes a system of levels of narrativity. This will be utilized in the corpus-assisted analysis later in this thesis.

All speech occurring during the game can be characterized as pertaining to one of the three frames – the narrative frame, the game frame and the social frame – in accordance with how directly it affects the creation of the narrative which will probably remain in the players’ memories after the session is over. The least amount of narrativity can be seen in the social frame, which comprises discussions about the rules, out-of-character planning, out-of-game commentary about the game, the players’ feelings about it and cultural references (Cover 2010, 96-98). A higher degree of narrativity, which goes hand in hand with a more direct impact on the gameplay,

is generated by the game frame. The players' articulated intentions as to what they want their characters to do, so-called narrative suggestions, belong in the game frame due to the inherent necessity for the GM to confirm their success in the game. A closely related type of speech in the game frame is referred to as dice rolls, which is the mechanical representation of suggested actions (ibid. 99-101). The narrative frame represents the highest level of narrativity and consists of in-character⁶ speech and narrative speech (ibid. 101-105).

Within this system, the umbrella term "narrative speech" in the narrative frame is used to refer to both actual narration of events in clear cause-and-effect sequences and simple description of the surroundings, which in and of itself would not be considered narration by most definitions due to the lack of any events happening. However, Cover (2010, 81-82) illustrates the narrative qualities of the description in the way it is often executed – by deliberately choosing the order in which a scene is gradually uncovered, the GM can hint at whatever events previously transpired so as to leave the evidence and markings as described with a degree of transparency. Given the relative brevity of these passages (in comparison to descriptive passages in some novels, for instance) as well as the immersive nature they tend to have due to the GM speaking directly to the players as though they were characters, it could be argued that even these parts of text directly contribute to the overall perception of narrativity.

There is a greatly varied ratio of predetermination and space for selection or even creation of one's own imagined path within the game across the various existing genres and media, as analyzed by Cover (2010). The medium of TRPGs has the potential to provide considerable freedom, meaning that players make unpredictable choices which are then rewarded or punished in original ways by their GM, who is in charge of assessing and enacting the consequences of what the players elect for their PCs to do.

The aspect of narrative agency serves as a distinction between TRPGs and, for instance, single-player computer role-playing games (CRPGs), which means that the players themselves play a crucial role in building the final narrative of the game in which they are participating (Cover 2010, 18). A significant part of the discourse of each TRPG session consists of players describing their characters' intended courses of action to the GM, who then evaluates them and

⁶ The exact term used by Cover is *in-characters speech*.

states what the result will be, often incorporating chance in the decision process in the form of a die roll. This in and of itself can be as restrictive as the GM providing a choice between going left or right upon encountering a fork in a tunnel, for both of which eventualities the GM is probably prepared. Alternatively, the players might decide to return the way they have come from, start digging a tunnelway of their own, collapsing the tunnel or make any number of non-established impromptu endeavors, presumably placing the GM in an unprepared position where improvisation is likely to ensue.

The element of preparedness versus cooperative improvisation is crucial to TRPGs. Equivalent to improvised theater, all participants are collectively responsible for the progression of the story (Landert 2020, 69). Not only do players get to affect the story, they are expected to. When applying the traditional requirement of narration having a clear narrator or narrators and narratees, it is clear that these roles shift constantly during a session. The most obvious layout is when the GM narrates the story to a specific player or even more typically the whole group. However, since Cover also allows players to participate in the narrative frame, that implies they become the narrators for the benefit of the GM as well as the rest of the players as the narratees.

Although the majority of exchanges are usually improvised, there can be occasional scripted passages prepared in advance which the GM intends to use verbatim (such as the description of a crypt taken directly from printed materials or a part of a conversation the PCs are meant to overhear). The GM will be left with a portion of their preparation completely unused, especially if they are prepared for multiple potential routes the PCs can take (of which they take one at most). This displays the narrative potential of a TRPG world, which is disproportionately large to what is explored by and made known to the players (Cover 2010, 82). The world prepared by a game master is likely to contain numerous locations which the players end up avoiding, whereby their narrative potential remains unfulfilled. Conversely, players are responsible for the creation of narrative by exploring areas and thereby forcing the GM to bring them into existence. The distinction between prepared and improvised details is effectively irrelevant to the players and in case of the corpus analyzed in this thesis, often impossible to ascertain.

1.4 Corpus stylistics

Computer-assisted methods have the potential to identify linguistic patterns in large texts and collections thereof and thus provide insights which would be otherwise unattainable (Stubbs 2014, 61). Recently, corpus methods have been increasingly applied to the study of literary texts, giving rise to corpus stylistics, i.e. “the study of literary texts that employs corpus-linguistic methods to support the analysis of textual meanings and the interpretation of texts” (Mahlberg 2015, 346). It is the focus on specific meanings in texts that distinguishes corpus stylistics both from general corpus linguistics and purely computational stylistics, with which it shares its quantitative methods. In corpus stylistics, however, quantitative methods should optimally be employed in combination with qualitative ones to generate relevant analyses of the texts under scrutiny, whether it be a single work (or a small part thereof), a collection of works by the same author or a specific genre from a target period. These texts or corpora are then typically compared to larger reference corpora in order to either analyze individual items of interest (such as the significance of an expression used in a poem) or to observe a statistically significant frequency of words or n-grams (strings of n words, where n is typically between 2 and 6) when compared to the reference corpus. On a more rudimentary level, a text or a corpus large enough to validate the use of a computer-assisted analysis can be used on its own to objectively observe features which are subjectively expected to be significant, which is the procedure utilized in this thesis, as elaborated in Section 2.2.

Generally, the quantitative corpus-stylistic methods rely on “the standard functionalities offered by concordance packages to retrieve frequencies, study words in the form of concordances, generate collocations [...], retrieve clusters [...], and perform key comparisons” (Mahlberg 2015, 355). These methods can provide an initial step or a “way in” to the literary texts under scrutiny (ibid. 356). For instance, one could observe the frequent usage of certain expressions throughout a novel and find evidence of symbolism. Alternatively, an example of intertextuality could be confirmed by locating a word in the literary text which is infrequent in general English of the relevant time period and discover it being frequently used in a different work from centuries before. It could also be used to disambiguate the implications of the use of a certain word by an author by searching a corpus of all their works to see if it is used elsewhere and in what context (Stubbs 2014, 50). One might simply search for the most frequent verbs in a

text to see what the most typical activities discussed are, which once again is the course of action taken in this thesis.

The most iconic technique is a concordance – the identification of frequently used lexical items or types of items in certain positions either to the left or to the right of a selected word, lemma or n-gram. It can point a researcher in the right direction when determining what to examine in more detail (Stubbs 2014, 50-51). This can be useful for instance when comparing the types of verbs used after specific characters in a play to differentiate between them or when quickly identifying the context in which certain phrases tend to occur.

In a morphologically tagged corpus or a syntactically parsed one, one can also search for parts of speech or abstract syntactic patterns (ibid. 53-54). Specific annotation can be added in the texts to meet the needs of a particular research task, such as the identification of types of speech and thought presentation in the literary work (Mahlberg 2015, 353).

Another aspect of a text can be analyzed by examining the number of types, tokens and their ratio – tokens being the individual occurrences of words in the text and types being unique words. For instance, the expression “back to back” consists of three word-tokens but only two word-types due to the repetition of one of the types. The complexity of a text (especially a short one) can be perceived by counting the type-token ratio.

The final term to be introduced here are keywords, which are useful when identifying the theme of a text, a text part or perhaps the speech of a character (Stubbs 2014, 55). Prominent words, especially those used more frequently in the focus corpus (the one examined) than in a reference corpus, can be interpreted as the backbone of that text and illustrate its recurring themes. Multiple reference corpora can be used in any comparison (ibid. 56) to distinguish between areas of language use and to draw conclusions from that.

While corpus methods may represent an initial step in the analysis of the literary text (cf. Mahlberg 2014, 378-392), their application is limited: “Effects that readers perceive may not clearly be linked to countable features. Hence, it is important to combine corpus methods with other approaches to the effects of texts” (Mahlberg 2015, 357).

2 Material and method

2.1 Corpus

There has been a large market for game playthroughs being streamed and uploaded online for the past several years and *D&D* is one such game. Platforms such as twitch.tv and youtube.com house numerous individual shows and among them, few are remotely as popular as *Critical Role*. It is pertinent to remark that this ensemble's campaign is not an average representation of the game, but rather a groundbreaking example of inspiration to many, whether in a positive way as described by Kenreck (2017) and Whitten (2020) or negative as explained by Girdwood (2019). Its influential nature will be reflected in the analysis.

In order to be able to analyze the language of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the acquisition of a large quantity of homogenous written text was a quintessential first step. Out of the many *D&D* streams, only *Critical Role* appears to already exist in a transcribed form, most episodes having been transcribed by a fan-based team CR Transcript, as explained in an interview published by Chris Lockey on *Critical Role*'s website⁷. The transcriptions analyzed in this thesis are all produced by CR Transcript. Twenty-nine such transcribed episodes of over 110 hours of speech in total (3-5 hours/episode) comprise the 988,776-word-token⁸ corpus which will be the subject of analysis in this paper. The details of its compilation will be described in Section 2.2. The corpus was part-of-speech tagged using the English TreeTagger PoS tagset.

Some specificities of the texts include the names of who is speaking at all times, as not including them was not an option for the team, given the presence of 7-8 speakers each episode (Lockey 2020). The names of the permanent cast members (e.g. *LIAM* in ex. 1 in Chapter 3) will therefore constitute a significant portion of the corpus, which will be taken into consideration during the analysis. Another relevant point to be made is the frequent presence of nonsense words and fabricated proper nouns (such as the city of *Zadash*, *Ulog* the dwarf, and the position of *High-Richter*), whose spelling was confirmed by Matthew Mercer, their creator and Dungeon Master for *Critical Role*, according to their source⁹. A pertinent disclaimer must be echoed,

⁷ <https://critrole.com/> (Accessed 15 April 2021)

⁸ The corpus consists of 1,305,046 total tokens including non-words.

⁹ <https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/transcripts> (Accessed 10 April 2021)

namely that the transcripts are not verbatim for practical reasons including crosstalk¹⁰ and presumed viewer reading speed (Lockey 2020). Furthermore, there are occasional inconsistencies between transcripts in terms of punctuation. Last but not least, the texts include an equivalent of stage directions indicating the manner in which some lines were originally said and non-verbal noises, such as the presence of laughter (both in ex. 5), as well as shouting and music, which will also be considered during the analysis, including the likelihood of further inconsistencies in this area as well.

The structure of each episode follows a predictable pattern: a greeting from the DM is extended before sponsor-related advertising is performed, which in turn is followed by various announcements regarding *Critical Role* program scheduling and merchandise. This pregame section is concluded by a prerecorded video clip. Only then does the game itself commence with a summary of the events of the previous session. The game proper is always divided into two parts which are separated by a short break. The end of the session is decided by the DM and may be briefly followed by out-of-character comments and banter before the DM offers a goodbye and the episode comes to an end. Minor alterations were made to the downloaded text, specifically, everything prior to the summary of the preceding episode was removed due to its irrelevance to the actual game, as was the note signaling that a break occurs and ones describing non-verbal phenomena (especially music) transpiring after the DM's last word. Everything else was retained, including occasional out-of-character banter throughout the session. The presence of such discourse is unlikely to affect the analysis to any noticeable degree and thus its insignificance outweighed the inconvenience connected to its potential localization and removal. Besides, such dialogue is an inseparable part of the TRPG gaming experience.

In order to best capture the nature of a *D&D* game, the beginning of the second campaign was chosen for these reasons: every *D&D* campaign has a beginning. Not all of them have an end, nor do they have to last very long. As stated above, the first campaign of *Critical Role* began to be recorded long after the game itself commenced in a home environment. The start of the second campaign, which does feature a true beginning of a narrative, was then chosen as a necessary component. Based on that, the first campaign was wholly excluded so as to avoid

¹⁰ The term is used to mean multiple people speaking over each other at the same time.

combining two sets of proper nouns. With that priority in mind, a set of complete sequential sessions was elected over a set of random excerpts to reflect the features of a continuous story told from the beginning over dozens of hours.

2.2 Method

The textual material described above was downloaded in the *MS Word* .docx format on March 4, 2021 and each episode was saved separately. With the knowledge of the structure of each episode, the initial point of each game session was located using the ctrl+F function and certain parts were simply deleted as per section 2.1. A list was kept of the number, name and length of each episode as well as the web address from which it was downloaded (Appendix 1). The entirety of the 29 episodes were uploaded to *Sketch Engine*¹¹ as a corpus.

Sketch Engine was chosen as the primary analysis tool due to its accessibility and wide range of easy-to-use functions, such as expandable concordance lines and automatic word class tagging; not only does it provide free access for university students and teachers, it does so online without the need to download anything, allowing for comfortable work from multiple devices. This service is provided for corpora of up to one million word-tokens, which was found sufficient and is the reason for the corpus size. Additional software utilized comprised *Google Spreadsheets* and *Microsoft Excel*.

Following the approaches commonly adopted in corpus stylistics, the analysis of *D&D* presented in Chapter 3 relies on the identification of frequent multi-word units as its starting point. Their importance is widely recognized as the building blocks of language, constituting up to 80% of conversation (Conrad and Biber 2005, 56-57). The first search performed pertained to n-grams, ignoring the differences between capitalized letters (such as at the beginning and in the middle of a sentence). Out of potential n-gram sizes to be chosen from, 4-grams were found to be optimal as the perfect balance of being long enough to indicate meaning while still reaching relevant absolute frequencies (cf. Conrad and Biber 2005). Since the 50th most frequent 4-gram had the same absolute frequency (71) as the following two, it was the top 52 items on the list that formed the basis for further analysis. Determining the cut-off point of 71 occurrences in the corpus, the search was redone in order for nothing after that to appear on the list. It was then

¹¹ <https://www.sketchengine.eu/>

downloaded into an *MS Excel*-readable format, in which file it was then annotated using Conrad and Biber (2005) and Cover (2010) as models (Appendix 2).

Annotating some 4-grams was a straightforward process based on the two publications and personal knowledge of *Critical Role* and *D&D* while others required context. In order to discover it, the *Sketch Engine* function of concordance lines was utilized. The lines were expanded at times if necessary and 40 concordance lines were thus typically examined to determine the standard function(s) of the 4-gram in question. The minimum for acknowledging a function as standard enough for a 4-gram was determined to be 10%; in other words, it needed to be represented in at least 4 out of the 40 examined concordance lines, which had been chosen at random before their examination.

Further searches were accomplished via the *Sketch Engine* Wordlist function and the category of interest was set to be words (including non-words to search for all tokens), noun lemmata (Appendix 3) and verb lemmata (Appendix 4; each in a separate search following the principles outlined in the previous paragraph). Both *MS Excel* and *Google Spreadsheets* were used to organize the items examined, sort them using the filter function and calculate any percentages provided in this paper. At one point, a Wordlist search was made for all words starting from “can” with the sole intention to locate the modal verb *can*, which was suspiciously absent from the most frequent verb list. Particular attention was given to the analysis of collocates.

3 A linguistic analysis of *Dungeons & Dragons*

3.1 Register analysis

This chapter will be devoted to the description of the situational features of the campaign introduced in Chapter 2. It will then apply them to the interpretation of frequent bundles used in the game.

3.1.1 The situational features of *Dungeons & Dragons*

This section will provide the identification and description of situational characteristics that define the specific register of *Critical Role D&D* as the common way to start a register analysis (Biber and Conrad 2009, 39). Specifically, the participants will be listed, the relations between them briefly discussed, the channel through which they communicate described, production circumstances outlined, the setting painted, their communicative purposes relayed and the topic given an account of (ibid. 40).

The **participants** comprise the cast of eight “nerdy-ass voice actors,” as they never fail to refer to themselves at the beginning of each episode, crew members and thousands of on-lookers in the form of stream and video viewers (ibid. 41). The show would logically have ceased to exist by now were it not for the interest of the on-lookers, which in and of itself makes them a crucial part of the program, but they also influence some of its specific aspects – most obviously advertising on top of probably providing a source of motivation for the cast members to give the high-quality performances to which the audience is accustomed. The crew is another intended group of addressees for similar reasons a theater crew would be. Unlike them, however, any of the 8 cast members can become addressors virtually at any time, and the remaining seven are typically all addressees for that instance of speech, unless a deliberately secret message is hidden from some of the addressees (sometimes even the viewers), such as in the form of a whisper. The degree of participation of the DM and the players will be examined later in the Proper nouns section. They frequently have significantly different background knowledge of the game world, which is best illustrated in Section 1.1, as is the development of (especially the DM’s) knowledge availability throughout the game.

One key aspect of the **relations** of the participants is the level of interactiveness they experience (Biber and Conrad 2009, 42); although typically, the on-lookers and the crew members get virtually none, sometimes one of the cast members follows their chat, which may rarely even be mentioned during the show. Conversely, the cast members effectively experience all interactiveness, like in a conversation, except for the times when a DM is discussing something with one specific player, to which discussion others are often not allowed to contribute. As for their personal relationships, although there are two marriages and various leadership positions within the company built around this show, the cast practically never even hints at being anything other than good friends (during the program); the balance of power lies strictly on the DM-player level. This being their second campaign together, they have known each other at least from the beginning of the first campaign, whose first episode was aired roughly three years before the beginning of the second campaign; however, the first campaign started approximately a year prior to the beginning of the show. Only two of them were experienced *D&D* players at the time, the rest often exhibiting incomplete or incorrect understanding of the rules on the show (even after playing for years), proving not only the claim in *Player's Handbook* that perfect memorization of the complete set of rules is not a prerequisite for enjoying the game (Wyatt et al. 2014, 4), but also that one can be a fantastic player without it.

Even though the **channel** through which the participants primarily experience the game is speech, its transcribed and therefore not verbatim version is the basis for this analysis. For the cast, in-person face-to-face conversation is the most common, while the viewers watch the performance on screens – no live studio audience is present. Due to the prevalent exclusion of over-a-computer conversation, very few instances of miscommunication occur despite the fact that their exchanges are unscripted and happening in real time (them being trained actors helps). The addressees' circumstances for comprehension as part of the **production circumstances** vary somewhat: the cast and crew cannot affect it for themselves; real-time viewers can at least manipulate the volume; viewers of the recorded sessions, however, can alter the speed, they can turn captions on/off and pause and skip parts of the video to maximize their comprehension (Biber and Conrad 2009, 43-44). The only detail necessary to add in regards to the physical **setting** of the program is that it is a privately owned studio in a publicly inaccessible building full

of whatever is necessary for the production of the show. No direct censorship is implemented anywhere in the process.

The general **communicative purpose** of the addressors is to entertain each other, themselves and the audience (probably in this order). Considering the fact that the active participants play a fantasy game, there is a very little degree of factuality – the viewer is not expected to finish watching the episode feeling informed, with one occasional exception: perhaps the most obvious example of a specific factual communicative purpose is the discussion of the rules of the game. Occasionally, expressions of stance can be present when the players communicate their feelings about the game or their uncertainty regarding the rules (ibid. 45-46). Finally, the **topic** of their speech could be characterised as fantasy (ibid. 46-47).

3.1.2 The linguistic features of *Dungeons & Dragons* identified on the basis of n-grams and their functional interpretation

Organized by frequency in the focus corpus, the top 52 4-grams were annotated (Appendix 2) in terms of their function as per Conrad and Biber (2005) as either Stance Expressions¹² (S), Discourse Organizers (D), Referential Expressions (R) or Special Conversational Functions (SCF). The distribution of functions can be seen in Table 1. The high frequency of stance-related bundles (Conrad and Biber 2005) reveals the notably interactional nature of the discourse.

Particularly prominent are expressions illustrating lack of information about, uncertainty over and inquiry into other people's intentions, all of which point to the collaborative aspect of the game. This need to understand each other in order to accomplish their goals (whether the general goal of having fun or some specific story-related goals) can be seen in the bundles: *I don't know, I don't think, do you want to, if you want to, don't know what, don't know if, you want to do, are you going to, you don't know, you don't have* and *what are you doing*. The importance of seeking information can be seen in the fact that out of the total intended end-of-sentence punctuation marks (full stops, question marks and exclamation points), the question mark was used in 16.5% of the cases, proving a relatively high frequency of interrogative sentences and implying a comparably high number of questions.

¹² The terms are capitalized in accordance with the publication from which they are taken.

By far the most frequent 4-gram in the corpus, *I don't know*, can be uttered by a player expressing their gap in knowledge or their character doing the same, though not always sincerely, often as a response to a question. It is frequently a separate sentence or it is followed by a nominal content clause or an object expressed by a nominal phrase. Besides that, it is commonly utilized as a discourse marker. On top of being syntactically flexible, it is able to express and perhaps amplify various emotional tones ranging from humor, to exasperation to desperation and it very well reflects the emotional roller-coaster that this program can be (for the viewers and active participants alike).

Expressing predictions and personal or impersonal PC and NPC intentions via first or third person statements respectively (to accomplish or avoid something) is nearly as well represented in the phraseology examined: *going to be a, is going to be, I would like to, don't want to, I don't want, going to take a, I was going to, going to try and, I am going to and going to go ahead*. What this demonstrates is how much of the language is invested in expressing (mostly immediate) future. Even *I was going to* is most commonly used as a tentative way of prefacing one's statements regarding their intentions.

Table 1: Functional classification of the top 52 4-word lexical bundles

Function	Total	Percentage
Stance Expressions	20	38.5%
Discourse Organizers	14	26.9%
Referential Expressions	13	25.0%
Special Conversational Functions	1	1.9%
Stance Expressions / Discourse Organizers	3	5.8%
Discourse Organizers / Referential Expressions	1	1.9%
Total	52	100%

An additional only slightly altered annotation by Cover (2010, 94) was added in order to capture the areas of language closely associated with the unique nature of the language of *Dungeons & Dragons*, namely the distinction into frames and types of speech. Within the narrative frame (N), Cover distinguishes between narrative speech (nasp) and in-character speech

(i); the game frame (G) is then split between dice rolls (d) and narrative suggestions (nasu) and the social frame (S) is realized either by narrative planning speech (napl) or off-record speech (o). This annotation was designed to reflect the complex makeup of the game in terms of who speaks to whom and why. Individual categories will now be described.

The term in-character speech is used to refer to anything PCs and NPCs say in game. Occasionally it might be challenging to distinguish among the utterances of the players speaking as, for and about their characters (or expressing their own feelings and thoughts). However, whenever it was plausible to assume a character might be speaking, the utterance was annotated as such (ex. 1). This includes planning the groups' actions in a forthcoming battle or when deciding what to do next, where the line between the players and the PCs may often seem particularly thin (ex. 2).

- (1) LIAM: Because that is an extra-dimensional pocket.
LAURA: Yes.
LIAM: And I *don't know what*¹³ this is, and I am worried that it could potentially create -
- (2) SAM: We need to plan the ambush.
MARISHA: We need to plan.
SAM: We don't have a cart to block the road with.
MARISA (sic): We don't have a cleric who can Hold Person¹⁴.

Narrative speech refers to any text directly relevant to the gameplay when no character is speaking. It comprises sensory descriptions (ex. 3), true narrative passages (ex. 4), as well as information about the knowledgeability of particular characters (line 5 in ex. 5). Furthermore, any expression of the players' intentions was determined to be a part of this area, so long as no further confirmation by the DM is (expected to be) necessary, nor is a dice roll (line 1 in ex. 5).

- (3) TALIESIN: Did we find mulled wine? Did we find a wine vendor?

¹³ Italics signify the most frequent 4-grams within the examples.

¹⁴ Hold Person is the name of a spell from the primary manual (Wyatt et al. 2014, 251), making the exact phrasing difficult to justify for purely in-character speech.

- MATT: Oh yeah. No, especially with it so cold outside, *you can see there* were two different carts that had small, pot-heated, basic alcohol and ciders.
- (4) MATT: [...] As you guys walk, *you watch as the* horned tiefling you had approached earlier slowly saunters up to your side, you recognizing these individuals you had spoken with earlier.
- (5) TALIESIN: [...] *I'm going to* walk over and dampen my hand on the water on his chest really quickly and (sniffing).
- MATT: It's briny and salty.
- TALIESIN: Huh.
- SAM: Why are you drinking salt water?
- TALIESIN: *You don't know* that.
- SAM: Oh. (in Sam's voice) Why are you drinking salt water?
(laughter)

Compared to the player's temporary autonomy in example 5, example 6 illustrates more standard narrative suggestions, which require a roll of the dice to determine how exactly they are realized in the narrative world (Cover 2010, 102-103). Cover does not seem to deal much with the DM inquiring into how the players wish to proceed; however for the purposes of this analysis, such questions are considered to be narrative suggestions as well, as they purposefully move the narrative forward without directly affecting the narrative world by themselves in requiring a response from a second party (ex. 7).

- (6) MATT: [...] So with it now hexed, what would you like to do?
- TRAVIS: *I would like to* use my falchion to open it the fuck up.
- MATT: All right, go for it.
- TRAVIS: 21.
- MATT: That definitely hits.
- (7) MATT: *Do you want to* go to the north side or the south side of the main tent?

The annotation of dice rolls was given to any lexical bundles pertaining to the direct reference to the rules of the game, often as an immediate continuation after the expression of a narrative suggestion (ex. 8). As the example shows, a request is typically made by the DM to roll a specific die (which in the case of a d20 is not even mentioned) with a specific bonus, upon which the player will do so and announce the result out loud.

(8) SAM: I'm going to just keep my eyes open for any tricks of the hand, sleight-of-hand-y-type tricks.

MATT: *Make a perception check.*

SAM: Okay. Perception. 14.

Given the tendency to proclaim anything remotely justifiable to be in-character speech, the social frame area of narrative planning speech is virtually absent from the bundles examined. However, it is implied that it occurs off-camera during breaks and between sessions. Off-record speech, on the other hand, is undeniably present in comments about the players' attitudes and thoughts about the game, having little to no impact on the narrative (ex. 9). This includes the phenomenon of humorous alternate realities, which are the instances of a player jokingly offering a sequence of events which might occur in the fantasy world as a consequence of their or somebody else's character's hypothetical actions which are not actually realized in the game world. Alternatively, a player will similarly express an estimate of what will happen (sincere or otherwise) before the DM informs them of the reality (ex. 10). Furthermore, expressions utilized for declaring a break or the end of a session (by the DM) were included, as they do not relate to the narrative as much as to the DM's social authority stemming from his in-game position.

(9) MATT: They (sic) hyenas are before Nott. Then we have Nott, then we have Fjord. Molly, you're at the top of the round.

[...]

MARISHA: God, that's bad. *I don't think* I even fucking spelled it right.

(10) MARISHA: I'll use this for the first roll, which will be seven points of damage. Yeah? Second roll. Ugh, that was a one.

SAM: How *do you want to do this?*¹⁵

The frames and types of speech where the 52 most frequent 4-grams are used are summarized in Table 2, including their frequencies. Out of the 52 4-grams, 21 were ascribed to multiple areas.

Table 2: Frames in the 52 most common 4-grams

Frame	Total	Percentage
The narrative frame	23	44.2%
The game frame	8	15.4%
The social frame	0	0%
The narrative/game frame	15	29.8%
The narrative/social frame	5	9.6%
Across all frames	1	1.9%
Total	52	100%

It appears that the most frequently used phraseology in this campaign is allocated to directly affecting the narrative and the lower degree of narrativity there is (and thus the further away such language is from playing the game), the fewer examples of frequent bundles are to be found among the recurrent phrases. This can be clearly seen in the extremes, with the pure narrative frame being represented by the most bundles (23) and the social frame not being represented at all, except for bundles also representing the narrative frame. Furthermore, the narrative frame is apparent in 44 out of the 52 4-grams (even though nearly half of it is shared with other frames), leaving only a small portion of the most frequent phraseology which is not utilized for producing narrative speech or speaking in character, which fully corresponds to the game frame, specifically to the dice rolls category. These are expressions so specialized in nature that they usually have no standing in standard speech and are emblematic of the game. Namely, these are: *make a perception check, go ahead and roll, that ends your turn, make an investigation*

¹⁵ The question, “*How do you want to do this?*” is the DM’s (Matt’s) iconic way of announcing that the monster which the players have been battling has finally been slain without explicitly stating so. It effectively translates into: “You have killed it. Please describe your killing blow.” Sam (one of the players) jokingly asks the question here to imply the battle is over (which it is not). It is not his character speaking, nor does he, as a player, have the authority to make the announcement, which means it is not part of the narrative, either.

check, go ahead and make, points of piercing damage and ahead and roll damage. There is also a frequent expression, which is more organizational in character, used in combat (ex. 11).

(11) MATT: All righty. That ends your turn? All right, you're done. *That brings us to Caleb.*

Table 3: Types of speech in the 52 most frequent 4-grams

Type of speech	Total	Percentage
Narrative speech	15	28.8%
In-character speech	2	3.8%
Dice rolls	8	15.4%
Narrative speech/in-character speech	6	11.5%
Narrative speech/dice rolls	1	1.9%
Narrative speech/narrative suggestions	1	1.9%
In-character speech/dice rolls	3	5.8%
In-character sp./narrative suggestions	8	15.4%
In-character sp./off-record speech	4	7.7%
Combination of three types	4	7.7%
Total	52	100%

While phrases used specifically for the purposes of giving voice to characters are almost non-existent, the unique lexical arsenal of narrative speech is nearly as potent as that which it shares with other areas. The lowest end of that spectrum, the social frame, is probably so poorly represented due to its highly spontaneous nature (especially off-record speech) where more targeted vocabulary is likely to be prioritized.

Two observations can be made on the basis of Table 3. Firstly, as per the “How to Play” section of *Player’s Handbook*, the three simple steps of the game are meant to be the description of the environment, the vocalization of the players’ intentions and the narration of their actions (Wyatt et al. 2014, 6). This pattern of narrative speech – narrative suggestions – narrative speech is easily deducible from Table 3, narrative speech having 27 of the most popular bundles at its disposal and narrative suggestions 9. Strictly speaking, step two could also consist of in-character

speech and narrative speech and there are certain to be many instances of dice rolling between steps 2 and 3. Lastly, off-record speech is likely to be present during many instances of any of the steps and thus the claim in the manual is confirmed.

Secondly, as for the unique use of certain phrases, it stands to reason that the players' plain speech (whether speaking for their characters or offering their own personal comments) is expressed through the most common expressions found across various areas of language (which they are likely to use in other types of speech whenever possible, too), while description as well as discussion about the rules of the game invite targeted lexis bound by predetermined constraints of the exactness of the rules and the fact that there are only so many ways through which one can describe the environment.

Although examining only the most common 4-word bundles does not in and of itself conclusively map the distribution of the language used in *Critical Role* games, an important first step has been taken towards its closer understanding.

3.2 The fantasy world: starting from a word-list

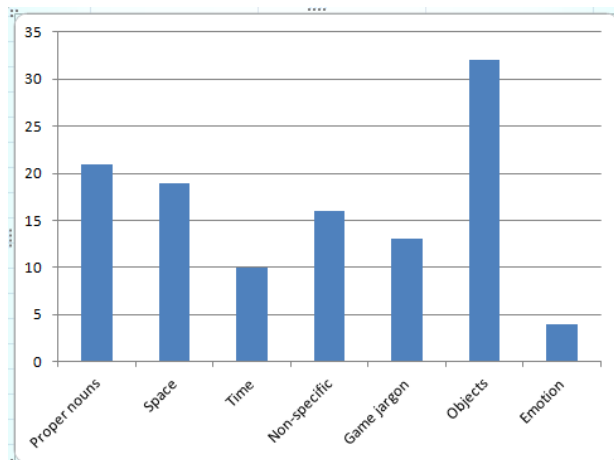
A frequency list of nouns was chosen to be the starting point in the description of the fantasy world, the reason being that it is prototypically nouns which denote the (stative) objects of the world, "persons, things, substances, etc." (Dušková et al., chapter 3). An initial examination of the means through which the world is developed and experienced reveals that 19 of the 101 most frequently uttered nouns¹⁶ are commonly (though not exclusively) utilized to refer to the physical location or direction of scenes and 10 referring to passage of time. There are 16 expressions of little to no specificity. There are 13 expressions closely associated with the terminology of the game and its proceedings. Approximately a third of the most frequent nouns relate to tangible objects and concepts with which the characters interact within the world. Furthermore, four nouns suggesting the players' emotional experiences are present. However, the absolute frequency of none of these categories is as high in the corpus as proper nouns. Here is a full list of noun categories which appear in the corpus with examples:

¹⁶ Although the *Sketch Engine* search was done exclusively for nouns, the absolute frequencies of the items seem to include instances of the same word used as a different word class, due to imperfect automatic tagging; e.g. "Does that *end* your turn?" is on the list for the noun *end*. Thus the specific number of nouns is exaggerated in some cases. The tagging appears accurate in most instances, though.

- Proper nouns (player, character, other), e.g. *Liam, Caleb, Frumpkin*
- Nouns referring to space, e.g. *town, end of the hall*
- Nouns referring to time, e.g. *night, at this point*
- Nouns denoting objects, e.g. *cart, eye*
- Nouns referring to emotions, e.g. *laughter*
- Game jargon, e.g. *check, turn*
- Other nouns, e.g. *lot, kind*

The representation of these semantic domains is given in Figure 1. Some of the nouns frequently appear in multiple categories, such as the lemma *point*. It is often featured in the 3-gram “*points of damage*” or modified as “*points of (type¹⁷) damage*” as a means of quantifying an abstract concept to fit the numerical mechanics of the game. It can also be used to connect a sequence of events as a narrative device, especially in the 3-gram “*at this point*”. Other less frequent uses can also be found in the spatial semantic domain, such as in “Eventually, they pass beyond a *point* where you feel absolute dread of their presence.” Lastly, the lemma is occasionally employed in other areas, e.g. “That’s a good *point*,” commenting on the communication.

Figure 1: The functions of the most frequent nouns



¹⁷ The damage type stems from what weapon or ability is used to hurt someone or damage something, most commonly *piercing, bludgeoning* or *poison*.

3.2.1 Proper nouns

Since every turn in the transcripts starts with the name of the person who is speaking, the names of the DM and the seven players occupy the top seven positions of the most frequent nouns list in the focus corpus and the eighth name appears on the ninth position (clearly due to the fact that that particular player only participated in 15 out of the 29 episodes examined). *MATT*, the Dungeon Master, is the uncontested most frequent noun with 19,953 uses, more than doubling the most frequently mentioned player's name with mere 9,217 occurrences. Further differences in the frequencies of the names of the individual players are relatively small, with absolute frequencies ranging from 9,217 to 6,774 occurrences for six of the players and *ASHLEY*, the name of the player who participated in fewer episodes, appearing 2,086¹⁸ times. This attests to the fact that the DM is by far the most important participant in the creation of the fantasy world and the narrative set in it. Furthermore, each of the individual players is also instrumental in the process, with three of them being nearly equally prominent in their contributions and the remaining four accounting for gradually less, but always relatively close to one another in terms of frequency. This illustrates the degree to which the game is interactive. Even guests on the show are highly prominent, considering their appearance spans across only a few episodes: 1,414 occurrences over 4 episodes for the first guest of the campaign (i.e. 353.5 mentions per episode on average, which is comparable to the representation of the most frequently mentioned players' names, 317.8-233.6 instances per episode on average), 518 occurrences over 2 episodes for the second and 461 occurrences over 2 episodes for the third. The last guest to be mentioned is *MARK*¹⁹. He was present only in episode 2x21 and yet his name appears 372 times as the speaker and twice more when the DM addresses him by name out of the game.

As important as it is by whom the narrative is created, it also appears to be significant who is featured in it. The names of the seven main characters occupy positions 21, 22, 27, 29, 30, 39 and 41 on the noun frequency list and *Frumpinkin*, one of the PCs' familiar²⁰, is the 53rd most frequent noun. This is so despite the fact that the players only rarely say the name of their own

¹⁸ It is likely that this number would be approximately twice as large (around 4,000) if the player had appeared in all 29 episodes instead of only 15.

¹⁹ The noun *mark* appears as a common noun as well, but not with a significant frequency.

²⁰ A familiar is a wizard's helper/pet. The wizard has a strong emotional connection with it and uses it as a useful tool, both of which factors undeniably account for its name's frequency.

PCs²¹. In fact, the tendency to speak about one's character in the first person is so strong in this game that the subjective first person personal pronoun in singular is by far the most frequently co-occurring word for collocations with each player's name within the first three positions to the right of it (R 1-3). The same collocation search for the DM's name, on the other hand, shows *You* as the most frequent, further promoting the idea of the players embodying their characters (ex. 12).

- (12) LAURA: Can *I* search the corpse of the woman?
MATT: *You* can.

3.2.2 Space and time

Returning to the three pillars of adventure, as described by Wyatt et al. (2014, 8), exploration and combat are heavily dependent on the physical setting in which the characters are located. The description of scenery relating to exploration is commonly accomplished with one of three groups of words. Firstly, there are nouns directly denoting the peculiar features of the landscape: *ground, water, city, chamber, room* and *town* (ex. 13). These items most clearly illustrate the kind of scenery relevant to this portion of the campaign and are certain to be almost entirely replaced on the frequency list when the campaign becomes a naval adventure at a point beyond the scope of this analysis. *Ground, water* and *chamber* are spatially relevant enough to appear in combat as well (ex. 14). Secondly, there are nouns which support orientation in space, which are likely to persist in frequency throughout the campaign: *right*²², *side, back, front, end, edge, area* and *top*. Example 14 illustrates the most frequent collocate of the noun *back* (R 1-3)²³, *of*; the remaining nouns in this group typically take this pattern as well. Each of them can be seen both during exploration and in the middle of combat. Such precise positioning can be crucial in combat whether as a means of finding an optimal path towards the enemy or conversely, finding cover from the enemy, especially their line of sight and ranged attacks. Finally, the macroscopic approach to spatial orientation through traversing from one place to another is frequently

21 The PC names are uttered only about as often as one might declare one's own name (in introductions).

22 *Right* is usually present as the discourse marker *all right* and much less frequently as the side.

23 In the description of collocates, the collocation window is delimited as stretching to the left (L) or right (R) of the keyword, with the size of the window given in number of words in brackets (e.g. 1-3 words).

accomplished by using the nouns: *way*, *foot*, *direction* and *back*, all of which are usable in combat, as well (ex. 15 and 22).

- (13) MATT: “The parchment place is good for trash. If you’re looking for unique stuff, there’s a few “places you can go.”
- LIAM: Here in *town*?
- MATT: “Here in *town*, yeah. ...
- (14) ASHLY: Right next to me?
- MATT: No, in the *back* of the *chamber* right here. That’s your action.
- (15) SAM: Am I in range - where’s the other gnoll, is it right on me?
- MATT: Yeah.
- SAM: Okay, I will bonus action disengage and run all the *way* around to the other *side* of the room.

Within this campaign setting, the DM uses physical three-dimensional battle maps to help paint the picture, allowing for slightly shorter descriptive passages without sacrificing the players’ spatial awareness (ex. 14). Out of the spatial nouns, the word *foot* is of particular interest as the primary unit of distance in *D&D*, especially in combat, where it plays a significant role in everyone’s tactics such as the usage of various abilities working at various ranges and the distance individual characters can travel each turn (ex. 16).

- (16) ASHLEY: Okay, can I get to it?
- MATT: What’s your speed?
- ASHLEY: 30 *feet*.
- MATT: 30 *feet*? (counting) Just in range!

Being able to place things within the PCs’ surroundings is clearly an essential aspect of the game, as illustrated by the number of nouns dedicated to precisely that. Whether or not there is a map which helps with visualization, much of the lexis must be dedicated to bridging the gap between what the characters (are supposed to) know and what the players understand, remember and are able to imagine. For a similar reason, 10% of the 101 most frequent nouns in the corpus denote time. Since there is a discrepancy between the time spent in the game and in real life, it is

often quintessential for the DM to mention how long certain activities take in the game in order for the players to have this information. Nouns related to short-term activities (especially combat-related as illustrated in example 17), namely *end*, *point*, *time*, *turn* and *moment*, are marginally less prominent than those referring to situations when time is sped up: *time*²⁴, *rest*, *day*, *night*, *minute* and *hour* (ex. 18).

(17) MATT: That ends your *turn*. Top of the round, Beau, you're up.

(18) MATT: 12. You take the better part of 30 *minutes* or so, and you find there's a lot of *books* on farming techniques.

3.2.3 Common objects and phenomena

Within the spatial and temporal specifications, the characters encounter a plethora of somewhat non-specific *places*, *things* and *people*. This lack of specificity can be ascribed to several factors. The DM has the task of generating the entire world and this one in particular tends to provide heavily detailed descriptions, but even he sometimes takes a descriptive shortcut and produces vague statements (ex. 19). More frequently, he uses the noun *thing* to respond to the players' statements in a somewhat jovial manner (ex. 20), often through an NPC. It is, in fact, usually the players who express themselves vaguely – L (1-5) collocates of *things* include *LAURA*, *LIAM*, *SAM* and *MARISHA* as more frequent collocates in these positions than the DM, *MATT*, who otherwise spends at least twice as much time speaking as any single player. Many of the *things* they encounter are outside of the scope of what they are closely familiar with in their actual lives and hence they often fail to recall the vocabulary necessary to denote them precisely, which, together with the ubiquitous concept of fading memory, explains the frequency of the vague terminology (ex. 21).

(19) MATT: [...] The figures are currently taking *things* out of the boat²⁵.

(20) MATT: Make another sleight of hand check, please.

SAM: 20.

²⁴ *Time* can be used either when stretching short amounts of in-game-world time into much longer in the actual world or when conversely skipping longer time periods in game in a matter of seconds in reality.

²⁵ The rarity of such vagueness necessitated over 120 concurrence lines to be viewed before a suitable example was located.

MATT: It just vanishes into your cloak! It's the craziest *thing!*

(21) SAM: I passed by a *place* called Natural Remedies, herbs and medical *things*.

Next, there are frequent inanimate objects such as *wall, door, cart, armor, table, book, sword, and blade*, intangible phenomena such as *sound, fire, money, name, light* and *spell*, and animate nouns, namely *guy, guard, man, creature, horse* and *tree*. Some of these are likely to remain constantly frequent in later sections of the campaign due to their relevance in either exploration or combat, such as *door, armor* and *wall* (ex. 22), while others appear more thematic in nature and relate to the current settings, such as *cart* and *horse*, which constitute some of the party's most valuable possessions and allow them to travel at a reasonable pace or *table* and *book*, which reflect the predominantly urban setting at this point in the campaign (ex. 18). Either way, these (types of) expressions and their repetition are likely to invoke a sense of familiarity with the players' surroundings. The relatively frequent focus on body parts, especially *face, head, body* and *eye* greatly promotes immersion when the PCs' exact injuries or attacks (ex. 23) are described instead of simply remarking, "I attack him." Furthermore, one's body management is a decisive aspect of combat, particularly having free *hands* or wielding something in them (ex. 24).

(22) LIAM: We are sitting ducks here. What do we do, Fjord?

TRAVIS: It's all on the other *side* of a *wall*?

MATT: Correct.

MARISHA: Let's go towards the *wall*.

(23) MARISHA: [...] I'm going to do a big roundhouse kick to his *head*.

(24) MATT: Well, the glowing one is your main *hand*²⁶.

TALIESIN: Oh, it was my main *hand*?

MATT: Then your offhand is the other one.

Perhaps an unexpectedly low amount of historical and fantasy vocabulary is featured. However, considering the proportion of nouns necessary for running the game (roughly a third)

²⁶ Notice how Taliesin's and Matt's experience as gamers affects their natural tendency to refer to hands in this situation as *main* and *off* instead of right and left – a tendency which is likely to appear relatively often among RPG players.

and nouns needed for establishing spatial and temporal awareness (approximately a quarter), not to mention the constant changing of scenes as the story progresses, the number of pseudo-historically relevant and fantasy-world nouns featured among the 101 most frequent nouns is still significant. These include *guard*, *spell*, *cart*, *armor*, *chamber*, *creature*, *sword* and *blade* and nouns which are used frequently to describe actual everyday phenomena, such as *city* and *tree*.

Like in most games, entertainment is an inseparable part of the *D&D* world-building gaming experience, for which there is some evidence in this campaign. Although it was virtually never uttered out loud, the frequency of the word *laughter* (794) usually used in brackets by the transcribers to illustrate the non-verbal auditory phenomenon the viewers might be witnessing, strongly suggests that the players (and often also the characters) are having a good time on hundreds of separate occasions, such as in example 5 in the previous section. As for the players' actual words, their emotional involvement can be illustrated by the presence of expletives *fuck*, *shit* and *god*. Although it is often difficult to separate the players' feelings from their characters', this particular group rarely breaks character and therefore although the outburst typically originates in the players, it should be understood as coming out of the characters' lips in most cases – examples 6 and 9 feature differing ratios of player-character input incorporated into the language and example 25 illustrates an element of surprise. The latter example also features another prominent indicator of emotional experience, *oh*, as the 54th most frequent lemma in the corpus.

(25) LAURA: But, you know, that's my skill, too.
SAM: *Oh, shit.*

3.2.4 Verbs

In order to further capture the way in which the PCs interact with their surroundings, the most frequent verb lemmata were explored. It is through this word class that the characters' actions and stances can be observed the most directly. Furthermore, the transpiring events and states reflected in the use of verbs characterize the game and are quintessential in the development of the narrative.

A list of the 52 most frequent verbs in the corpus shows a greater proportion of dynamic verbs to stative ones (37:14)²⁷. Some of the most frequent verbs predictably relate to movement and manipulation with one's surroundings – *go, come, leave, move, run, walk, turn, get, take, give, pull, put, bring, try* and *use* (ex. 26) – reflecting the dynamic aspect of the game. The example also features a linear sequence of actions – a dynamic narrative passage, which is likely to be one of the most memorable points of the session as well as a small but important element in the participants' image of the character engaging in this feat of acrobatics. However, the occasional effort to cause the continuation of the current affairs can be observed through the verbs: *let, keep, hold, wait* and *stay* (ex. 27).

(26) MATT: Pole vaulting off, parkouring up the wall until eventually you leap and *get* back up to the top.

(27) MATT: “Please open, it’s Crownsguard.”

LAURA: *Hold* on, I’m naked!

Perception is another strongly represented category with verbs such as: *see, look, find, hear, seem, feel* and *watch*, illustrating the preferred way of describing the PCs' surroundings, as is obvious from examples 3 and 4 in section 3.1.2 for the most common visual descriptions and example 28 below shows an auditory input. The final remaining prominent category consists of (other) stative verbs: *be, have, know, want, need, think, like* and *mean*, which predominantly pertain to the characters' inner lives, their knowledge and their desires (ex. 29). Lastly, the (potentially) auxiliary verbs *be, do* and *have* are the three most frequent verbs with absolute frequencies from 56,271 to 11,366 and the modal auxiliary *can* with absolute frequency 5,507²⁸ can be argued to partially reflect the high proportion of negative statements and questions (ex. 30), particularly in combination with *n't* being the third most frequent collocate (R 1) for *be*, the first for *do*, the sixth for *have* and the full form *not* the eleventh for *can*.

27 Another instance of wrongly tagged expression can be seen in *guy* being tagged as a verb, probably due to the collocation *you guys*, which is still perfectly within the expected success rate of this automatic function based on McIntyre and Walker (2019, 10). The word was excluded from any calculations apart from the total number of verbs searched for.

28 Due to another apparent tagging issue, *can* is not featured on the list. Upon manually inserting it there, *can* is the sixth most frequent verb in the corpus.

- (28) MATT: [...] While you guys have a moment there at the table, you can *hear* conversation muttering around you...
- (29) LIAM: You *know*, we *want* to be efficient here. Quick.
- (30) LIAM: *Do you know* something? I, shockingly, think that's not a bad idea.

4 Conclusions

4.1 *D&D* as a representative of a specific register of TRPGs

By describing the situational features of a *D&D* game and carrying out a linguistic analysis of its text, this thesis proves that it is possible to view and study *D&D* as a register. Taking into account the calls for the need for representativeness during an attempt to analyze a particular text type, such as formulated by Biber and Conrad (2009, 57-58) or McIntyre and Walker (2019, 66), the intuitive solution in describing TRPGs as a register would be amassing excerpts from across various games, each played by multiple groups of participants and thereby creating a TRPG corpus. However, this approach would be inferior to the one employed in this paper due to the inevitable exclusion of elements crucial for each individual game from the most frequent positions, especially proper nouns and game jargon, which differ from game to game even though they are present in all of them. The opposite extreme would be selecting one campaign as a representative of the register and generalizing any findings in the description of TRPGs as a register.

Instead, multiple individual campaigns must be analyzed as separate corpora to best reflect the phraseological makeup of each one. These results must be compared and contrasted. Only then can accurate objective generalizations be made about the register of TRPGs. This paper could potentially be one such individual element in a similar project of that magnitude. However, even standing on its own, the analysis in this paper approximates TRPGs as a register to a sufficient degree for the purposes of developing a basic idea of its features. This claim is promoted by the popularity of *D&D* within TRPGs (Cover 2010, 173 and Nikolaidou 2018, 224) and the popularity of *Critical Role* among *D&D* players, considering the influence it has on the TRPG genre as a whole.

4.2 *D&D* as a narrative co-created by the GM and the players

This thesis illustrates the degree to which each of the active participants of a *D&D* campaign contributes to the creation of a narrative and the phraseology employed in that endeavor. By discovering frequently used stance expressions, the players' attitudes and intentions are described and different roles of specific parts of speech are displayed. Furthermore, the most frequent nouns

reflect the nature of the fantasy world the players create and the lexis they need in the interface between the actual world and the fantasy one. Lastly, the most frequent verbs indicate the standard nature and sequence of actions and stances relevant to the fantasy world, its construction and the creation of the narrative.

4.3 The applicability of corpus stylistic quantitative methods

The quantitative methods of corpus stylistics employed in this paper reveal some information pertinent to the textual workings of a *D&D* game, such as the specific lexis utilized and the general makeup in terms of areas of language used in a session or a campaign. They also serve to provide concrete textual evidence for subjective views of the game, suggesting the adequacy of employing corpus analysis tools for comprehensive analyses of similar texts. However, their combination with qualitative methods is necessary in order to know what to look for to begin with as well as to interpret what would otherwise be mere statistical information.

References and sources

Biber, Douglas, and Susan Conrad. *Register, Genre, and Style*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Biber, Douglas, et al. *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Pearson Education Limited, 1999.

Conrad, Susan M., and Douglas Biber. “The Frequency and Use of Lexical Bundles in Conversation and Academic Prose.” *PDXScholar*, 2005, pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/ling_fac/3/. Accessed 17 April 2021.

Cover, Jennifer Grouling. *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*. McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers, 2010.

Dušková, Libuše, et al. “Substantivum.” *Mluvnice*, mluvniceanglictiny.cz/3. Accessed 17 April 2021.

Girdwood, Andrew. “What Is the Matt Mercer Effect?” *Geek Native*, 9 Aug. 2019, www.geeknative.com/68009/what-is-the-matt-mercer-effect. Accessed 17 April 2021.

Jara, David, and Evan Torner. “Literary Studies and Role-Playing Games.” *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, by Zagal José Pablo and Sebastian Deterding, Routledge, 2018, pp. 265–282.

Kenreck, Todd. “How Matthew Mercer & 'Critical Role' Changed Dungeons & Dragons.” *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 28 Apr. 2017, www.forbes.com/sites/toddkenreck/2017/04/25/how-matthew-mercer-critical-role-changed-dungeons-dragons/?sh=378f7d746d3a. Accessed 17 April 2021.

Landert, Daniela. “The Spontaneous Co-Creation of Comedy: Humour in Improvised Theatrical Fiction.” *Pragmatics. Quarterly Publication of the International Pragmatics Association (IPrA)*, vol. 173, Feb. 2021, pp. 68–87., doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2020.12.007>. Accessed 14 April 2021.

Lockey, Chris. “CR Transcript & Closed Captions Update.” *Critical Role*, 22 July 2020, critrole.com/cr-transcript-closed-captions-update/. Accessed 17 April 2021.

Mahlberg, Michaela. "Corpus Stylistics." *The Routledge Handbook of Stylistics*, by Michael Burke, Routledge, 2014, pp. 378–392.

Mahlberg, Michaela. "Literary Style and Literary Texts." *The Cambridge Handbook of English Corpus Linguistics*, by Douglas Biber and Randi Reppen, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 346–361.

McIntyre, Dan, and Brian Walker. *Corpus Stylistics Theory and Practice*. Edinburgh University Press, 2019.

Nikolaidou, Dimitra. "The Evolution of Fantastical Storyworlds: A Study of Tabletop Role-Playing Settings." *Ex-Centric Narratives: Journal of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Media*, 2018, ejournals.lib.auth.gr/ExCentric/article/view/6741. Accessed 18 April 2021.

Page, Ruth. "Narrative Structure." *The Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics*, by Peter Stockwell and Sara Whiteley, Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 439–455.

Stubbs, Michael. "Quantitative Methods in Literary Linguistics." *The Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics*, by Peter Stockwell and Sara Whiteley, Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 46–62.

Whitten, Sarah. "How Critical Role Helped Spark a Dungeons & Dragons Renaissance." *CNBC*, CNBC, 14 Mar. 2020, www.cnn.com/2020/03/14/critical-role-helped-spark-a-dungeons-dragons-renaissance.html. Accessed 17 April 2021.

Wyatt, James, et al. *Player's Handbook*. Wizards of the Coast, 2014.

Zagal, José P., and Sebastian Deterding. *ROLE-PLAYING GAME STUDIES: a Transmedia Approach*. ROUTLEDGE, 2018.

Sources

"Episode Transcripts." *Tumblr*, crtranscript.tumblr.com/transcripts. Accessed 4 February 2021.
Critical Role, critrole.com/. Accessed 18 April 2021.

Tools

Sketch Engine, <https://www.sketchengine.eu/>

Appendices

Appendix 1: The composition of the corpus

Appendix 2: The most frequent 4-word bundles with annotation

Appendix 3: The most frequent noun lemmata with annotation

Appendix 4: The most frequent verb lemmata with annotation

Appendix 1: The composition of the corpus

Episode number*	Episode title	Saved as	Link	Length
1	Curious Beginnings	CR 2x01	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep116	3:24:32
2	A Show of Scrutiny	CR 2x02	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep117	4:22:09
3	The Midnight Chase	CR 2x03	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep118	3:59:28
4	Disparate Pieces	CR 2x04	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep119	3:46:13
5	The Open Road	CR 2x05	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep120	3:43:11
6	The Howling Mines	CR 2x06	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep121	4:08:23
7	Hush	CR 2x07	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep122	4:30:28
8	The Gates of Zadash	CR 2x08	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep123	3:47:10
9	Steam and Conversation	CR 2x09	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep124	3:43:45
10	Waste and Webs	CR 2x10	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep125	4:13:25
11	Zemnian Nights	CR 2x11	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep126	4:16:50
12	Midnight Espionage	CR 2x12	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep127	4:16:31
13	Lost & Found	CR 2x13	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep128	4:23:53
14	Fleeting Memories	CR 2x14	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep129	3:16:55
15	Where the River Goes	CR 2x15	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep130	3:51:59
16	A Favor in Kind	CR 2x16	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep131	4:13:03
17	Harvest Close	CR 2x17	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep132	4:18:01
18	Whispers of War	CR 2x18	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep133	4:27:20
19	The Gentleman's Path	CR 2x19	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep134	3:54:43
20	Labenda Awaits	CR 2x20	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep135	3:43:42
21	Stalker in the Swamp	CR 2x21	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep136	4:34:15
22	Lost Treasures	CR 2x22	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep137	3:37:06
23	Have Bird, Will Travel	CR 2x23	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep138	3:57:35
24	The Hour of Honor	CR 2x24	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep139	3:46:09
25	Divergent Paths	CR 2x25	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep140	4:00:26
26	Found & Lost	CR 2x26	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep141	4:53:29
27	Converging Fury	CR 2x27	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep142	4:03:18
28	Within the Nest	CR 2x28	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep143	4:12:18
29	The Stalking Nightmare	CR 2x29	https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/ep144	4:10:58

*All episodes are from the Critical Role second campaign.

Appendix 2: The most frequent 4-word bundles with annotation

Number	Item	Frequency	Function	Frame	Speech
1	"i do n't know"	672	S	N/S	i/o
2	"make a perception check"	212	D	G	d
3	"i do n't think"	208	S	N/S	i/o
4	"do you want to"	204	S	N/G	i/nasu
5	"if you want to"	173	S	N/G	i/nasu
6	"do n't want to"	162	S	N	i
7	"go ahead and roll"	157	D	G	d
8	"you can see the"	154	D	N	nasp
9	"a little bit of"	152	R	N	i/nasp
10	"and you can see"	148	D	N	nasp
11	"i do n't want"	139	S	N/S	i/o
12	"going to be a"	131	S	N/G	i/d
13	"that ends your turn"	129	D	G	d
14	"is going to be"	126	S	N/G	i/d
15	"make an investigation check"	122	D	G	d
16	"do n't know what"	120	S	N	i
17	"go ahead and make"	120	D	G	d
18	"the rest of the"	119	R	N	nasp
19	"do n't know if"	116	S	N/S	i/o
20	"points of piercing damage"	115	D/R	G	d
21	"out of the way"	114	R	N	nasp
22	"i would like to"	113	S	N/G	i/nasu
23	"the rest of you"	111	R	N/G	i/nasu
24	"in the process of"	111	R	N	nasp
25	"the side of the"	108	R	N	nasp
26	"what are you doing"	108	SCF	N	i/nasp
27	"you want to do"	107	S	N/G	i/nasu
28	"you do n't have"	105	S/D	N/G	i/nasp/d
29	"in the middle of"	104	R	N	i/nasp
30	"going to take a"	100	S	N/G	i/nasp/nasu
31	"to go ahead and"	95	D	N	i/nasp
32	"are you going to"	93	S	N/G	i/nasu
33	"off to the side"	93	R	N	nasp
34	"you do n't know"	89	S	N	i/nasp
35	"do n't have to"	88	S	N/G	i/d
36	"i was going to"	87	S	N/G/S	i/nasu/o
37	"you watch as the"	86	D	N	nasp
38	"you make your way"	85	D	N	nasp
39	"you do n't see"	84	D	N	nasp
40	"i do n't have"	81	S/D	N/S	i/napl/o
41	"the edge of the"	81	R	N	nasp
42	"going to try and"	80	S	N	nasp
43	"the top of the"	78	R	N/G	nasp/d
44	"ahead and roll damage"	77	D	G	d
45	"the back of the"	76	R	N/G	nasp/nasu
46	"the middle of the"	76	R	N	i/nasp
47	"i am going to"	75	S	N/G	i/nasu
48	"you can see a"	75	D	N	nasp
49	"the two of you"	73	R	N	nasp
50	"that brings us to"	71	D	G	d
51	"it looks like it"	71	S	N	i/nasp
52	"going to go ahead"	71	S/D	N	nasp

Appendix 3: The most frequent noun lemmata with annotation

Frequency	Nouns	Proper nouns	Space	Time	Non-specific	Game jargon	Objects	Emotion
19953	"matt"	1						
9217	"marisha"	1						
9115	"sam"	1						
9054	"laura"	1						
8105	"liam"	1						
6812	"travis"	1						
6774	"taliesin"	1						
2250	"right"			1				
2086	"ashley"	1						
1973	"way"			1				
1887	"thing"					1		1
1801	"point"				1		1	
1552	"guy"					1		1
1507	"damage"						1	
1418	"time"				1			
1414	"ashly"	1						
1372	"side"			1				
1334	"bit"					1		
1332	"check"						1	
1290	"people"					1		1
1253	"caleb"	1						
1089	"nott"	1						
1087	"foot"	1		1				
1067	"anything"					1		
1062	"something"					1		
896	"attack"						1	
894	"jester"	1						
874	"turn"				1		1	
873	"beau"	1						
871	"fjord"	1						
794	"laughter"							1
792	"hand"							
768	"door"							1
763	"lot"					1		
730	"eye"							1
677	"room"			1				
671	"action"						1	
666	"moment"				1			
661	"molly"	1						
657	"shit"					1		1
643	"yasha"	1						
633	"hit"						1	
619	"place"			1				
590	"rest"				1		1	
580	"ground"			1				
572	"gold"							1
569	"wall"			1				1
563	"body"							1
561	"guard"							1
557	"day"				1			

557	"roll"					1		
545	"friend"						1	
535	"spell"						1	
535	"frumpkin"	1						
518	"night"			1				
518	"khary"	1						
516	"water"		1				1	
511	"god"							1
481	"head"						1	
471	"cart"						1	
462	"back"		1					
461	"sumalee"	1						
460	"part"				1			
457	"name"						1	
456	"front"		1					
454	"horse"						1	
454	"face"						1	
437	"advantage"					1		
433	"direction"		1					
429	"city"		1					
429	"piece"				1		1	
423	"mark"	1						
420	"bonus"					1		
419	"tree"						1	
398	"armor"						1	
394	"chamber"		1					
393	"nothing"				1		1	
393	"end"		1	1				
391	"table"						1	
386	"minute"			1				
384	"kind"				1			
378	"perception"					1		
375	"light"						1	
368	"hour"			1				
365	"town"		1					
353	"book"						1	
346	"man"				1		1	
345	"look"							
342	"sort"				1			
336	"fuck"							1
332	"money"						1	
327	"disadvantage"					1		
325	"creature"				1		1	
324	"sword"						1	
323	"edge"		1					
319	"stuff"				1		1	
319	"fire"						1	
318	"area"		1					
317	"sound"						1	
312	"top"		1					
312	"blade"						1	
		21	19	10	16	13	32	4
		Proper nouns	Space	Time	Non-specific	Game jargon	Objects	Emotion

Appendix 4: The most frequent verb lemmata with annotation

Frequency	Item	Dynamic/Stative/Modal
56271	"be"	s
14065	"do"	d
11366	"have"	s/m
11218	"go"	d
5688	"get"	d
4799	"see"	s
3511	"know"	s
3427	"look"	d
3408	"make"	d
2944	"take"	d
2522	"come"	d
2296	"want"	s
2171	"say"	d
2029	"think"	s
1638	"try"	d
1296	"let"	d
1204	"hit"	d
1158	"use"	d
1122	"find"	d
1116	"give"	d
1099	"roll"	d
1087	"need"	s
1078	"like"	s
1063	"pull"	d
1054	"leave"	d
1043	"begin"	d
1006	"keep"	d
960	"put"	d
939	"mean"	s
928	"hear"	s
922	"move"	d
910	"guy"	xxx
884	"run"	d
868	"seem"	s
858	"hold"	d
838	"start"	d
811	"feel"	s
806	"thank"	d
806	"wait"	d
785	"watch"	d
776	"fuck"	d
760	"tell"	d
717	"walk"	d
659	"happen"	d
651	"help"	d
628	"talk"	d
626	"turn"	d
548	"bring"	d
538	"cast"	d
503	"stay"	d