Play, Performance, and Participation:
Boundary Negotiation and *Critical Role*

Robyn Hope

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By: Robyn Hope

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Owen Chapman_____ Chair
Chair's Name

Bart Simon_____ Examiner
Examiner's Name

Matt Soar_____ Examiner
Examiner's Name

Mia Consalvo_____ Supervisor
Supervisor's Name

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_____ 2017 _____
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Abstract

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Critical Role is a livestreamed spectacle of play, in which eight professional voice actors come together once a week for a session of the tabletop roleplaying game *Dungeons and Dragons*. This show first launched in 2015, and, after one hundred and fifteen episodes spanning nearly four hundred and fifty hours of content, reached the conclusion of its first major narrative arc in October 2017. In this time, the show has attracted a dedicated fanbase of thousands. These fans, known as "Critters", not only produce creative fanworks, but also undertake massive projects of archiving, timekeeping, transcribing and curating *Critical Role.* The main project of this thesis is to argue that *Critical Role* facilitates an ecosystem of ideas, where ideas change hands quickly and fluidly – and, in doing so, it has caused familiar boundaries between author and audience to blur or even collapse. In some cases, this blurring allows for incredible collaborations between fans and performers; at its most challenging, the collapse of familiar author-audience dynamics creates unfamiliar conflicts with no obvious solution. Using Erving Goffman's model of interactional frame analysis, this thesis will isolate different areas of challenge, collapse, and change. First, it will demonstrate how the dynamics of traditional tabletop roleplaying transform when the roleplayers are put before an audience. The *Critical Role* cast must negotiate double identities as both players and performers. This thesis will then transition to the behaviour of the audience. The act of watching *Critical Role* requires a keen understanding of the different frames at work inside the show, and fans have done a considerable amount of work to help each other understand these frames. Finally, this thesis will establish the concept of the fan frame. Both Critters and cast members consider themselves fans in some way. While familiarity with fan culture helps these two groups understand each other, it also creates conflict when the values of fans do not line up with the demands of online content production.

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Introduction

On June 8, 2017, the online video series *Critical Role* celebrated its one hundredth episode. As it had ninety-nine times before, on nearly every Thursday since March 12th of 2015, the cast and their fans – the online masses of self-identified "Critters" – would gather on Twitch.tv to watch, in the words of host Matthew Mercer, "a bunch of us nerdy-ass voice actors sit around and play *Dungeons and Dragons.*" Celebrations began early in the day, largely coordinated through Twitter. The official *Critical Role* account held a merchandise giveaway, including shirts and dice boxes. The fan-run statistics blog CritRoleStats collaborated with Geek and Sundry, the production company that owns *Critical Role,* to produce an infographic on the show's various feats. The show's runtime has reached thirteen full days– which, according to the infographic, makes it longer than *The Simpsons* or *Grey's Anatomy*. These 100 episodes have amassed 68 million views (just under three times the population of Australia, notes the infographic – and nearly twice the population of Canada, I noticed). Crew members shared photos of the *Critical Role* set in its early days. Fan artists created celebratory pieces throughout the week leading up to the hundredth episode, which eventually filled a gallery on the Geek and Sundry website. The cast members joined in the Twitter celebrations, teasing surprises for the show that night and thanking fans for following them over two years. Geek and Sundry announced that *Critical Role* would be turned into a podcast.

Critical Role is perhaps one of the most successful examples of a new entertainment phenomenon in which tabletop roleplaying games are recorded and broadcast for an online audience. Still in its youth, the formal characteristics of this genre vary: some tabletop games, like *Critical Role,* are livestreamed, while others are pre-recorded; some incorporate video, some are exclusively audio-based, and still others include illustrative animations. In gaining this technological foothold, tabletop roleplay series have also found their audience. As such, over the past two years, *Critical Role* has single-handedly grown the subscription base of its parent production company, Geek and Sundry, to over thirty thousand subscribers[1] – though, as the CritRoleStats infographic and other articles suggest, the actual audience for the show is much

[1] Some *Critical Role* episodes display a subscriber count in the top left-hand corner. Episode 5 is the first one to do so, claiming 1465 subscriptions. The final count at the end of Episode 99 is 35,749. This number is tracked in real time, so the number of subscriptions may fluctuate throughout an episode.

larger.[2] The Geek and Sundry website itself boasts views "in the hundreds of thousands" ("Critical Role Celebrates Their 100th Episode Tonight"). The show has also attracted an intensely dedicated fanbase, populated by artists, craftsman, statisticians, and a number of curious academics including myself. Their voluntary work has slowly become part and parcel of the *Critical Role* fan experience. As a fan of *Critical Role* and a student of media and game studies, I was instantly curious about how *Critical Role* had grabbed my attention and the attention of so many others. I also wanted to know how the show had sparked such a lively community – one the Critters themselves characterize as passionate, productive, and generous, but one no less prone to the internal conflicts of any fan culture. After immersing myself in research on tabletop gaming, the performance of play, and the behaviour of fan cultures in the digital age, I realized that *Critical Role* rested at the nexus of many interesting questions of digital media consumption. Moreover, the dedication of the fans had already created an immense archive of information on the show, comprising everything from quantitative data to comprehensive episode transcripts. Taken together, *Critical Role* and its surrounding community offered an irresistible chance to study how the broadcasting of a tabletop roleplaying game had created a deeply interdependent ecosystem of creation, transformation, and performance.

The experience of being a *Critical Role* fan is much broader than the consumption of the central text; the central text itself is much broader than it originally appears; and the "creators" of the text number much higher than the headcount onscreen. I intend to model this ecosystem of ideas through this thesis, following an overarching theme of boundary negotiation. I will show how ideas are created by actors on the show (Chapter 1); how the fans expand, interpret, and imbricate themselves in these ideas (Chapter 2); and how the fans and actors invite free, non-commercial exchanges of ideas that are integrated into their creations (Chapter 3). In each case, the production of these creative ideas involves the negotiations of boundaries and identities that fans and performers alike have often taken for granted. The boundaries between casual player and professional performer, the boundaries between creator and spectator, and the balances of creative authority are all challenged and redefined in this new ecology of creative consumption and production. Following this, I will conclude with some suggestions on how this model of

[2] Due to the fact that the show is released on two platforms (Twitch and YouTube) with no way to account for people who may watch the videos multiple times, the exact size of *Critical Role's* audience is difficult to pin down – though most estimates range in the hundreds of thousands.

creation and fan production might allow for new kinds of collaboration, participation, and even resistance in spectated play.

A History of Tabletop Roleplaying Studies

The place to begin when studying "a new genre" is to situate it in the history of its forbearers – which almost always leads to the revelation that it is not as new as expected. Tabletop games have always had strong, if complex, relationships with performance and narrative. We can see this quite clearly in a brief history of the popular texts inspired by tabletop roleplay. The earliest incarnations of tabletop roleplaying games were originally derived from war gaming (Peterson 2017). In war gaming, two or more players control opposing armies, represented by miniatures, to model a battle. Because these games model troop movements, they are built on precise combat rules that apply to large groups of soldiers or important commanding units. Tabletop roleplaying also uses precise rules for combat, but it narrows the focus from an army to a single band of heroes. In this new gaming model, developed by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in the first edition of *Dungeons and Dragons,* each player controls a single character. [3] That character has specific talents, combat abilities, shortcomings, and – perhaps most significantly – a name and identity. The gameplay focused, in its early incarnations, on dungeon crawling, with the heroes descending into labyrinths, tombs, and catacombs in search of treasure and mythical beasts to slay. As such, the initial ruleset of *Dungeons and Dragons* provided ways for characters to encounter and overcome the challenges of a dungeon. Their abilities dictated not only how the characters would behave in combat, but also whether they could disarm or detect traps, how much loot they could carry, whether or not they would have access to magic, and so on. Dice were already used in war gaming to add an element of randomness to combat, and they performed a similar function in tabletop roleplay: each attempted action forced the player to roll a die to determine whether their action succeeds or fails. This model also helped integrate the abilities and specialties of various classes. Certain characters are better at certain things – stronger, more observant, faster, or hardier – and so the dice rolls were modified by adding or subtracting numbers to account for these natural aptitudes.

[3] Both men were separately experimenting with variations on war gaming. Gygax developed *Chainmail,* a wargame using fantasy elements such as dragons, wizards, and magic. Arneson used the *Chainmail* rules to model a proto-*Dungeons and Dragons* campaign in private. The two joined forces to release the first *Dungeons and Dragons* booklets in 1974. This is detailed in Peterson's "History: Forty Years of Adventure" article (2017).

This simple format for creating characters, managing their decisions, and exploring a world through their eyes became hugely popular, and eventually, this single ruleset expanded far beyond the dungeon crawl. Tabletop roleplaying produced many different games in many genres, with varied rules to accommodate their atmospheres. Role-playing games were designed for science fiction settings, cosmic horror settings, and high fantasy settings. The rulebooks multiplied, accompanied by new lore for monsters, particular dungeons, cities, or gods. Players wanted more to explore, and so dungeons made for raiding grew into entire worlds, with histories, nations, political conflicts, prophecies, allegiances and cataclysms, many of them detailed in the ever-expanding collection of sourcebooks and adventure modules.[4]

After only a few decades, tabletop sourcebooks had birthed a number of fantasy universes, and those universes sparked stories of their own. Novelists and other writers were among the first to harness the potential of these settings, and they remain among the most prolific adaptors of tabletop content. The *Dragonlance* campaign setting birthed nearly two hundred associated novels, while the *Forgotten Realms* setting launched the career of novelist R.A. Salvatore, whose books have sold an estimated 17 million copies worldwide (Gilsdorf 2012). In *Second person: Role-playing and story in games and playable media,* George R. R. Martin recounts the story of how his Wild Cards franchise sprang from a tabletop campaign shared with several other writers (2008). Later on, digital game developers used the same settings and rules to produce the first slew of digital roleplaying games. These games, crafted around the turn of the millennium, often used the *Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset and campaign settings – *Baldur's Gate* and *Planescape: Torment* (Interplay Entertainment, 1999) among them. Even now, long after Western-made roleplaying games began to construct original lore, settings, and mechanics, many still borrow heavily from their origins in tabletop gaming. Modern roleplaying video games, such as the *Dragon Age* series (Electronic Arts 2009/2011/2014) and the *Witcher* series (Atari 2007/2011/2015), rely on principles established around gaming tables, including everything from statistics that reflect a character's skills or behaviour to the numerical growth of their protagonists. Words that are familiar to digital gamers now – experience points, hit points, and dexterity scores, for example – are lifted from *Dungeons and Dragons* and its kin. Massive multiplayer online replaying games (MMORPGs) and their predecessors, multi-user dungeons

[4] Rulebooks explain the general mechanical structure of any tabletop game. They provide only basic descriptions of magic and character creation so they can apply to any adventure. Sourcebooks describe locations to explore, characters to meet, and monsters to slay. Adventure modules map out a particular adventure for the players.

(muds), were in some ways attempts to both recreate the fantastical setting *and* replicate the social dynamics of a roleplaying group by permitting multiple creators an amount of agency over characters and space.

Alongside the stories based *in* tabletop universes, many saw potential in stories *about* tabletop roleplayers in our own universe. This was most notoriously exploited in the 1980s. The sensationalized – and ultimately untrue – tale of a university student who committed suicide over a roleplaying game was first novelized in 1981 by Rona Jaffe[5] as *Mazes & Monsters,* and later adapted into a 1982 movie starring a very young Tom Hanks. Ironically, the movie has become something of a cult favourite of roleplayers, who get a kick out of just how absurd the misrepresentation of their pastime is. Noah Antwiler (also known as "Spoony" or "The Spoony One"), an online personality known in part for sharing his own tabletop roleplay stories in a vlog-style series known as *Counter Monkey*, also filmed a half-hour lampooning of *Mazes & Monsters*. More recently, television series like *Freaks and Geeks, Community, iZombie,* and *Stranger Things*[6] have used *Dungeons & Dragons* to provide storytelling set-pieces that double as a convenient way to explore character dynamics. The characters play *Dungeons and Dragons* or a similar knockoff – with the rules streamlined for pacing's sake – and the writers explore everything from the characters' creativity to their competitive streaks. These episodes have been considerably more well-received than *Mazes and Monsters*, largely because they are more accurate depictions of a group playing the game together.

Various other media projects sought to remove the middleman of a novelization or a television plot, and simply tried to engage wider audiences in roleplaying games themselves. Because tabletop games are inherently participatory and collaborative, most of these early attempts shared two specific characteristics: firstly, they sought volunteers from the public, and secondly, they employed a medium that would allow these volunteers to interact with the game in real-time. Some of these roleplaying series have been discontinued, while others are still performed today. Finland's *Lohikäärmepuu* was staged over the radio; the show's host narrated an adventure, and lucky callers were able to make decisions for the characters in the story (The

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[5] To my knowledge, Rona Jaffe is not related to *Critical Role's* Taliesin Jaffe.

[6] *The Big Bang Theory* is perhaps the most broadly successful show that features a scene of tabletop roleplay. In this scene, a female character (Penny) claims that "no girl" has ever played *Dungeons & Dragons.* This is a frustrating repetition of a misogynistic stereotype. Unlike the other shows mentioned here, I cannot deem it a positive or accurate depiction of a tabletop game because it makes such a harmful error. It rather suits *Mazes and Monsters'* representation of tabletop roleplay as an object of scandal or ridicule – but even *Mazes and Monsters* includes a woman in their fictional tabletop group.

Finnish Museum of Games, 2017). At Fringe Festivals around the world, dungeon masters run roleplaying games in theatres for live audiences, sometimes selecting volunteers to roll dice for the players (Bruin 2017). Live-action roleplaying games (LARPs), are close cousins of tabletop roleplaying that involve physically embodying the characters, have opened themselves to audiences. Some spectators are given small roles to perform, while others are simply invited to watch – though this shift has caused no small amount of controversy within the LARP community (Nielsen 2016).

Eventually, digital technology was able to facilitate a new way to open tabletop roleplaying sessions for public consumption. The costs of distribution for a tabletop-themed show plummeted, thanks to YouTube and its file-sharing kin; all potential restrictions on the length of a session vanished when they did not need to fit between commercial breaks. With such low barriers to entry, dungeon masters could cheaply record their tabletop sessions and broadcast those recordings to audiences worldwide. Many online content creators have done exactly that, leading to the birth of what I will hereafter call the tabletop roleplay series.[7]

Of the theorists I encountered who studied *Dungeons and Dragons* before the birth of such shows, Daniel Mackay had perhaps the most foresight in term of this transformation. He predicts, near the end of his book *Tabletop Roleplaying: A New Performing Art,* something similar to what has indeed occurred:

> I suggest that once the technological innovations in computer programming reach a point where online and virtual-reality role-playing are inexpensive and sophisticated enough for contemporary tastes, the tabletop role-playing game will be commonly regarded as …merely the precursor of whatever technological form of role-playing consequently emerges…[it] will be a *mediated* experience dependent upon some sort of technological apparatus with which the audience/player/user will interface.
>
> (Mackay 2001, 146)

This prediction is startlingly perceptive: though Mackay is imagining a slightly different object[8], he correctly guesses that tabletop roleplaying could form the basis of a new, performance-based art form, accessible through a technological apparatus. While tabletop roleplaying games still

[7] I am resisting the term "tabletop roleplay show" because a number of these series have nothing *to* show: some of them are podcasts, and therefore audio-exclusive.

[8] Mackay suggests that MMORPGs will be the source this new art form. I do not have enough personal experience with modern MMORPGs to declare whether they have achieved what Mackay is describing.

thrive in their original, private form, they are also the necessary precursor to what I am calling the tabletop roleplaying series. These series are dependent upon a technological apparatus in the form of file sharing and/or livestreaming. Mackay even has the foresight to divide spectatorship into "audience/player/user" categories, predicting the very complexities that this thesis is about to unravel.

Predecessors and Contemporaries

The idea to broadcast a tabletop campaign did not spring from a single, brilliant source, but rather occurred to multiple minds in multiple places over the span of half a decade. One of the earliest forays into the format is the long-runner *Acquisitions Inc,* a joint project between Wizards of the Coast (the company which now owns the *Dungeons and Dragons* copyright) and Penny Arcade (Gabriel 2008). The show began as a podcast in 2008, then eventually transitioned to live shows at conventions as well as filmed video episodes. Another example which predates *Critical Role* is *The Adventure Zone,* which began in 2014. *The Adventure Zone* is a podcast hosted by dungeon master Griffin McElroy (founder of gaming review site Polygon, who also produces podcasts including *My Brother, My Brother and Me*) featuring his brothers, Justin and Travis, and their father, Clint (Maximum Fun 2017). In 2015, Geek and Sundry, an online production company helmed by Felicia Day, asked dungeon master Matthew Mercer to bring his private *Dungeons & Dragons* game to the Geek and Sundry livestream – and so *Critical Role* entered the picture in March of that year[9]. There are also a number of video series that aired in the immediate wake of *Critical Role: Dice, Camera, Action,* a livestream started by D&D editor Chris Perkins; *High Rollers,* created by Yogscast; *Heroes and Halfwits,* from the online production giant Rooster Teeth; and *Twits and Crits,* created by Rooster Teeth collaborator Funhaus.

These shows differ not only by content, players, and titles, but also by form and distribution. *Heroes and Halfwits* and *Twits and Crits* are pre-recorded, edited, and then uploaded to YouTube, with uncut versions of their sessions accessible to those who pay subscription dues. *Critical Role, High Rollers,* and *Dice, Camera, Action,* by contrast, are livestreamed, and

[9] Geek and Sundry, owned by parent company Legendary Digital Networks, produces a number of shows centred around geek culture to fill a weekly program of Twitch livestreams. Since 2015, Geek and Sundry has provided *Critical Role* with sets, equipment and crew members, but creative control of the show remains in the hands of Matt and his players. The relationship between Geek and Sundry's executives and the creative teams producing its shows is generally understood as tight-knit and friendly, and some of their executives – such as the Creative Director and *Critical Role* cast member Marisha Ray – also host Geek and Sundry shows.

recordings of the sessions are later uploaded to YouTube. The games also differ by locale. *Dice, Camera, Action* is unique among the samples for hosting its game over Skype, with each of the players shown on video in markedly different locations. Most of the other shows described above keep their players in the same room. The visuals of each show differ greatly between livestreaming and pre-recorded episodes. *Twits and Crits* and *Heroes and Halfwits* feature complex camera setups and tend to rotate through multiple camera angles, whereas *Critical Role* and *High Rollers* use three limited, stationary cameras displaying all the players and the dungeon master simultaneously. *Dice, Camera, Action* features a very fragmented visual design by necessity, in that it must divide up its frame into five separate Skype windows. *HarmonQuest,* another serialized show based on tabletop roleplay, takes a far more dramatic approach to its design. Along with edited clips of the players, it includes extensive animated sequences depicting the characters. In short, while these shows ostensibly have the same subject matter, they take very different approaches to gathering, segmenting, displaying and distributing information.

These shows also differ in their level of remediation. On one end of the scale, there are shows like *HarmonQuest,* which use infographics, animations, editing, and music to restructure the content of a tabletop session. One might even place shows like *Community* or *Stranger Things* on this scale as well, just beyond *HarmonQuest:* they further mediate the process of a tabletop session by scripting it ahead of time. On the complete opposite side of this scale are shows like *Critical Role,* which strive to edit the experience of a tabletop session as little as possible. *Critical Role's* form is tantamount to placing a camera in the room where *Dungeons and Dragons* is being played and simply letting it run, allowing it to capture all the mistakes, hesitations and distractions of traditional tabletop roleplay. *Critical Role* has even removed the camera as interlocutor: Episodes 60 and 62 were performed in theatres in front of a live audience, with cameras set up in the theatre to also stream to audiences at home.

Putting aside arguments of aesthetic superiority, popularity, or quality for now, the fact that *Critical Role* sits on the low end of this scale of remediation makes it ideal for an examination of this new genre. There is no post-production editing, nor any scripted sequences to fall back on; nothing is omitted or obfuscated about the game itself. Because nothing can be excised from the show after the fact, any differences between play and performance are implemented by the actors as they play/perform. What is left is an uninterrupted record of the behavioural transformations that are either necessary or natural when a tabletop roleplaying game

becomes a television show. Moreover, the choice to livestream the show – as opposed to creating a podcast or edited video recording – has created the need for a very specific technological framework and a specialized crew. The production side of the show will therefore also provide clues as to a tabletop roleplay series' priorities.

Critical Role is special for another reason: it is one of the only shows in which the group of players adventured together in a private tabletop game *before* transforming their campaign into a show. *Critical Role* actually starts midway through the characters' story. The players are already comfortable with themselves and with each other, and the characters have formulated the groundwork of the relationships that carry *Critical Role* forward. This allows for an even clearer assessment of the difference between private tabletop roleplay and public tabletop series, because the performers themselves can comment on the transition. We, the audience, can even catch glimpses of this pre-*Critical Role* game through archived video footage; the players enjoyed documenting their home game, and short clips of this game are available on YouTube.

As these shows establish their niche, their producers and consumers alike have begun to establish guidelines for what the genre *should* be, and how the participants in its communities should behave. Through discussion and action, these communities create both markers of aesthetic quality and standards of behaviour for fans, players, and behind-the-scenes producers. This process of developing "regimes of value and criteria of prestige" is known as *boundary work* (Ganti 2012, 8). In the case of *Critical Role* and its kin, familiar boundaries must be renegotiated: for example, the values of public entertainment have, in some cases, come into conflict with the values of the tabletop roleplaying game. Boundary work is also an "ongoing process": as we will see, most of the definitions in the *Critical Role* community remain under constant negotiation, with few concrete verdicts in sight (Ganti 2012, 11). The next chapter deals with this boundary work in earnest, modeling the behaviours of the players of *Critical Role* and contrasting them with previous scholarly observations on tabletop roleplay. Before that begins, however, I would like to outline two more fundamental components of this thesis: my methodology, and the basic narrative content of *Critical Role.*

***Critical Role*: The Story So Far**

One of the biggest challenges in writing this thesis is the observation of the object of study itself. The sheer scale of content is intimidating enough without also factoring in the speed

at which it grows. Each week, another three to four hours are added to the story of *Critical Role* during Thursday's live episode. Along with that episode comes a weekly burst of fan-created content and community-wide discussions and debates. Recently, Geek and Sundry also launched *Talks Machina,* a talk show starring the players of *Critical Role* that airs every Tuesday, and gives the players a chance to discuss the previous week's session and answer questions from the audience. At the time of the first draft of this introduction, *Critical Role* had just passed its eighty-fifth episode. By the time of its final defense, the show will be well past its hundredth. What this means is that this or any study of *Critical Role* will be, at its best, perpetually out of date; by the time all the commas are checked, twelve more hours of content, a full cornucopia of potential counter-examples, will have been released. With that in mind, this thesis encompasses examples from the first one hundred and five episodes unless otherwise stated.[10]

That said, the show's episodic nature, relatively homogenous visuals, and titanic archive already provide more than enough content for critical scrutiny without too much variation. In many ways, the show is formulaic: in every episode, we can expect between five and nine people sitting at a table, rolling dice, fighting imaginary creatures, and role-playing as their characters. Adventure constantly beckons; no sooner does the adventuring party solve a problem than another crisis descends upon them. While an in-depth close reading of the narrative arcs and story structure of *Critical Role* would certainly be a fruitful venture, this particular examination rests on a more general understanding of the story. While I will examine some moments in depth, I will not analyze each discrete arc.

For now, I will give you the shape of *Critical Role's* central narrative. It is the tale of a group of heroes, traveling together under the moniker "Vox Machina", and their adventures in the fantastical world of Tal'Dorei. The members of Vox Machina, and the actors who portray them, are described below. Note that the cast members frequently flicker in and out of character as they play, and while a seasoned viewer may become attuned to the cues that indicate this shift – observing it in everything from the player's facial expression, to their body language, to their eyelines – the clearest indicator of this transition is in the casts' employment of distinctive in-

[10] Episode 12 skews the numbering of the series somewhat. The episode consists of Matt giving tabletop roleplay tips and a brief gameplay session unrelated to the central narrative of *Critical Role.* Most "one-shot" episodes like this are not numbered and do not count towards the total number of *Critical Role* episodes; however, episode 12 predates the decision to not count one-shot spinoffs. This discrepancy is mostly ignored by the community – episode one hundred was still celebrated as such, though it was arguably the ninety-ninth – but still worth noting here. When I do a brief quantitative analysis of *Critical Role*'s "first one hundred episodes" in chapter one, I am not counting episode 12, and I *am* including episode 101 to reach a nice round one hundred.

character voices. Thus, when I annotate a quote as "Laura", Laura is speaking as herself; if it is annotated as "Laura [*as Vex*]", this indicates that Laura is speaking in-character. Occasionally, players will also mock other characters' voices, or take over for characters who are not there. Therefore, a quote could be annotated "Laura [*as Grog*]". In this case, Laura would be imitating Grog's distinctive speech pattern, either because Grog's regular player is absent or because Laura is mocking Grog.

The Cast of Characters

- Vax'ildan the half-elf rogue, played by Liam O'Brien. Vax'ildan, usually known as Vax, begins the story as a carefree prankster, but as the story progresses, he begins to wonder if he has a higher purpose. He finds what he is looking for when the goddess of death, the Raven Queen, makes Vax her champion.
- Vex'ahlia the half-elf ranger, played by Laura Bailey. Vex is intelligent, flirtatious, and a bit of a penny-pincher; she manages the group's money and haggles for every purchase. Unlike her twin brother, Vax'ildan, she still has trouble accepting her half-elven lineage. She has a particularly difficult relationship with her elven father. She has a loyal pet bear named Trinket.
- Pike Trickfoot, the gnome cleric, played Ashley Johnson. Pike is by far the most kind-hearted and modest member of the group. She is a devout follower of the goddess of redemption, Sarenrae. Due to Ashley Johnson's conflicting acting commitments (she is currently starring in *Blindspot,* which films in New York City, while *Critical Role* is streamed from California), Pike's role is often taken over by other players.
- Grog Strongjaw, the goliath barbarian, played by Travis Willingham. Grog is bloodthirsty, brash, and impulsive. He is fiercely loyal to Vox Machina and particularly attached to Pike, his childhood friend. He is also illiterate and comically dim-witted, which is reflected in his low intelligence score.
- Scanlan Shorthalt, the gnome bard, played by Sam Riegel. Bards supplement their fighting style with magic-infused music. Scanlan is a skilled musician and performer, constantly spouting jokes and song parodies. Later in the show's run, he discovers that he has a grown daughter, Kaylie, whom he has never met.

Scanlan leaves the group to be with his daughter in Episode 85, and Sam replaces Scanlan with a new character, Taryon Darrington. Taryon is a spoiled aspiring adventurer who joins Vox Machina to learn to become a hero.

- Percy, the human gunslinger, played by Taliesin Jaffe. Percy is a blue-blooded noble with a dry sense of humour, a brilliant mind and a Byronic sinister streak. Before the campaign, he struck a deal with a demon, asking for the power to avenge the deaths of his family; the demon granted him the inspiration to invent the world's first firearm.
- Keyleth, the half-elf druid, played by Marisha Ray. Keyleth has a powerful command over nature-based magic, including the ability to shapeshift herself into animals. Outside of combat, she is concerned with the impacts of the group's actions upon civilians and innocents, and tends to speculate about whether Vox Machina is doing the right thing. She is also quite naïve and socially awkward, and occasionally misunderstands lewd jokes or social cues.

For the first twenty-seven episodes, the group was also joined by the sorcerer Tiberius Stormwind, played by Orion Acaba. Orion left the show after Episode 27 for personal reasons. While he was present, Tiberius was a prideful bumbling-professor archetype, with a distinctive blustery voice.

The central pillar of *Critical Role* is Matthew Mercer, the campaign's dungeon master. He does not play a singular role, but instead creates and voices every one of the characters encountered by Vox Machina. (Because these characters are controlled by the dungeon master and not the other players, they are often called "NPCs", short for "non-player characters). Matt also "narrates" *Critical Role,* verbally describing the settings and creatures encountered by the players and providing environmental sound effects. Occasionally, the show also invites guest players to join Vox Machina's adventures for one or two episodes at a time. These guests include everyone from other voice actors (particularly notable among them are Mary Elizabeth McGlynn and Wil Friedle, who have returned to the show multiple times) to fans of the show (including the show's official artist Kit Buss, and author Patrick Rothfuss).

As for the story of *Critical Role*, divide it semi-officially into five arcs. In the first arc, spanning Episode 1 to Episode 14, Vox Machina is sent to the dwarven city of Kraghammer to rescue a paladin, Lady Kima, at the behest of a high-ranking wizard, Arcanist Allura Vysoren.

The second arc, from Episode 15 to Episode 23, sees the party venture to a distant, ancient city called Vasselheim, where they are split into two teams and sent to hunt bounties on two dangerous monsters (one team faces a dragon; the other, a shapeshifting demon called a Rakshasa). Episodes 24 to 36 center on Percy's quest for vengeance against the Briarwoods, the mysterious noble couple that slaughtered his family, and his reclamation of his ancestral home, Whitestone. Two episodes are then spent on foreshadowing and build-up to the epic Chroma Conclave arc, a story spanning Episodes 39 to 82. In this arc, Vox Machina struggles to destroy a coalition of four evil dragons who call themselves the Chroma Conclave. To do so, the heroes must gather the Vestiges of Divergence, the only artefacts powerful enough to defeat their monstrous enemies. This arc is divided into sub-stories, as the retrieval of each Vestige – and the defeat of each dragon – demand remarkable heroic feats of Vox Machina.[11] This arc concludes with the defeat of the last dragon, Raishan. The fifth and final arc sees Vox Machina challenging Vecna, a mighty undead wizard who aspires to be a god. The heroes successfully seal Vecna away, and the story of Vox Machina concludes in Episode 115. In between these arcs, smaller, ongoing quests and questions motivate the heroes to explore beyond their central stories. These subplots may resolve in part and then unravel, or they may be set aside for dozens of episodes before they recommence. Characters create friendships, rivalries, and romances between themselves, and manage relationships with non-player characters, who also maintain relationships with each other. A handful of Matt's non-player characters return to the story quite frequently, including benevolent allies (such as the fan-favourite mage and merchant, Shaun Gilmore) and recurring villains (such as Delilah Briarwood, the mastermind behind the slaughter of Percy's family).

These stories and characters are created from the minds of the players, and the paths of any narrative can change at a single roll of the dice. As such, it is currently impossible to predict when, how, or where the series will reach its end.

Research Methods

One factor that makes the volume of content in *Critical Role* moderately less overwhelming is that I have been watching it regularly each week since the launch of Episode 24.

[11] These sub-stories include a Wonderland-esque voyage to an alternate plane known as the Feywild; a counter-invasion of the city of Westruun, where Grog's old Goliath herd has assumed power; and a journey to Ank'Harel, a desert city ruled by a benevolent dragon.

I am not only an academic, but also a fan, and my engagement with *Critical Role* as a fan predates my interest in it as a research object. In November of 2015, I began to make tentative forays into the *Critical Role* community, transforming both an inactive Twitter account and an established Tumblr blog into *Critical Role* fan accounts. Under the pseudonym "CurrieBelle", I published fanfiction and fan art. Since then, I have been asked to involve myself in a small handful of fan projects, including a fan art gallery for Valentine's Day in 2016, and an episode of the fan-run *Critical Re-Roll* podcast that same summer ("Cornflakes From Hell"). I also briefly hosted a project of my own, facilitating a relatively informal "fic trade", in which about thirty authors exchanged prompts on a particular theme and wrote short-form fanfiction for each other.

I recognized, through these interactions with the community, that any examination of *Critical Role* – either as a new media form, an aesthetic object, or a social phenomenon – would be incomplete without some consideration of the fans. My experience of *Critical Role,* after all, was one that was fundamentally embedded in a fan culture; I could not ignore the influences of community icons like CritRoleStats, or, perhaps more vitally, the impact of my own implicit bias as a fan. I had spent almost a full year writing and drawing and discussing and making friends with the Critters before submitting a thesis proposal; I had already established many friendships and found many allies, and even had the fortune of conversing (albeit very briefly), with one of the cast members, Liam O'Brien, about some of my fan art.

In this context I am what Henry Jenkins would call an "aca-fan"; a fan within academia, and moreover one (like Jenkins) interested in writing about fan culture in an academic context. Jenkins coined the aca-fan term in 1992 in *Textual Poachers*, as part of his project to pitch a more positive take on fan studies to academia.[12] He points out that fans enjoy reflecting critically on their fannish objects: "Organized fandom is, perhaps first and foremost, an institution of theory and criticism" (Jenkins 1992, 88). While the sympathy between fandom and academia is certainly strong in this sense, these cultures typically differ from each other in terms of which skills, arguments, and behaviours they find laudable (Hills 2002). Hills characterizes the role of the aca-fan as necessarily liminal, in that aca-fans can never fully belong to either culture without immersing themselves in the institutional strictures of either academic or fan discourse. Hills also

[12] Subsequent critiques of Jenkins' work, such as those mounted by Matt Hills in *Fan Cultures*, note that *Textual Poachers* was forced to paint an uncritical, positively-slanted picture of fan culture in order to make his argument. While I agree with the criticism of his *position*, a number of Jenkins' *observations* about the behaviour of fan cultures are still pertinent and accurate.

observes that this leads to suspicion among fans when they are faced with academics seeking to 'study' them, and cites no less than *nine* different accounts from the late 90s and early 2000s in which this is the case (2002, xxxiv). I would add a later account from Celia Pearce, in which she describes the initial suspicion her co-players in *Second Life* held for her academic project (2008).

Even though this distaste is so well-documented, I am not familiar with it: my experience in studying the *Critical Role* fans has been almost overwhelmingly positive. I was open about my thesis project from the proposal stage, and I have had the pleasure of eager interviewees, personal assistance from CritRoleStats, and even unprompted questions from users who are curious about my thesis.[13] They ask about methodology, fan culture, or game structure and narrative, and on many occasions these questions spark lengthy, useful, and eye-opening discussions. I suspect there are a number of reasons for this openness in the community. Firstly, I was a fan long before I announced my thesis project, and this may have prevented Critters from seeing me as an interloper. Moreover, as Jenkins observed, fans are quite conscious and critical of the material they consume, and being conscious of *Critical Role* has led fans to share my curiosity about the show as an unfamiliar media experience. Most of the questions I have received about my thesis relate to how *Critical Role* differs from other media. For example, I received this anonymous question in early July:

> …this popped into my head and I couldn't get it out of my head. Since beginning planning/writing…did any aired episodes drastically change any bits you planned on writing? Just sort of curious, since *I haven't heard of too many…things written on things that change practically weekly*.

I received another question, this time about fan culture, from Tumblr user wishiwould:

> What are your thoughts on the way exchange of ideas with the audience is so much more free with Critical Rome's [sic] format…vs print and other media…I LOVE the open exchange with CR community and wish more fandoms and media could be that way!

The curiosity and excitement of these fan-scholar questions appear to have overridden the animosity between fan cultures and academics. Or it could simply be that fans are growing more comfortable with the presence of academics among them, just as academia is coming to accept

[13] It is absolutely possible that some Critters find my project too probing or pretentious, but I have not heard this complaint openly voiced as of yet.

fans. Celia Pearce noted that her fellow *Second Life* players were more eager to help her as time went on, recounting a story of how they joined in one of her conference presentations. Perhaps even the initial suspicion has worn away with time.

So, with such an eager group of fans ready to help me – many of them just as keen for answers as I was – I took advantage of digital ethnographic methods. I sought out six volunteers from the Critter fanfiction community, and recorded interviews with them over Skype voice chat. I asked questions about their consumption of the show, what they found engrossing about it and what they didn't, and how their viewership would inform and/or transform their fan works. The interviews consisted of thirteen questions, though I tailored each interview to progress more like a casual conversation than a survey, hoping that would produce more organic answers from my interviewees. Our conversations often wove between theorizing, criticism, and fannish glee with startling seamlessness. I sent sporadic questions to CritRoleStats, who later introduced me (through e-mail) to Rachel Romero, the VP of marketing at Legendary Digital Networks (the company that owns Geek and Sundry and thus *Critical Role*), who answered yet more questions. I took extensive notes on the experience of watching episodes, as well as the impacts these episodes had on Critters as expressed through social media. In these notes, I followed Geertz's principle of thick description in ethnography: I recorded the facts of specific events, but I also interpreted and contextualized these events, diving deep into the cultural structures informing them. Sections of thick description appear throughout this thesis to demonstrate the complexities of the *Critical Role* community in action. I also published some of my notes as Tumblr posts, allowing my fellow Critters to comment and contribute. In many cases, these discussions broadened my perspectives and inspired further research:[14] this thesis is a Critter collaboration.

This acknowledgement reintroduces the question of bias, which I have struggled with throughout my research. I worried I would shy away from criticism of the show, for fear of upsetting my friends in the fandom or the cast members themselves. I was, as ethnographer Janice Radway would put it, "studying up", because I was researching groups of people who possess a considerable amount of cultural and social power (1988). Studying up is difficult, because forming relationships with members of powerful groups can undermine a researcher's ability to critique (Radway 10, 1989). I not only felt indebted to *Critical Role's* cultural

[14] For example, I was rather stymied by the phenomenon of real-person fanfiction (RPF) until a friend, going by the username blackestglass, told me that RPF had a long history in fan cultures. After our conversation, I incorporated *Critical Role's* RPF into my research.

authorities for assisting me, but as a fan, their authority could impact me quite directly. Conversely, publicly identifying myself as an "academic" granted me my own kind of cultural authority. I was immediately wary of abusing that power: for example, I did not want to shut down useful community debates by expressing my opinions as the official verdicts of the resident 'expert'.

To avoid censoring my critiques of the show, I tried to reframe them positively: I now see this thesis as an opportunity to help *Critical Role* improve, and criticism is a necessary component of improvement. I have avoided exploiting my own cultural authority by refusing to deliver verdicts on fannish controversies, choosing instead to report all sides of the situation. As aforementioned, I have made a handful of public social media posts about my thesis; I hope that inviting conversations online will encourage fans to challenge my work as necessary. This practice of open writing also helped me consider new perspectives, when fans chose to share their own ideas on my topics. Radway says that the study of cultural elites provides an opportunity to "meditate" on how academic authority and cultural authority relate to one another: writing this thesis turned those meditations into routine (1989).

I have made a point so far of referring to this thesis as one that uses ethnographic *methods* rather than *an ethnography.* While I did glean a considerable amount of information from observation, interviews, notes, and auto-ethnographic reflections, there were a number of factors preventing me from writing this thesis as an ethnography. Firstly, I believe that any attempt at an ethnography of the *Critical Role* fan subculture would fall necessarily short, because the Critters are so diverse and diffuse. Unlike ethnographies of some digital cultures – such as those in Celia Pearce's work, as well as Lori Kendall's (2002) – there is no unifying digital space in which all Critters are guaranteed to participate. Some Critters prefer to discuss game mechanics on Reddit; others speak directly to the cast on Twitter; still others watch the show in isolation, limiting their engagement with other fans. Critters come from all over the world, represent a massive variety of ages and gender identities, and express their fannish devotion in different ways. I do not believe an ethnography of the Critters is impossible, but I do believe it would require more time and space than a Master's thesis allows, and perhaps some collaborators with different fan experiences from my own.

Even with the resources, this thesis would have been hampered by a second problem, one that informed my choice of another methodology. As I began to research tabletop games,

spectated and performed play, and fan cultures, I realized that *Critical Role* itself was such a complex piece of media that I would need to decipher how it operated before I or anyone else could create a picture of its larger fan culture. I wanted to know how the viewers influenced the content and operation of a private game, and how the players changed to accommodate for viewers. While ethnographic methods could obviously help me understand these dynamics, I also decided to take a closer look at the show itself. I chose to inform my arguments with close readings of *Critical Role* and some of its paratexts, isolating and interpreting patterns that could help me understand its ecosystem of ideas. As such, I have selected a number of scenes from the show and examined them in depth. These selected scenes usually represent the clearest iterations of patterns that have repeated across the series. In certain places, I have also found opportunities to marry my close readings of *Critical Role* with some quantitative analysis. Thanks to the efforts of CritRoleStats, a fan-run project that collects statistical data on the show, I have a great amount of quantitative data at my disposal, which enhances the specificity and accuracy of some of the arguments. Moreover, I have built my analyses of the data, the interviews, and the close readings on a varied background of theories and academic literature.

Literature Review

This thesis lies at the intersection of three different areas of study: studies of tabletop roleplay as an object; studies of fan cultures; and studies of play as performance.

Studies of tabletop roleplay are relatively limited in number, considering the difficulty in accessing the object of study. I have drawn on four of these works in order to properly capture tabletop culture and behavioural dynamics. Gary Alan Fine's 1982 book, *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds,* examines tabletop roleplaying as a subculture, describing the social codes of play using Erving Goffman's model of interactional frame analysis. The three other works I selected are Daniel Mackay's *The Fantasy Roleplaying Game: A New Performing Art* (2002)*,* Jennifer Grouling Cover's *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Roleplaying Games* (2010), and Markus Montola's PhD dissertation "On The Edge of the Magic Circle: Understanding Role-Playing and Pervasive Games" (2012). Mackay and Cover present tabletop roleplaying as a performing art and a story creation system respectively; both of these definitions were integral to my understanding of how tabletop roleplay could be consumed and understood as a public media product. Montola updates Fine's early work by discussing the social contexts of

tabletop roleplay, and he also adds some much-needed nuance to Fine's frame-based analyses. These studies follow similar methodological practices to my thesis, relying heavily on participatory ethnographic methods but also analyzing the texts and paratexts of tabletop roleplaying games.[15]

Beyond the text of *Critical Role* itself, I also studied its Critter-consumers. To understand *Critical Role* fan culture, I drew on fan studies works by Henry Jenkins, Matthew Hills, and others. I used Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* (1992) as a baseline for my observations about fans, noting where the Critters adhere to Jenkins' model and where they differ. Similar to Gary Alan Fine's *Shared Fantasy,* some of the arguments in *Textual Poachers* have become obsolete over time, but its commentary on the typical behaviours of fans remains relevant. In particular, I value Jenkins' observation that fans like to discuss their media critically because, as I have already shown, this aligns well with my own observations. I have also looked at some of Jenkins' later work (such as *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* from 2006) to see how his theories changed over time. Matthew Hills' book, *Fan Cultures* (2002)*,* provided me with the idea of fandom as a negotiated performance, neither inherently capitalist nor inherently resistant in its practices. Boundary negotiation is a central theme of this thesis, and the narrow path between complicity and resistance is one that fans and players alike are still mapping. Moreover, I like the idea that fandom *and* play have both been re-imagined as performances.[16] Still, these texts predate many of the features of online fandom that I need to address. To that end, I have sought out a number of more recent articles about fan culture. I found articles from the online open-access *Journal of Transformative Works* to be pertinent, because they often concentrated on the creative products and unacknowledged labour. It was through references in this journal that I came across Hellekson's idea of fandom as a gift economy, which heavily informs my discussion of fan labour in Chapter 3 (2009). In terms of my ethnographic techniques, I also found some useful methodological advice in digital ethnographies. In particular, I drew from Celia Pearce and Artemesia's discussions of identity in *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Online Games and Virtual Worlds* (2008). While my digital 'territory' is quite different from Pearce's virtual worlds, such as *Second Life,* I see a handful of similarities between her experiences and my own.

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[15] Mackay, Cover, Fine, and myself treat the dialogue exchanged by players during play as the central text of a tabletop roleplaying game. Character sheets, rulebooks, e-mails exchanged between roleplayers, or the dungeon master's notes are thus examples of paratexts.

[16] Mackay argues for tabletop roleplaying as a performance, but Clara Fernandez-Vara has suggested the same thing in reference to playing digital games (2009).

For example, Celia Pearce gradually grew to understand her avatar Artemesia as a distinct performance of self, a "social prosthesis" she used to interact with her digital world; I found that I had constructed a similarly intense and complex relationship with my Critter-identity as CurrieBelle (2008, 337). Pearce also explains that a turning point in her research came when she engaged more directly with the community in *Second Life*, rather than trying to study the players from afar. Her work underlined the importance of participation, and encouraged me not to pull away from the relationships I had already formed in the Critter community. Similar to Pearce, I also wrote journal entries about some of my more vivid online experiences.

The study of the relationship between play, performance, and spectatorship is also relevant to this thesis. I approached this topic in a number of different ways, and found interesting threads to pursue across many different disciplines. Mackay's 2001 book is, as aforementioned, an extended argument for tabletop roleplaying as a performing art. This helped me relate other kinds of play-performance to tabletop roleplaying. In that same vein of other play-performances, I found some surprising resonance in T.L. Taylor's book *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming* (2006). The later chapters of this book address how digital games needed to change in order to be legible to an audience. I found it useful that this work deals with mechanical structures and game rules, which were a touch underrepresented in the books on tabletop roleplay and in fan studies (which often, but not always, focus on fans of narrative media).

On the topic of play and play-performance, I found one other interesting thread of theory relating to the relationship between performance and surveillance in the digital age. Foucault's definition of surveillance as a disciplinary top-down power structure is now considered something of an oversimplification. Various theorists have recently proposed more complex readings of surveillance in relation to phenomena like webcams, livestreaming, and social media. For example, Albrechtslund and Dubbeld (2005) discuss surveillance as an entertainment apparatus, while Kolselka (2004) sees it as an opportunity to resist the very social standards that surveillance is supposed to ingrain. Intrigued as I was by these ideas, I have described *Critical Role's* apparatuses of surveillance and resistance in Chapter 2.

The theories described here inform the central argument of this thesis: in order to consume a tabletop roleplay series like *Critical Role,* viewers and players alike must adapt to an unfamiliar blend of play and performance. This process transforms typical fan and typical player

behaviour in a way that reflects the complex, multi-layered construction of the tabletop roleplaying game. Each agent involved with *Critical Role* must re-define familiar roles such as "fan" and "player", often transgressing accepted boundaries between creator and consumer in the process. In order to demonstrate this transformation of identity and territory, and to model *Critical Role's* exchange of creative ideas, I will use interactional frame analysis. Erving Goffman developed this model in his book, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience,* and used his model to explore and explain many kinds of social realities; Gary Alan Fine later adapted frame analysis to describe behaviours in traditional tabletop roleplaying games; and I will repurpose it again to show how these games are transformed when they are opened to an audience.

The first chapter of this thesis introduces interactional frame theory and how it is typically used to analyze tabletop roleplaying games. Here, I will introduce what I call the entertainment frame to explain how the performance context has impacted the actual content and form of a typical roleplaying game. The changes are particularly evident in speech acts on the parts of the players, but also in the visual and technical components of the set and stream layout. The key conflict in this chapter rests in the identity struggle of the cast members, who must negotiate the liberties of a person at play with the responsibilities of an entertainer before an audience. In the second chapter, I will shift the focus from the cast to the audience, and demonstrate how audience members engage with each frame in different ways. In particular, this chapter will examine how audience engagement with the mechanical frame has developed and helped to shape the role of viewers in a tabletop roleplay stream. Through shows like Critical Role, spectators are inserted into a performance that was previously both private and heavily participatory, demanding the input of all attendees; and in this new format, they must find a suitable role for themselves, including new means of participation. Finally, the third chapter will discuss another new frame: the fan-frame. This frame applies to both the cast and the Critters, and may in fact be their largest space of common ground. Jennifer Grouling Cover identifies fannish behaviour in private tabletop roleplaying, a behaviour that continues when tabletop roleplaying is broadcast. Both performers and fans of Critical Role share a penchant for pastiche, a fascination with fannish material objects, physical and embodied responses to narrative, and a strong shared identity born of group culture. This common ground facilitates some of Critical Role's greatest creative and collective achievements, but also some of its most interesting moral quandaries. Questions of

power, creative ownership, privacy, recognition, and labour are all still being negotiated by fans and players. All participants contribute a startling amount of voluntary labour, creating an imperfect gift economy – imperfect because there are still exchanges of money, and, more importantly, imbalances of creative power. Related to this imbalance, fans are enamored with the opportunities for extended contact with cast members on social media, but they have also carved out online spaces for themselves away from the cast. As fans themselves, the cast seems to know, instinctively, not to cross certain boundaries into their fandom's important counter-cultural currents. It is worth noting that in terms of the conflicts enumerated here – everything from the subconscious identity crisis of the players to the question of fan labour in an imperfect gift economy – each conflict has been dealt with to varying degrees. Some problems remain unsolved within the community; some have reached a satisfactory equilibrium; some have yet to be acknowledged, although their impact is still felt throughout the larger world of *Critical Role*. Finally, this thesis will conclude with an explanation of how the simple model of interactional frames can be used to parse the complex negotiations of identity, ownership, participatory culture, and online discourse across the larger genre of play-performance. Acknowledgements of conflicting frames can lead to better understanding of which boundaries must be negotiated for a show like *Critical Role* to succeed.

Chapter One: Players, Performers, and the Stories They Tell

What exactly are we watching when we tune in to *Critical Role*? The simple answer to the question is the catchphrase Matt uses to cue the beginning of each episode: "a show where a bunch of us nerdy-ass voice actors play *Dungeons and Dragons.*" Yet that simple answer represents a surprisingly complicated spectacle. Tabletop roleplaying games are very elaborate structures in and of themselves, which often require their players to engage with the game on multiple levels. These games facilitate many different kinds of play, including everything from imaginative story-crafting to agonic combat. To begin this argument, we need to look more closely at the game that forms the show's premise: the tabletop roleplaying game in general, and the fifth edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* in particular. The complexity of the tabletop roleplaying game informs the equally complex dynamics of the media ecosystem around it. To explain how *Dungeons and Dragons* changes when it is exposed to an external audience, we must first understand how it works in its typical private context.

Frame Analyses of Tabletop Roleplay

Most academic studies on tabletop roleplay date from before the era of the tabletop roleplay series, and as such, those interested in researching tabletop roleplay often had difficulty accessing their object of study. Previous literature relies heavily on participatory ethnography, and it is highly thorough but relatively limited. Many theorists who write on tabletop roleplay are roleplayers themselves. Of these, Gary Alan Fine, Daniel Mackay, and Jennifer Grouling Cover have written books that use interactional frames to analyze tabletop roleplay. Gary Alan Fine's *Shared Fantasy,* a sociological look at tabletop groups, provides an outline of their social structure; Daniel Mackay's *The Fantasy Roleplaying Game: A New Performing Art* examines tabletop roleplay using the framework of performance studies; and Jennifer Grouling Cover's *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Roleplaying Games* provides a useful guide to how a tabletop roleplaying game can construct an overarching narrative. Alongside these three books, I have also drawn on Markus Montola's PhD thesis, *On the Edge of the Magic Circle: Understanding Pervasive Games and Role-Playing,* which offers a useful re-imagining of frame analysis that I will also use and elaborate on later.

Of these four theorists, Mackay provides the most useful definition of a tabletop roleplaying game:

> …an *episodic* and *participatory* story creation *system* that includes a set of quantified *rules* that assist a group of *players* and a *gamemaster* in determining how their fictional *characters'* spontaneous interactions are resolved.
>
> (xix-xx, emphasis in original)

This definition is best understood piece by piece. Firstly, tabletop roleplaying games are episodic; groups meet periodically for discrete and self-contained sessions of play. These episodes – or 'sessions' – may form an ongoing story, creating what is known as a 'campaign'. Sessions are participatory because the gamemaster (who manages the setting, non-player characters, and conflicts within the fictional game-world, and who has absolute, final authority over the rules), and the players (who each control a single character in the world), contribute collaboratively to the progression of a story. The rules of the game create a flexible system for resolving narrative conflict. When the players encounter a challenge, puzzle, or enemy, they explain how their characters intend to resolve the situation. The gamemaster will then use a combination of published rulebooks, dice rolls, and personal judgements to determine the outcomes of the players' attempts. Importantly, these interactions are also *spontaneous.* While the gamemaster may plan out locations or story hooks ahead of time, they have no way of predicting how the players will react; for both the players and gamemaster, improvisation is crucial and constant. There are many tabletop systems, but *Dungeons & Dragons* is the standard across most tabletop series so far, though not all: *Critical Role* uses the fifth edition ruleset of *Dungeons & Dragons,* with a handful of custom rules – or 'house rules' – created by the gamemaster, Matthew Mercer. There are currently seven players on *Critical Role* in addition to Matt, and each of the seven players controls one character within the game world of *Critical Role*; collectively, these fictional heroes are known as Vox Machina. Vox Machina translates to 'voice machine', a nod to their shared real-world profession.

To describe the multifaceted style of play in tabletop games, Fine, Mackay, and Cover all use Goffman's model of interactional frames, as developed in Goffman's book *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Simply put, a "frame" is a set of principles that dictates social behaviour within a particular context. Gestures, words, and acts have different connotations within different social frames, and these connotations are developed over time within that context. For example, raising a hand in class is a respectful request to speak; a basketball player raising a hand during a game is probably requesting a pass, or trying to defend a

shot. Among other things, social frames keep us from confounding the meaning of similar gestures in different contexts, so our teachers are not usually in danger of throwing basketballs at their students.

Goffman is particularly interested in experiences that are re-creations, transformations, or ritualized versions of everyday social life. These transformations – Goffman calls them "keyings" – include things like games and theatrical performances, which are artificial reproductions of various situations (1974). For example, play-fighting (between animals, or perhaps siblings) can only exist because the participants know and understand that they will not actually be harmed; play-fighting is only a re-creation of an actual fight. Meanwhile, audiences and cast members in a play must accept a number of caveats in order to stage a performance. Actors must behave in character, reciting lines and performing actions as rehearsed, and pretending they do not know the outcome of the play. Audience members must 'suspend disbelief' and invest themselves emotionally, while remaining aware of the fact that the happenings on stage are re-creations. Watching the murder of a beloved character might produce tears, but it usually does not provoke an audience member into phoning the police. Audiences buy in to the story, and actors commit to their characters, but everyone is still somewhat aware of the fictional nature of the frame.

Different frames and keyings require different behaviours from their participants. A play's audience understands that the outcome of the play is pre-determined; however, for something like boxing or fencing (falsified fights, transformed into sport) a pre-determined outcome would be scandalous or even illegal. Instead, the boxing match requires that viewers believe both boxers are engaging in an uncompromized contest of skill, and that boxers obey certain rules about contact and timing in order to ensure the contest is, in fact, fair. Goffman discusses other differences of frame by comparing different media, showing that audiences of radio plays, novels, or stage productions all have to suspend disbelief in certain ways, transforming their expectations to fit within the frame. Radio plays will often use short sound cues, like chatter or the sound of rain, to set a scene. Afterwards, the sound will fade out – which would not happen in a real busy room or real rainstorm, but is necessary for the actors' voices to be heard. Accepting this convention is a behaviour specific to radio dramas. Goffman's model also allows for the lamination or "layering" of frames – so a fake game of chess could take place during a stage show, for example (1974).

Because Goffman applies his model to various reproductions, games, and performances, frame analysis appeals to many theorists studying tabletop roleplay. Tabletop roleplaying games are re-creations with multiple components. Roleplayers, like theatrical actors, are pretending to be someone other than themselves; tabletop gameplay is a keying of life-or-death physical combat, only with transformations that permit imaginary magic and monstrosities, and using dice to determine who emerges the victor. Roleplaying games require interaction through multiple frames, and the players must become adept at shifting between these frames in order to understand each other. In Fine's model, tabletop roleplayers oscillate between three primary frames when they play: the gameworld frame, encompassing all actions within the narrative diegesis; the gameplay frame, concerning the rules, dice, and play mechanics; and the social frame, comprising the extradiegetic relationships the players have with each other (Fine 1983).

Fine employs frame analysis to model the behaviours of roleplayers, and demonstrates its versatility in explaining everything from power structures to tabletop superstitions. Again, we will explore these scenarios as they become relevant. For now, we can focus on Fine's observation that players frequently shift or *oscillate* between frames as they play.[17] Fluid, uninterrupted movement through the narrative, gameplay, and social frames is essentially required of tabletop roleplayers. Losing track of the frame of reference can lead to misunderstandings, though Fine observes that these are swiftly clarified and corrected. In Episode 2 of *Critical Role,* Laura wonders aloud if she can ask a mechanical question, but Matt misunderstands her, thinking they are still in the narrative frame:

> Laura: Can I ask a question?
> Matt [*with a Scottish accent, in character as a dwarf*]: Ah, yes!
> Laura: Oh, not to you – to the other guy. Matt.
> [*other players laughing*]
> Matt [*in his own voice*]: Ah, yes. Yes, *Laura?*
>
> (*Critical Role* Episode 2)

As they are conscious of this frame oscillation, and the misunderstandings that arise from it, the players may crack jokes about their confusion, as Liam does later in that same episode: "When you say [we are] "too drunk", do you mean "we" the adventurers, or the humans back in Los Angeles?" (*Critical Role* Episode 2).

[17] Fine mostly uses the term "frame shifting" in his book. I prefer "frame oscillation", because it restores some of the fluidity that the frame metaphor naturally lacks.

Similarly, viewers of *Critical Role* must also shift through frames in order to understand the action taking place on screen. Sometimes, the participants are warned that a frame switch is occurring, which might take the form of everything from obvious signposting on the part of the players to subliminal clues. The content of the conversation can make the shift obvious, but players also indicate that they are shifting frames through their body language, tone of voice, accents, and attitudes.

Considering the potential porousness of these frames, the confusion between them, and the practice of frame oscillation, the term "frame" may seem too strictly geometric for the concepts at hand. My continued usage of the term is, in part, an effort to maintain consistency through the relatively limited discipline of tabletop roleplay research. However, I do still prefer the term "frame" to a more malleable synonym. Firstly because the term "frame", through Goffman, originally has ties to the theatrical, and in particular to the physical frame of the stage (1974). I like the way this rectangular shape recalls the screens of our laptops and phones (our digital proscenium arches). Frames can overlap, or nest within each other, which similarly recalls both social situations and the maneuverability of the windows open on a desktop or laptop screen. Moreover, the fact that the boundaries between different social contexts can be foggy does not eliminate them entirely. Shifting or transgressing from one frame into another requires a boundary of some kind; even if disputes rage over the exact location of the boundary, the dispute would not exist if someone did not feel a line had been crossed.

I was challenged on my use of the interactional frame model during a preliminary presentation of this work at the Spectating Play conference in Tampere, Finland, in early 2017. The panel of commenters expressed the complaint above; that the frame seemed to be a terribly restrictive model for a discussion that was essentially about the negotiation of identities, spaces, and social protocols. Their suggestions led me to Markus Montola, who reintroduces Goffman's concept of the *interactional membrane*:

> A living cell [has] a membrane which cuts the cell off from…its external milieu, ensuring a selective relation between them and the internal composition of the cell…a membrane does the actual work of filtering and does not merely designate that a selection from the external milieu is being maintained. The membrane is subject to many threats, for it can sustain its function over only a small range of changes in the external system
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> (Montola 2012, 50-51)

This organic metaphor adds some nuance and flexibility to our idea interactional frames. Rather than imagining a hard-edged boundary of wood or metal, we should think of the "edge" around each interactional frame as a membrane. In any frame, certain information from the external world must persist, while certain information must be filtered out of the cell to maintain its health and integrity. We preserve certain ideas within the narrative frame and exclude others. For example, previous relationships between the players are filtered out by the membrane around the narrative frame. Most of the players are either married or in long-term relationships, but it is perfectly acceptable for players who are not in a romantic relationship with each other to create romantic relationships between their characters. This is a familiar principle in the entertainment frame, as actors must discard their personal traits to step into different roles. Moreover, this cell metaphor creates an important sense of interconnectedness and interdependence on other frames: as Goffman states here, cells are susceptible to changes in an external system. If a factor external to the game begins to exert pressure on the game's "cells", the game itself might fall apart; or, at the very least, it will be forced to adapt to accommodate for this new presence.

Montola emphasizes that the membrane metaphor is "not about isolation, but about transformation" (2012, 52). External information is transformed through its relationship to the interactional frame. The dice rolls in the mechanical frame of tabletop roleplaying games are *transformed* into narrative information when they interact with the narrative frame. Laura's question to Matt in Episode 2 is erroneously transformed into narrative information; then, it is transformed back into mechanical information as she clarifies the target of her question. While the filtration method of the interactional frames in tabletop games is imperfect at times, they have achieved a workable and long-lasting equilibrium. *Dungeons and Dragons*, in particular, has persisted as a form of popular entertainment for over four decades.

Critical Role introduces an external force into this system of equilibrium, forcing these interactional frames to adapt in order to coexist once more. We, the audience, are that external force, and we bring with us our own social context – our own interactional frame, our own cell structure. I have decided to call this new frame the "entertainment frame." [18]

[18] I begin with the term "entertainment frame" (instead of "performance frame") to avoid confusion with performance theory. Mackay, in his 2001 book, uses very specific structures from performance studies when discussing tabletop roleplay as a performance: in this thesis, am referring more generally to the social context of a performer confronted with an audience. That said, the term "performance frame" is more or less interchangeable with "entertainment frame", and both are used later in this thesis.

The Entertainment Frame

The cast members of *Critical Role* shift through the same three frames of behaviour observed by Fine: the narrative frame, the gameplay frame, and the social frame. However, these players are simultaneously performers, playing their game before an audience of tens of thousands of people. They inhabit what I have called the "entertainment frame" – the social context of a performer of any kind who is faced with an audience. Moreover, *Critical Role's* entertainment frame is a professional one, as the actors are paid for their work. The show itself is free to watch, but the show's parent channel, Geek and Sundry, collects about thirty thousand monthly Twitch subscriptions of at least 4.99 USD each[19]. In addition, *Critical Role* has a number of corporate sponsors, including Lootcrate, BackBlaze, and Wyrmwood Gaming. Geek and Sundry has also involved *Critical Role* in their joint project with the website Nerdist, a program called Alpha. Alpha costs an additional five dollars, but allows viewers to see a small amount of extra content both during and after *Critical Role* livestreams.

The context of professional entertainment adds a number of new operations to the dynamic of frame oscillation during tabletop roleplay. First and foremost, the players are being watched by an audience. Since *Critical Role* is a Twitch livestream, this audience is watching the performance of play as it happens (or, more accurately, with a thirty-second delay caused by technological limitations), much as they would watch a live show at a theatre[20]. There are no opportunities to cut mistakes out in post-production; the camera captures everything. Because these performers are also working for a production company, and creating income for them, they are also burdened with the tasks of creating audience appeal and facilitating clear communication. The players are not playing for their own amusement anymore, not entirely: instead, their performance of play must also captivate an audience, and compel them to 'tune in next week'. Whether it is for the sake of professional obligation or the actors' desire to share their story, the cast of *Critical Role* is charged with the task of creating an appealing spectacle. Art in

[19] Twitch.tv offers "super" subscription packages for 9.99 and 24.99, but Geek and Sundry offers no additional incentives for these rates.

[20] Twitch.tv is an online livestreaming service, initially developed so users could to livestream themselves playing video games. Creative groups and individuals have learned to use Twitch for other purposes: Geek and Sundry uses it to broadcast tabletop games, geeky talk shows, and other video entertainment. Twitch is its own online success story, boasting millions of broadcasters and hundreds of millions of users.

general, and narrative art in particular, is communication; and the players must communicate clearly to their anonymous audience behind the camera.

At this point, I would like to draw a useful parallel to demonstrate the importance of clarity in entertainment, particularly in the performance of play. Clarity is not just the burden of narrative media, but also for any game that is broadcast before a large audience. TL Taylor devotes a chapter in her book on e-sports, *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming,* to the role of e-sports fans. These fans may find spectatorship challenging because digital game interfaces may be confusing or unclear, as they are typically designed to facilitate the player's perspective, not the perspective of an audience. Taylor also describes tactics used to *clarify* the action of e-sports – and traditional sports – for viewers, including everything from changes in the rules, to the role of commentators, to the introduction of new technologies such as instant replays (Taylor 2012). By her description, the journey towards the commodification of sport – and the transformation of sport into spectacle – largely involves the process of broadening the appeal of sport by clarifying it for spectators.

Critical Role faces a similar situation, in that the proceedings of the game must be clear in order to attract spectatorship. There are purely logistical problems in achieving clarity, such as how one might film a game that is traditionally played around a table. Problems arise from the fact that tabletop rules are complicated, and from the fact that players oscillate so quickly through frames – sometimes so quickly they even confuse each other! And, of course, the 'live' aspect of the livestream creates additional challenges for clarity through the increased potential for both human error and technological glitches. The sound might cut out, the internet might fail, the stream might lag; the players might mumble, contradict themselves, or make mathematical mistakes, and all of these errors must be dealt with as they occur live.

All of these challenges to clarity have arisen because the players have decided to play their game before an audience: in seeking the solutions to these problems, the players have undergone fascinating shifts in typical tabletop roleplay practices. Here, not only will we delve more deeply into the traditional negotiation between narrative, gameplay and social worlds, but also into how the entertainment frame alters this negotiation.

Clarity, Technically Speaking

When I speak of "clarity", I should be clear myself, and specify exactly what spectators are looking to understand, and what performers are looking to communicate, in a tabletop roleplaying game. Looking at the technical architecture of the show can point us towards what information is most important. For comparison's sake, the examples in TL Taylor's book indirectly tell us what viewers of sports and e-sports care about as they watch. She mentions the spectators may find first-person camera views frustrating, because it gives a limited perspective of the larger conflict, and it is possible that stellar moves or vital kills will be missed entirely. This suggests the spectators are interested in understanding the general flow of the competition (which team is ahead, or which team is playing better). Other technological developments in spectator sports, such as instant replay and slow-motion replay, suggest that viewers are interested in feats of skill; these replays exist to show viewers particularly amazing feats of athleticism or skill that they might have missed the first time around.

Similarly, looking at what the technological setup of *Critical Role* emphasizes or discourages will naturally point us towards what might be considered the "performance highlights". To put it another way, the technological structure of *Critical Role* guides the viewers to the most appealing part of the play spectacle. This point also already demonstrates how the presence of an audience – in this case, the presence of a camera connected to an audience – can change the process of play to make it more spectator-friendly.

Over nearly 100 episodes, the technological scaffolding of *Critical Role* has not changed too drastically. Three cameras record the players simultaneously, and all three perspectives are assembled in one video window for the viewers. Matt, the dungeon master, is given his own frame in the top-left corner. The remainder of the screen is split in two. The top half of the frame shows the players at one table, and the bottom half of the frame shows the players at the other table.

Initially, the space of play was arranged similar to a traditional tabletop game, with the dungeon master at the head of the table (so their notes can be hidden from the players) and the players facing each other across the table. However, in Episode 18, the layout of the tables was completely restructured, placing Matt across the room, with the players in a single row facing him. The tables are angled slightly inwards, so the players can still communicate. Matt is also no longer standing; he is given a chair. This redistribution of space accomplishes a number of things. Firstly, it means that the players are still facing almost directly into the cameras while Matt

narrates large portions of text, describing scenery or characters. This gives us a much clearer look at their reactions than the previous arrangement, which would show the players looking at Matt and therefore reacting in profile. Keeping Matt seated also means it is impossible for the camera to lose track of him, should he move suddenly or walk around while performing. Lastly, the re-arrangement of the tables discourages what is known as "cross-talk"; players speaking to each other, usually out of character, while the dungeon master is interacting with other players. It is far more difficult to engage in cross-talk when the other players are to your left and right, and you must whisper in full view of the Dungeon Master, or even address someone three or four seats down the row of players. This has reduced the ambient chatter in most episodes of *Critical Role*, and increased the frequency of note-passing. As a result of this framing, Matthew Mercer's narration is either met with respectful silence or hasty shushing; players are less likely to chat while other players are performing; and a general formality rests on the proceedings that – while it does not completely eliminate the friendly atmosphere – grants it the authority of a performance, rather than the casual atmosphere of play. Not only do the earlier episodes feature much more cross-talk, more difficult eyelines to follow, and more friendly irreverence on the part of the players, but the show is far more structured in comparison to the players' private games. Before the show officially launched, the players filmed a snippet of a home session of their campaign as a promotion for *Critical Role.* This video, which is still available on YouTube, shows a much more chaotic format. Players argue over each other, and Matt stands, paces, and performs quite bombastically while the players shout their solutions at him. The energy of that "sneak peek" episode is comparable to the panic of the players as they face danger in later *Critical Role* episodes, but in those episodes, the energy is more streamlined. As distraught as they are, players are quick to hand over the proceedings to whichever character is acting at the time, while the spectator-players hush each other and watch, wide-eyed and fearful, waiting for their own turn. The show's consciousness of its viewers – and the staging changes made to incorporate those viewers more smoothly – led to the players creating a performance of play that is much easier for outside viewers to follow.

Other elements of the show have similarly contributed to these projects of streamlining and clarity. For example, when Matt was asked during an interview with Dungeon Life what aspiring roleplayers would need to stream their game on Twitch, he mentions that these games require good audio before anything else ("Twitch Advice with Matthew Mercer"). It is important

for the players to be seen, but even more important that they be heard. As Matt points out in the interview, most of the information in a tabletop session is transmitted verbally. This is why there are other popular tabletop series that exist in an audio-exclusive podcast form, including both *The Adventure Zone* and the early seasons of *Acquisitions Inc.* Indeed, alongside the restructuring of the set, there is a notable improvement in audio quality between early episodes of *Critical Role* and later instalments. As a celebration of *Critical Role's* 100th episode, Geek and Sundry also began to re-release *Critical Role* episodes in podcast form. Even for a show with such carefully constructed visuals, the visuals are secondary to what the players are saying.

The stream layout, as seen by the viewers, has also changed over time for clarity's sake. In early episodes, the window's negative space was filled by the players' Twitter handles, the Twitch chat, a running ticker that announced the number of subscribers, and other information. Over time, all of these distractions and excesses have been eliminated. The window now includes the title of the parent company at the top, the names of the sponsors in the top-right corner, and occasionally uses the bottom-right corner for shots of the battle maps or quick summaries of the characters' stats. There are far fewer distractions, and most of them remain stationary throughout the show unless they are relevant to the proceedings, as with the battle maps and abbreviated character sheets. The backdrop behind the actors has also changed. A white and blue wall with a chalkboard and bookshelf – both of which distracted the actors on more than one occasion – were eliminated, and replaced with a stone wall furnished with curtains. Many of these transformations took time to implement, but the current Twitch layout is the simplest it has ever been, and aside from some new colours, it has remained unchanged from Episode 57 to Episode 102, at time of writing.

It must be emphasized that while these changes add a formality to the normal tabletop game, they really only create a formal atmosphere *in comparison* to previous *Critical Role* episodes: the later episodes would still appear quite casual to a newcomer. Players swear, stutter, make lewd jokes, argue, interrupt each other, and knock things off the tables by accident. If Matt needs to leave his seat to whisper a secret to a player, Travis likes to move into Matt's vacant camera-frame and make silly faces. Some of the actors are also very physical, and tend to escape the carefully constructed frame with their exuberant motion, including a memorable moment in Episode 83 in which Marisha falls out of her chair in excitement.

Figs. 1 and 2 – The stream in Episode 16, showing the original Twitch layout and characters interacting with a blackboard, and the simplified layout in Episode 83. Marisha is absent from the latter photo because she has fallen out of her chair on the lower right.

This qualification is part of a larger pattern that appears throughout this chapter: while aspects of *Critical Role* can be 'tidied up', the show cannot lose its playful messiness. After good audio quality, Matt's second recommendation for the quality of a tabletop roleplay series is that everyone present needs to be having fun; the casual setting of a game both facilitates and emphasizes that. One of the appealing things about *Critical Role* is the paradox at its heart, in that we, the viewers, are essentially watching a demonstration of extreme performance skill in an informal setting – or, more accurately, in a setting that is carefully constructed to be informal. These role-players are clearly having fun, but they are also good at what they're doing. Watching *Critical Role* is an informal display of skill, similar to that of a professional soccer player juggling a ball in their backyard, or a synchronized swimmer showing off at a pool party. Fittingly, the actors enjoy provoking each other into challenges of skill. When Sam's two characters, Taryon and Scanlan, finally meet each other, he is eventually goaded into playing both characters at once and having a conversation with himself.

My conclusion here, emerging from the technical foundation of *Critical Role*, is that the producers and players alike have focused primarily on clarifying the contents of the narrative frame. This is also why our model of frame analysis is particularly useful in proving this argument: we can look at behaviours inherent to each frame of typical tabletop roleplay, and compare how they have been altered to transmit an emotional narrative to an audience. From here, we will begin looking at these behaviours in more detail. Jennifer Grouling Cover provides the most useful overview of these behaviours, because she breaks her frames up into different styles of speech. Using her model, we can compare the patterns of speech she has identified in private roleplaying groups and contrast them with the patterns observed in the players on *Critical Role.* In this way, we will be able to spot specific areas where the roleplayer and the performer identities come in to conflict, and how these conflicts are addressed.

The Cover Model of Narrativity

Jennifer Grouling Cover identifies six different types of speech that can occur during tabletop roleplay: DM (dungeon master) speech, in-character speech, dice rolls, narrative suggestions, narrative planning, and off-record speech. These modes of speech can be roughly divided into three groups, corresponding to the frames we have already identified. DM speech and in-character speech are part of the narrative frame; dice rolls and narrative suggestions are

part of the gameplay frame; and narrative planning and off-record speech are part of the social frame. These modes of speech are also organized in order of their "narrativity". Those modes of speech in the narrative frame predictably have the highest narrativity, while off-record speech has low narrativity.

Cover defines the concept of "narrativity" quite thoroughly, and we can reuse her definition for our purposes here. As opposed to understanding narrative as a form – say, a plot structure with a beginning, middle, and end – Cover defines narrative as an *experience.* This is particularly useful for tabletop games, because the 'narrative' of a tabletop game comes into existence as the game is improvised; it is quite literally an experience of building a story step by step. If a particular type of speech possesses a high degree of narrativity, then it engages the player more thoroughly in the narrative experience. Cover also helpfully identifies three major ways speech can create this engagement.[21] If the speech act gives players a more vivid mental picture of the setting, they are being *spatially* engaged. If the speech act makes a player unsure of what is going to happen next, so they cannot predict the way the story will go, they are engaged *temporally*. Colloquially, we might refer to this as being "in the moment": the uncertainty of the character's present moment and the player's present moment converge, creating a shared feeling of suspense. Tabletop roleplaying is particularly effective at creating this kind of engagement, because the success of player actions must be determined by a dice roll, rendering the immediate future constantly uncertain for players and characters alike. Finally, if the speech act helps players sympathize with or understand the emotions of a character, they are *emotionally* engaged. Each of these three modes of engagement – a vivid mental image, a stark sense of time, or a deeply-felt emotion – can be as powerful as the others, or as lacking.

Returning to Cover's speech model, we can see how some modes of speech facilitate this engagement better than others. Off-record speech is considered to have the lowest level of narrativity, because it tends to distract and detract from all three of these methods of engagement. Off-record speech emerges due to the social context of the game. If the players consider each other friends, they will engage in casual conversation throughout the game: catching up on personal lives, or sharing jokes or stories about the real world. This also covers observations about the room in which the game is physically situated, because it moves the focus away from

[21] Cover uses the term "immersion" rather than "engagement". However, since she uses it to refer to a variety of experiences, and since "immersion" is already a hotly contested term without using it so loosely, I have opted to replace "immersion" with a less controversial alternative.

the imaginative narrative world. Gary Alan Fine offers a vividly bizarre example of players complaining about the taste of the water they are drinking, a conversation which destroys the mood of a tabletop session. Similarly, I can recall a number of occasions in which *Critical Role'*s story has been briefly derailed so the players can kill a fly that has been buzzing around the set. In most if not all cases, off-the-record speech actively sabotages narrative engagement by directing attention towards something else.

The next level of speech is that of narrative planning. At this level, players are discussing how to approach a situation tactically, or whether or not certain rules will come into effect. While this mode does concern the game content, it is in the realm of the hypothetical; players are not declaring that their character *will* perform an action, but speculating or discussing what the characters could feasibly do. This is not specifically addressed in Cover's work, but this speech tends to be conducted largely out-of-character. Questions about the rules – such as the duration of a particular spell, or the amount of gold the party has – also fall under this category. While these questions do clarify the narrative world for players, they also highlight a disconnect between the knowledge of the player and the knowledge of the character, resulting in increased dissonance rather than deeper engagement.

The previous two types of speech are part of the social frame, because players are speaking out-of-character, and they have not yet impacted the fictional world. In contrast to this, the next two categories, narrative suggestions and dice rolls, impact the fictional world through gameplay mechanics. Narrative suggestions occur once the plans are formalized, and players declare what their characters are about to do. This transition is often marked by a linguistic switch from hypothetical clauses to first-person, present-tense, declarative speech. "We could go to the tavern and ask for information" is narrative planning; "My character goes to the tavern" is a narrative suggestion. Despite the fact that this kind of speech involves a direct impact upon the story-world, its 'narrativity' is undercut by its lack of narrative *authority*. This is why they are called narrative suggestions, as opposed to narrative actions. At any time, the Dungeon Master could take one of these suggestions and veto it or alter it – for example, "You can't go to the tavern, because you don't know where it is. Roll an investigation check to see if you can find it."

Evidently, this is one place where the next mode of speech, the dice roll, enters the equation. Dice rolls determine the degree of success players have when attempting certain actions, and therefore also have a distinct impact on creating engagement in the narrative. They

may dictate how much the characters notice when they enter a room, or whether they are able to convince a villain to talk instead of fight: as such, dice rolls often help to determine the boundaries of spatial, temporal, and emotional engagement. Importantly, these rolls still require interpretation by the dungeon master. To simplify an extraordinarily complex ruleset, characters in *Dungeons and Dragons* have certain natural aptitudes: some are smarter, some are stronger, some are more observant, some are more charming. When a player announces their intention to perform an action – say they attempt to break down a door – the dungeon master will reflect on how difficult that challenge will be, and then set a number that represents the "Difficulty Class" or "DC" of the challenge. A flimsy, rotted door might have a low DC of 10; a reinforced vault would have a much higher DC. Players will then roll on a 20-sided die to determine if they can match that DC. Obviously, a stronger character will have a better chance of breaking down the door, and so they will add a number representing that advantage – called a "modifier" – to their roll. There are two extreme cases in which modifiers and DCs become moot. If a player rolls a 1 on their 20-sided die, they fail; if they roll a 20, they succeed, regardless of what they are attempting. Rolling a 20 is colloquially called a "critical hit", a "crit", or a "natural twenty" (so named because the number is twenty before any modifiers are added; this avoids confusion with moments when the player's roll and modifier total twenty when added together, which doesn't count as an automatic success). Rolling a one is a "critical fail" or a "natural one". While dice rolls have a great impact on the path of the narrative in that they dictate each success and failure, there is also a great amount of creative interpretation required on the part of the dungeon master – particularly if they are thrown by an unlikely natural twenty. Therefore, the dice *themselves* can increase narrativity by adding suspense to the success rate of each action, as well as increasing engagement with the characters by rigging that success rate to align with their skills, but the power of the dice is still limited by the dungeon master's discretion.

Lastly, we come to the tier of speech acts that directly influence the narrative world. Unlike the speech acts in the mechanical frame, these speech acts do not require the dungeon master's interpretation or permission to affect the narrative; instead, they are performative, and they are true as soon as they are spoken. In-character speech is the first of these acts, referring to moments when actors speak as their characters. In rare cases, the dungeon master might veto the words of someone who is speaking in-character, if a character possesses knowledge they are not supposed to, or if they make a particularly obvious mistake. Characters misremembering details,

lying, making false assumptions, mispronouncing names, or making other errors may not be corrected by the dungeon master if those errors would make sense within the story world.

The dungeon master's speech is considered to have the highest level of narrativity. Unlike all the other speech acts, it cannot be contradicted by a higher authority, because the dungeon master is traditionally the highest authority present. As soon as the dungeon master describes something, it exists; all other speech acts only become part of the world with the dungeon masters's explicit or implicit permission. As such, DM speech is excellent at providing temporal and spatial engagement, as well as provoking emotional engagement by dictating the tone of the scene.

In the next section, I will posit two ways in which the introduction of the entertainment frame changes the normal dynamics of these speech acts and their correlating frames. I have observed that the players tend to maximize the quantity of narrative-rich speech, and that they have modified off-the-record speech to appeal to an audience.

Accentuating Narrative-Rich Speech

It should be noted that in any given iteration of a roleplaying game, a campaign may be pulled towards one end of Cover's scale of narrativity or the other, depending on the players. A group of long-time friends playing together may engage in more off-the-record chatter, sharing old stories or private jokes. Fine observes that some players are uncomfortable engaging in in-character speech, and may transform such speech into narrative suggestion instead (for example, saying "I ask the guard for information"). This summary-style approach decreases narrativity by sacrificing detail, but may be more comfortable for inexperienced players, or players who are unfamiliar with each other. In this way, the preference for certain types of play acts over others helps to characterize the atmosphere or social context of the game.

On *Critical Role,* the trend is to push the game overwhelmingly towards acts of higher narrativity. Types of speech that rest lower down on the scale of narrativity – off-the-record talk and narrative planning – are replaced or reduced to make way for speech with greater narrativity, while types of speech that rest higher on the scale are frequent and extensive. This shift is caused by the influence of the performance frame on *Critical Role*. Firstly, as the players are professional actors, they are particularly engaged by aspects of the game that involve roleplaying and character development. Before *Critical Role* was launched, the same group of voice actors

played *Dungeons and Dragons* together offline, in a fairly typical private setting. Interviews with the cast reveal that roleplaying had always been an integral part of their tabletop experience. The distinctive character voices and accents employed by the majority of the cast, for example, were not invented for *Critical Role,* but for the group's home game. Laura Bailey was the first one among them who began speaking 'in character', and she claims she did so spontaneously (Kraft 2015). The other players eventually joined her. Matthew Mercer has also quite revealingly described tabletop roleplay as "What we [voice actors] do for a living" ("2012 AyaCon Interview").

While the cast begin in a place of narrative-rich play, they also saw that rate of narrative-rich play increase over time due to the influence of the performance frame. On a macrocosmic level, we can see this phenomenon in the relative depreciation of the importance of combat encounters across the series. Combat encounters are typically lower-narrative affairs out of necessity. Due to the complexity of the combat rules, narrative-rich DM speech and in-character speech must share a space with dice rolls, mental math, and questions about dimensions, distances, and targets. For many players of tabletop roleplaying games, these complex rules are a large part of the appeal of tabletop. Moreover, characters are rewarded for fighting and winning fights. In *Dungeons and Dragons* in particular, victorious characters are rewarded with greater combat prowess in the form of stronger spells, new abilities, or better weapons: this creates a cyclical, self-fulfilling reason to include combat encounters in the game. And, of course, combat is very exciting, as characters are placing their lives on the line. In short, combat is important, and to some players it may even be central to their enjoyment of tabletop RPGs.

However, while the intensity of each encounter has increased as the characters on *Critical Role* level up, the actual *frequency* of encounters has decreased over time. According to CritRoleStats, 28.5% of the minutes of total gameplay time from Episode 1 to Episode 100 are spent in combat.[22] In addition, 29 of *Critical Role's* first 100 episodes feature no combat whatsoever.[23] Even this total may be an under-estimation, as it includes combat encounters that are instigated more for narrative comedy than ludic competition. For example, the only case of

[22] CritRoleStats defines the beginning of a combat encounter as any moment Matt asks for an "initiative roll", which determines the order in which the combatants act.

[23] Combat encounters are usually restricted to one episode, so the players do not lose track of the game's mechanical state. Exceptions occur when the circumstances of the fight change drastically. Episode 54 ends mid-combat, as the black dragon Umbrasyl flees the battlefield with Vax and Scanlan in its stomach and Grog dangling from it by a chain; episode 55 begins with these characters trying to free themselves.

combat in Episode 99 is a one-on-one bar fight between Grog and a half-orc named Lionel. It is instigated because Grog is jealous of Lionel, and it is entirely played for comedy. The encounter lasts just over sixteen minutes of real time, whereas other combat encounters can range from half an hour to three hours long depending on difficulty. The only combat encounter in Episode 72 occurs because Keyleth magically turns herself into an elephant, and Grog, mistaking her for a *real* elephant, attacks her until the spell breaks. This fight is even shorter than Lionel's, lasting seven minutes and thirty seconds. With these borderline cases included, nearly a third of *Critical Role's* episodes – as well as nearly three-quarters of its total content – are filled with something other than the negotiation of combat mechanics. And, as I have mentioned, this reduction of the frequency of combat appears to be a learned behaviour. Only eight of the entirely combat-free episodes occurred before Episode 50; the other twenty-one are between Episodes 50 and 100.

Alongside what we could call the quantifiable aspects of this trend are the qualitative aspects of it, which I have gleaned from my own notes and observations. Episode 60, which was performed in a theatre before a live audience, featured no combat, and yet the Critters in the audience came away wholly content with the experience. Whatever they had paid for, it was *not* to see a combat encounter, as they were not openly disappointed by the lack of a fight. I also remember Episode 45, "Those Who Walk Away", as a major turning point for the show. In the previous Episode, a dungeon-crawl titled "The Sunken Tomb," Percy accidentally activates a trap in the tomb that kills Vex'ahlia.[24] Vex is brought back to life after a ritual in which her twin brother Vax offers his life for hers. "Those Who Walk Away" is a non-combat episode, in which a vast majority of the content is just conversations dealing with the repercussions of Percy's mistake and the ritual afterwards. Percy apologizes to both twins; Vex interrogates Keyleth about what happened while she was dead; and Vax and Keyleth discuss Vax's potential debt to the goddess of death, the Raven Queen. The group then investigates the treasures they received from the tomb and plans their next move. While there had been episodes before "Those Who Walk Away" that were not focused on killing monsters, Episode 45 was the first episode in which the most important events – indeed, almost the *only* events – were in-character conversations. It was an episode that could have belonged in a melodrama, and it was far from the last of its kind, as other episodes such as "Hope" (Episode 56), "Duskmeadow" (Episode 57), "Passed Through

[24] Death is not a permanent problem for Vox Machina. Rituals to revive the dead exist in the *Critical Role* universe (and within the mechanics of *Dungeons and Dragons)*, but they do have a moderate chance of failure. By the end of the story, only Vax dies permanently, giving his soul to the goddess of death he serves.

Fire" (Episode 69) and "A Bard's Lament" (Episode 85) are fundamentally about addressing the relationships of characters within and without Vox Machina. Episode 115, the last episode of Vox Machina's story, is an extended roleplay-heavy epilogue with no combat. This shift occurred because of the slow-growing influence of the entertainment frame: the fans constantly expressed their interest in *Critical Role's* characters and its narrative through social media, and when dramatic non-combat episodes like "Those Who Walk Away" were still well-loved and positively received, the players slowly realized they could simply talk to each other in character for three hours and the viewers would be just as riveted. It is quite telling that in these moments, Matt often hands control of the show's pacing over to the players. Typically, a player will tell Matt that their character is pulling another character aside for a conversation. The conversation plays out, primarily through in-character speech, and then the players will give an indication that the scene is over, either through their own body language (turning away from their scene partner, looking towards Matt, or nodding) or by describing their character walking away. Matt then steps back into his role as the arbiter of order and pacing, and moves the story on as he sees fit – asking other characters what they have been doing in the meantime, describing the passage of time until the next major event, or ending the episode. Reflecting on a particular argument in Episode 85, where Matt did not speak at all for eighteen minutes, he says the scene "allowed me, for that moment, to be the audience…that's the reward for all the hard work" (*"*Talks Machina #13"). He understands these dramatic engagements not only as a spectacle for the larger audience, but also as the moments that he as the facilitator of the story finds the most rewarding.

As we narrow our focus from trends across the series and into specific episodes, it reveals smaller ways in which narrative speech takes priority. Even when combat *is* present, it is often infused with in-character speech and important narrative moments. One of the most obvious narrative beats occurs whenever the players defeat a significant foe. Those moments are marked by Matt using the rallying, memetic phrase, "How do you want to do this?". This phrase indicates that the characters have delivered a blow that will slay a major adversary. By framing this moment as a question, it allows victor to explain how they dispatch their enemy. Matt will then describe the hit as it takes effect. With this tool, Matt stages scenes like the one in which Vox Machina coordinates to slay Anna Ripley, a recurring villain, after she has killed Taliesin's character, Percy:

> Travis: I'm gonna take the axe and go straight across her navel.
> Matt: Keyleth?

> Marisha: I'm gonna take a grasping vine and choke her around her throat.
> Matt: The vines wrap around to hold her in place. Vex?
> Laura: I want an arrow straight through her heart, and one in her mouth as she screams.
> Matt: The scream is cut short as the arrow finds itself placed in the back of the skull, the other one straight through the chest. Grog, your blade cuts through the midsection as the other grasping vine pulls the lower half down. Ripley is entirely torn asunder in a final, silent scream.
>
> (*Critical Role* Episode 68)

This is a rare instance in which the final blow is given to multiple characters – in fact, it goes to the entirety of Vox Machina, as Scanlan and Vax make their strikes prior to this as well. The players are all visibly distraught over Percy's death (both Laura and Marisha are in tears) and instead of simply saying "you kill Ripley", Matt allows the characters a moment of vengeful catharsis through his vivid descriptions. The image of Ripley, vivisected and impaled, engages us spatially; Matt's description of the moment of silence that falls after her death, in which all the characters turn to look at Percy's corpse, engages us temporally, as we count the beats and wait for him to breathe; and the characters expressing their rage and heartbreak through their actions engages us emotionally.

Another tool to increase narrative engagement is the use of distinctive character voices by the cast members. Laura, Liam, and Taliesin all speak with vaguely British accents; Travis speaks in a bass register, and frequently drops consonants to emphasize Grog's stupidity; Ashley, Sam, and Marisha do not use accents, but they do enunciate more clearly when they are speaking in character, and pitch their voices slightly higher or lower. This makes it very easy to tell when the players are speaking in character, and thus removes some – though not all – of the ambiguity of frame oscillation. Through the use of their accents, the actors can *replace* speech acts that Cover identifies as low-narrative with speech acts of higher narrativity. "Narrative planning" sits in the lowest sphere of narrativity, just above out-of-character chatter, because it concerns the players speaking in hypotheticals about their next step. The cast increases the narrativity of these debates in a very simple way: they conduct their planning sessions in-character. Sometimes, during these planning sessions, they will even ask questions that could only fall within the mechanical frame – specifically, asking about game rules or dice rolls – but their character voices will persist. Liam and Travis in particular are notorious for keeping their lower-pitched British accents even when

asking about combat rules. During these strategic conversations, the players also try to suggest courses of action that align with their character's preferences and abilities. Travis is actually quite a cunning strategist; unfortunately, his character Grog is not. There are many moments in which Travis struggles to offer a solution while staying within the bounds of Grog's vocabulary and knowledge. On some occasions, Travis can't resist – and the characters point out how it is 'unlike him' to come up with a good idea. For example:

> Taliesin [*as Percy, discussing a battle*]: A small strike group came, attacked the fort. Did damage, I wouldn't necessarily call it significant damage-
> Laura [*as Vex*]: But wiped out a large percentage of the force there.
> Taliesin [*as Percy*]: Decimated it-
> Travis [*as Grog*]: Seventy-five percent.
> Sam [*as Scanlan*]: Grog?
> Taliesin [*as Percy*]: Grog-
> Travis [*as Grog*]: I mean – whatever those words mean.
> Taliesin [*as Percy*]: That's a *very* good guess, Grog.
> (*Critical Role,* Episode 77)

Grog is correct – the fort did lose about seventy-five percent of their forces – but Grog is canonically unable to count higher than four. Were they not discussing such developments in-character, it would have been perfectly prudent to point out that the losses were exactly seventy-five percent; the prioritization of in-character speech over narrative planning, however, means that Grog's observation is part of *Critical Role's* story world, and as such, it can't sneak by without a joke.

While these macrocosmic and microcosmic changes to increase narrative-rich content are effective, the mechanical and social frames cannot be fully eliminated from the dynamic. Remember, with our metaphor of the cellular membrane, that interactional frames exist in a careful equilibrium with other frames and with the world around them. In particular, Fine observes that the dynamic of any tabletop roleplaying game is contingent upon the relationships that constitute the social frame of the actors. The performance frame has an impact on this social frame as well, changing its relationship with the narrative and mechanical frames, and necessitating new modes of speech altogether.

Two Modifications to Off-the-Record Speech: Segmentation and Integration

Off-the-record speech is unavoidable in tabletop games, but it also has the potential consequence of shattering the engagement that the other, more narrative-rich forms of speech have built. However, it is also – somewhat paradoxically – key to the vital aura of earnestness and casual play that informs much of *Critical Role's* appeal. The cast members find ways to incorporate off-the-record speech in a way that can also appeal to viewers. While there are always cases in which off-the-record speech acts simply interrupt the flow in *Critical Role* as they would in any tabletop game, there are ways to smoothly relate off-the-record speech with the other frames at play. The first tactic is segmentation, in which certain off-the-record speech moments occur during sanctioned breaks, much like commercial breaks during a tv show. Viewers and players alike can withdraw from the central narrative during these moments. The opposite tactic is that of integration, which tends to occur spontaneously during normal play. In the case of integration, off-the-record speech is translated into something that is specifically camera-facing and audience aware. While these off-the-record speech acts may not engage the viewer in the central narrative of Vox Machina necessarily, they are still tools to engage the viewer in the *larger* spectacle of *Critical Role.*

The first type of off-the-record speech, segmentation, occurs precisely because *Critical Role* is an entertainment product. From its very first instalment, *Critical Role* has reserved a few minutes at the beginning of each episode for announcements and advertisements. These include Sam's increasingly absurd ads for sponsors such as LootCrate and BackBlaze; Laura's announcements about *Critical Role* merchandise; advertisements for other shows on their parent channel, *Geek and Sundry*; and shout-outs to charities or Kickstarter projects the group is keen to support. Cast members announce conventions, contests, or other events involving *Critical Role*. Once the announcements are over, *Critical Role's* opening credits play. This thirty-second sequence is the only pre-recorded element of the show, and it features the players dressed as their characters and fighting CGI enemies in a forest. This signifies the end of that particular mode of off-the-record speech.

Figs. 3 and 4 – Travis Willingham and Matthew Mercer in the *Critical Role* opening. Travis is dressed as Grog. Matt's costume does not represent any one character: instead, he holds a mask to signify the multiple characters he plays.

The endings of each episode, while less visually obvious, are more interesting in the way that they segment off-the-record speech. Usually, Matt ends the show with some variation of

"and that's where we'll pick up next episode." Players will remain silent during Matt's ending narration, listening attentively, but when he does finally declare the episode over, the players at the table may break character with everything from a sigh of relief to a cathartic laugh. However, the *Critical Role* stream itself does not end when this official "breaking-character" moment occurs; the camera runs for two or three minutes while the players react to the events of the episode and discuss them out-of-character. Only once Matt addresses the camera once more, and delivers his other signature line – "Is it Thursday yet?" – does the stream stop. Segmenting off-the-record speech in this way not only spares it from interrupting the narrative, but also intensifies the impact of the moment immediately before it, because the players break character and freely express emotions that the audience themselves might be feeling. This off-the-record moment – which in some cases is literally just an overwhelmed scream from all of the players – actually has the potential to enhance emotional engagement by reflecting a plausible audience reaction.

This segmentation also creates an interesting conundrum when pinning down what *Critical Role's* content is – more specifically, when it starts and when it ends. CritRoleStats actually records two different run times for the show, called "Full Time" and "Gameplay Time". When I asked about the distinction between the two in a personal correspondence, CritRoleStats replied:

> …with Gameplay Time, I start the clock right before Matt begins describing what happened last time ("Last time on Critical Role, [start] Vox Machina..."), and end it as soon as Matt finishes saying "And we'll pick this back up next week!" (right before all the groans happen, haha). If they continue discussing what they're going to do after he closes it, I'll usually not count that as part as the gameplay, unless Matt specifically states something that influences the story (e.g., the appearance of the Erinyes).

This comment indicates that viewers can actually be quite aware of the differences between frames at play during *Critical Role*. The exception to the rules of "Gameplay Time" *only* occur when Matt introduces another piece of DM narration, which constitutes the highest level of narrativity possible, because it is information immediately canonized and concretized as truth within the narrative frame. The case described here took place in Episode 75, "Where the Cards Fall". The episode ends as the party starts a fight with a Pit Fiend, an extremely powerful devil. Matt forgets to mention that an Erinyes, another type of devil, has teleported into the fight to

assist the Pit Fiend; he adds this detail after announcing that the episode is over. CritRoleStats' instinct to record both of these times suggests that there are at least two different *Critical Role* texts: the text made up of the narrative and mechanical frames, concerning the story of Vox Machina and the mechanics that dictate their future; and the full content of the *Critical Role* stream, which includes considerably more information from the social frame. The fact that these off-the-record moments are not considered part of "gameplay", but *are* still part of the *Critical Role* spectacle, begins to reveal the liminal role of off-the-record chatter and the social frame. This frame exists outside the narrative, but it is still connected to it, and it still lies within the bounds of the show.

The problem with this observation is that it is an extraordinary oversimplification, because off-the-record chatter does not *only* occur in these cordoned-off beginning-and-ending segments. Instead, the cast lapses into moments of off-the-record chatter frequently and fluidly throughout play. Another example of a segment of off-the-record chatter occurs during "whispers". Sometimes, in the course of play, Matt will need to share information with one of his players in secret. Matt will get up from his chair and whisper the secret in the player's ear. During these "whispers", the other players cannot take any in-character actions because the dungeon master is busy, which leaves the audience and players with a moment of dead air. It has become tradition for Sam (unless he's the one receiving a whisper) to launch into a quick advertisement for *Critical Role* sponsors or merchandise in these moments. These moments are bookended by a clear signifier – the start and end of the whisper – but they occur during gameplay, and they occur *because* of gameplay.

Off-the-record chatter can also occur without these signposted bookends. In such a situation, the players will always attempt to include the audience in their tangents. The actors are close friends in real life, and they might instinctively make inside jokes that only the other players will understand, but they will almost always double back to explain these joke to the audience. For example, in Episode 72, "The Elephant in the Room", the following exchange occurs:

> Liam [*as Vax*]: Is there like an aerated wine cellar, Scanlan?
> [*laughter from everyone at the table*]
> Sam [*as Scanlan*]: Yes, it's constantly aerating.
> Matt: [*makes aerator sound effects into the microphone*]
> Travis: No one will-
> Taliesin: No one has the slightest-

> Matt [*inaudible*]: -the internet with our inside jokes.
> Sam [*to the camera*]: Inside joke. I'm being teased right now for owning and using a wine aerator.
> Matt: Yes, you are.
> Travis: Someone sold you that and said it was an aerator, and is laughing their happy ass off.
>
> (*Critical Role* Episode 72)

Within a few seconds of the jab at Sam's wine aerator, at least three people at the table – Travis, Taliesin, and Matt – realize that their joke will not translate to their viewers. Sam breaks character to explain part of the joke directly to the audience, and Travis even adds a detail that makes the comedy more comprehensible (that the wine aerator is probably a scam). In this instance, the explanation of the joke does not possess narrativity, detached as it is from *Critical Role's* main story world; however, the players are still making a conscious effort to entertain, even with their side chatter.

Throughout these different uses of off-the-record chatter, the influence of the performance frame is obvious. The officially cordoned-off segments of chatter are used to impart real-world information directly to the audience; but organic off-the-record comments are also influenced by the viewer presence. In Episode 56, "Hope", the players celebrate their victory over a difficult boss by having a cannonball contest in a hot spring. Taliesin realizes that his idea for his character to win the contest is rather unsafe:

> Taliesin: I'm ready. I've got a kettle and what is essentially a giant cheesecloth teabag of raw sodium in an oil holding base. You are aware of what will happen when I hit the water? [25]
> Matt: Yep.
> Taliesin: Okay, cool! I put the kettle to my chest, and I run, I take a leap into [the water]-
> Marisha: Don't you think this is detrimental to your health?
> Taliesin: Yes, this is a terrible idea. [*gestures toward the camera*] Do not do this. Do not do this, you will die.
>
> (*Critical Role* Episode 56)

Taliesin is speaking directly to the viewers through the livestream camera lens. His off-the-record "don't try this at home" disclaimer only exists *because* there is an audience to receive it in the first place. While one can imagine a similar joke being made in a private session, this particular

[25] Raw sodium will violently explode when it comes into contact with water.

iteration of it is motivated by the realization that tens of thousands of viewers are about to watch a fictional character do something stupid.

Across both the segmented announcements and the integrated comedy, the ironic characteristic of this off-the-record talk is that it is very much *on* the record. The cameras are always rolling; and the announcements that bracket the beginning and end of the show are included when the show is archived and uploaded to YouTube. Importantly, other tabletop series *do* have the option of removing these moments through editing, and yet off-the-record chatter is often preserved in final cuts. Whether these segments are included in *Heroes and Halfwits* or *The Adventure Zone* depends entirely on the purpose of those moments within the entertainment frame. Most of these moments are included because they are funny, but they also enhance the spectacle of the social frame for viewers. These moments become a window into the lives and relationships of the players themselves. In *The Adventure Zone,* Griffin McElroy is the dungeon master for his two brothers and their father. The brothers tend to recoil whenever their father's character flirts with other characters – comedy that is largely contingent on their familial relationship outside of the game.

On *Critical Role,* the social lives of the players are also part of the show's appeal. In that same interview where Matt argues that good audio is the first step to a good tabletop livestream, his second point is that everyone at the table needs to be having fun. The players' visible emotional engagement in the narrative, their frequent laughter, and their real-life friendships, are all components of the social frame. Because the social frame cannot be excised from a tabletop game, the spectacle of these eight friends *at play* is also part of the performance. It is not necessarily a part of *Critical Role's* narrative, but it *is* a part of *Critical Role's* spectacle. Regardless of the genuine effect it creates on both sides of the camera, the cast's social frame is yet another element of the performance. Paradoxically, it is because of this very earnestness that the Critters might balk at the idea of characterizing the players as entertainment professionals. There is something inherently manipulative about the word "performance", because it is by definition a façade; and though the emotions themselves may be genuine, the fact is that *Critical Role's* setting has been manipulated to frame these emotions more effectively.

I initially argued that the *Critical Role* set had changed to streamline narrative play, but after Episode 100, the set changed once again. In Episode 101, the players sat at the same table together for the first time since playing at home. In that segmented social-world space after the

game was over, the players could not hold back their excitement at how close they were. They all reached for each other, grasping hands in the middle of the table. It is a perfect example of the way *Critical Role* has manipulated its performance – in this case, something as simple as changing a table setting – to better facilitate the spectacle of its social frame. The emotion remains genuine, but the show's building blocks are re-arranged to trigger it, and we are able to see it more clearly.

Fig. 5 – The cast joining hands after Episode 102.

Conclusion: The Conflicts Between Performer and Player

I mentioned above that the fans of *Critical Role* sometimes resist defining the cast as professional entertainers, because they see an authenticity of emotion that does not complement their understanding of performance as something that is "faked." Throughout this chapter, I have mostly described how the roles of performer and player have worked together to create a clearer, more absorbing narrative, but it is at this juncture where the negotiation between player and performer becomes more difficult. In keeping with our idea of boundary work, this is where the boundaries of these identities have to be re-negotiated, because the *values* governing play and entertainment work are conventionally quite different. Many fans who perceive the cast members as *players* instead of *performers* are quite reticent to criticize *Critical Role.* If it is not specifically

contextualized as a contest of skill (for example, as a professional basketball game), play is a strange and uncomfortable thing to criticize. In the words passed around in the *Critical Role* community for some time now, it seems as if fan critics are saying to the cast, "your fun is wrong" ("Critical Role Q&A!"). At the same time, however, the entertainment frame has a very different relationship with criticism. Performers are frequently and publicly criticized, sometimes rightfully (as with a director trying to improve a scene), and sometimes cruelly (as with a tabloid needlessly judging a star's fashion sense). Rejection in any entertainment profession is common and constant. Most importantly, criticism that is insightful and constructive contributes to the growth of art, both socially and aesthetically. Good criticism can create great performances.

This opens the question of how player-performers on a show like *Critical Role* handle audience criticism. On the one hand, as performers, the players are very familiar with criticism of both the good and groundless kinds. On the other, *Critical Role* is a performance of play, and certain kinds of play behaviours seem incompatible with criticism. In *The Ambiguity of Play,* Brian Sutton-Smith identifies seven different "rhetorics" of play – these being general ideological arguments as to the purpose or value of play behaviour. Both players and viewers of *Critical Role* frequently argue (in interviews and on social media) that tabletop roleplaying is powerful because it allows players to freely express themselves, which falls under Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of *play as imaginary*. This rhetoric values play because it encourages "imagination, flexibility, and creativity" in its players (Sutton-Smith 1997). In this rhetorical environment, improvised roleplaying is rarely evaluated for its 'quality', because such evaluation would restrict the very freedom imaginative play values by deeming some imaginations "better" than others.

A subtle yet ongoing identity crisis therefore rests underneath most of the criticism that is directed towards *Critical Role,* particularly in the way the cast responds to it. As the cast approached their one hundredth episode, Marisha tweeted,[26] "After 100 eps, and the amount #CriticalRole has grown, we're still just a bunch of nerds sittin around a table. That'll never change!" To an extent, they do still see themselves as players. And yet, these actors are making, marketing, and regularly promoting a performance for an audience. As aforementioned, the players also intrinsically associate the skills required to roleplay *to their professional skills*; I believe Matt's repeated comment that D&D is exactly like "what we do for a living" is particularly revealing in that sense.

[26] Marisha Ray, Twitter post, June 8, 2017, 9:01 a.m, https://twitter.com/Marisha_Ray

The fact that the players themselves inconsistently identify as both "professional D&D players" and just "friends playing around a table" means that both the audience and the cast are conflicted over how to handle criticism. Fan discussions about everything from gameplay mistakes to queer representation tend to be influenced by this underlying debate. The arguments reached a point where Matt had to release an extensive Reddit post in March of 2017, outlining what kind of criticism he and the players would find acceptable ("[No Spoilers] Welcome, and let us all discuss!"). The post strikes an interesting balance between encouraging discussion in the community and reminding viewers that it is very easy to make mistakes in an informal, improvised game. The post ends with the following lines:

> We are prone to mistakes, inconsistency, and failure time to time... and that's kind of the beauty of Roleplaying games is it allows a safe space to do all of that and learn from it. I only ask that you fight the knee-jerk judgement on anything in our game…and present your own perspective in a way that is respectful of the cast, and your fellow community members.

From Matt's words, it seems that audience criticism must be filtered through the perspective that the performers can make errors in their "safe space" of play. Following the rhetoric of play as imaginary, Matt values *Critical Role* as a place where his and his players' imaginations can work unimpeded. As the post continued, other Reddit users began to theorize, quite extensively, as to what an acceptable model of criticism would look like. Matt Coleville, a writer, dungeon master, and friend of Matthew Mercer, who also creates YouTube videos about tabletop roleplaying, suggested viewers would need to develop "a new semiotics" for expressing opinions about shows like *Critical Role.* Both Matthew Mercer's original post and Matt Coleville's response encourage recognition of the limitations and responsibilities of both players and performers. Criticism, while it is still important due to the public reception of *Critical Role,* must be reframed by the limitations of a performance of play. Mistakes and inconsistencies abound, and no amount of criticism will ever smooth out those wrinkles.

The role of open dialogue and criticism in the fan community is but one problem arising from the uneasy coexistence of these two conflicting identities. Furthermore, the addition of an audience perspective on any issue adds a new layer of complexity to any debate. The next chapter will dive into the influence of the audience in more depth, largely through the frame we have neglected so far – the mechanical frame.

Chapter Two: Audience Participation and CritRoleStats

As we have established with the previous chapter, the process of tabletop roleplay is a navigation of multiple interdependent frames. Players oscillate through these frames as the flow of play demands, utilizing a number of signposting tricks so every player can follow the transitions. When an audience is added to the equation, this adds another layer of complexity to the navigation of the relevant frames. Signposts must be made legible not only to the players, but also to a broader audience.

This would probably be interesting to writers like Cover, McKay, and Montola, all of whom, in the process of granting a magic-circle-like sanctity to tabletop roleplay, characterize it as unappealing to external spectators in various ways. Cover implies that emotional engagement in tabletop roleplaying would be exclusive to the players, because adapting a traditional narrative – say, a novel – out of a specific roleplaying campaign requires considerable transformation of the text. She references an interview with *Forgotten Realms* author R.A. Salvatore, in which he explains that he would never consider turning the text of a tabletop session into a novel, and that he insists on keeping his private games and published novels separate (2010, 132). Cover then speaks about Mark, an aspiring fantasy novelist, who claims his novels' relationship to *Dungeons and Dragons* is one of "inspiration, not adaptation" (2010, 134). This is because, as Mark explains through Cover, a key structure of the roleplaying game – the fact that characters learn entirely new abilities by gaining experience and levels – does not translate well into the more fluid and situational growth a character would experience in a novel. Similarly, George R. R. Martin's essay in *Second Person,* "On the *Wild Cards* series", explains the process of adapting a tabletop game into a series of novels (2008). Most revealingly, he writes that "the qualities that make a good game do not necessarily make for good fiction, and in some cases are actually antithetical to it" (Martin 2008, 18). These testimonials all suggest that tabletop roleplaying games do not naturally create narratives that will appeal to an external audience. They are not "good fiction."

Cover denies this audience implicitly: Montola and Mackay discuss and exclude them openly. Mackay argues that if tabletop roleplaying is a performing art, the "spectators" to that performance are the other players at the table. These players may lapse out of character to watch their tablemates perform before springing back in with their character's contributions. His arguments often have a wistful "you had to be there" tone; he claims that truly emotional

performances cannot be replicated, that they are "experiences that are impossible to record" (Mackay 2001, 85). Lastly, Montola's thesis uses a quote by Mortensen that is perhaps the most exclusionary of the lot:

> To observe traditional theatre as a member of the audience means to study it from the angle from which it is supposed to be viewed. But analyzing a role-play game from the position of a spectator permits, at best, *description of the event without understanding*.
> (2012, 92)

I do not think Mortensen is wrong to say this, and I understand Mackay's frustration. Before I watched *Critical Role,* I played a bard in a long-running tabletop game. I grew very attached to my character, Byron, and I doubt I could ever fully express how it broke my heart when he was forced to betray his lifelong pacifist oaths and spill blood in defense of his fiancée. In fact, this seems to be a common difficulty for authors who try to express the emotional power of embodying an avatar, whether in digital or tabletop roleplaying. Celia Pearce recounts a tale of how she felt distant and excluded from her digital community in *Second Life* until her avatar, in a delightfully literalized metaphor, "became the ball" in a game of buggy polo[27], thrusting her into the center of the physical and emotional experience of the game. She identifies this as her "turning point" between "participant observation and participant *engagement*" (2008, 362). Pearce could not fully understand the engagement with a game until she, quite literally, became one of the game pieces and joined in the act of play.

However, the fact remains that *Critical Role* exists as something of a counterpoint to these experiences. While I would never argue that Critters are engaged in *Critical Role* exactly as the players are, they are still engaged by the narrative of a tabletop game – a narrative that some authors consider antithetical to "good fiction". To be fair, some alteration of traditional tabletop play has occurred on *Critical Role*; the previous chapter detailed how the players adapted certain speech acts to be more audience-friendly. Yet those structures that Cover warns writers away from – those numerical progressions of experience points and levels representing character growth – remain part of the show. The oscillation between mechanical, narrative, and social frames, sometimes confusing to even the players, remains part of the show. To watch this show,

[27] "Buggy polo" is a game in which the players use buggies to knock a large orb around a field. Pearce explains that clicking on the game ball caused her avatar to get sucked inside the ball. Her avatar could then steer the ball from the inside with the arrow keys, but Pearce instead took her hands off the keys and let the other players kick and pass her avatar-ball around.

understand its content, and grow emotionally invested in its narrative, Critters must follow this progression of frames – and this requires work.

On its most basic level, *Critical Role* requires a considerable time investment. Each episode lasts between three and five hours. Critters who live in increasingly inconvenient time zones often sacrifice a good night's rest to watch the show live. Those of us on eastern time might stay up until three AM to watch the end of significant boss fights; European Critters wake up before dawn to catch the announcements at the beginning of the show. There is also a considerable archive of past content to consume. If a newly minted Critter wants to catch up on every episode that has aired so far, they can look forward to a time commitment of over three hundred hours of YouTube videos.

Beyond that, *Critical Role* takes a considerable amount of expertise to unravel. In order to follow the players through their frame shifts, spectators must be familiar with the rules of each of the frames. If a viewer of *Critical Role* wishes to actually understand the spectacle, they need at least a cursory familiarity with the story so far, the characters and their aptitudes, the rules of *Dungeons and Dragons,* and the external cultural references dropped by the players. Furthermore, the livestream prohibits pausing or rewinding; if you are watching live and you miss a significant piece of information, that information is gone. This is part of why viewers might choose to watch the show with other social media tabs open, or even with other people, as many of my interviewees do. Interviewee mischief7manager watches on a laptop while scrolling through Twitter on her phone; another, teammompike, watches "with Twitter and Tumblr open in another window". There is an aspect of community bonding to this social media use, as Critters share their reactions to Vox Machina's antics, but it also helps viewers comprehend the fast-moving complexities of the show. Critter social media tags on Thursdays – particularly Twitter's #CriticalRole hashtag, used by live viewers on Thursday nights – are frequently peppered with questions about important information or missed moments. "What did Vex say just there? I missed it." Or, "Why is Matt having everyone roll saving throws?"

By complete coincidence, I not only had access in my studies to committed *Critical Role* fans – those who frequent *Critical Role*-centric social media and subscribe to Twitch – but also a casual counterpoint. My mother watches *Critical Role,* but does not engage in other online aspects of the fandom. I bring her up to demonstrate the considerable baseline effort required to simply enjoy the show. My mother's knowledge of geek culture is largely second-hand, imparted

by her geeky daughter; her first-hand knowledge of *Dungeons and Dragons,* which we sometimes play on family holidays, is the exception. My mother and I live on opposite sides of the country, but we watch *Critical Role* at the same time. Particularly in the early episodes, when she was still learning the rules of *Dungeons and Dragons,* we would text each other throughout the show. I would clarify the mechanical frame for her, or explain references the players make towards video games or other bastions of nerd culture. This flow of information is not unidirectional; the players on *Critical Role* reference television shows, movies, or music from decades before I was born, and my mother will often explain those references for me. If I need to go to sleep before the episode finishes, or if she needs to miss the beginning to run errands after work, we will summarize what the other viewer missed from the livestream.

These functions that my mother and I perform for each other while we watch are also performed by the wider fan community. CritRoleStats clarifies the mechanical frame, identifies media references, and provides a handy live summary on Twitter if the viewer misses information. Tumblr, Twitter, Discord, and the Twitch chat identify certain monsters, spin narrative theories, identify parallels, or predict the next plot twist. In short, the *Critical Role* experience is not a passive one; watching *Critical Role* is an interpretive activity. Most of the time, this work goes unappreciated because the viewers are entertained while they are doing it; they *want* to understand *Critical Role* and its many layers, regardless of how much effort that takes. This effort does begin to show the next day: the *Critical Role* "hangover" is a well-known phenomenon amongst the fans who stay up late, throw themselves into the story emotionally, and sporadically research obscure *D&D* lore to understand the story a little better. One of the main contributors to CritRoleStats begins particularly difficult Friday mornings with the Tweet, "all aboard the *Critical Role* struggle bus!"

Once the hangover fades, Critters also take it upon themselves to cement key parts of their experiences in many different fan-run archives, ensuring that key information will be available in the future. Fans might contribute to summaries on the *Critical Role* wiki or the *Critical Role* TV Tropes page, or they might volunteer for more precise archiving projects like CritRoleStats or Critical Role Transcripts. Gifsets are very popular Critter products: these are short collections of .gif images (usually between two and eight, to fit within social media platform restrictions) that either immortalize key moments in *Critical Role* or point out moments viewers might have

missed. A few of my interviewees mentioned gifsets, and seemed to understand them as important community memorials:

> Anonymous: With gifsets, it's big moments that are particularly funny or particularly touching…very brief moments, or sort of behind-the-scenes moments with people goofing off in the background that maybe people missed.
> Robyn: So that's a broader appeal kind of thing?
> Anonymous: Yeah, what I think other people will enjoy…I write fic for me, honestly, but gifsets are for everyone.
>
> [*Describing an event in Episode 64*] When Keyleth comes up to Percy and says, as they're letting everyone out of the bunkers, "I'm so sorry" and he tells her to shut up and hugs her, that moment…I'm still waiting for someone to gif it, because I love it.
> (Teammompike, personal interview)

After the marathon of mental work that is a Thursday night episode of *Critical Role,* fans almost impulsively – yet quite comprehensively – document key fragments of a three-hour show, preserving them for posterity. One of my interviewees, who goes by Tuk_Roll on Twitter, has been a *Critical Role* fan since the show's earliest days (she began watching live by the airing of Episode 10). When we spoke about fanworks, she underlined the importance of creating an information base for new fans:

> Tuk: There is always an urge to make content, not just for yourself, but for those who come after you …I remember being like "wow, because this fandom is in its infancy, we really have to churn this stuff out there."
> Robyn: …so if you've been there a long time, you almost feel an obligation to newer fans, to curate the experience that they have *around* the show?
> Tuk: Yeah, absolutely.

Even quite early in *Critical Role's* lifespan, Critters were conscious of newcomers. They selected key pieces of information from their show, enshrined moments of particular importance in summaries, gifsets and stats, and created fanwork that would help viewers enjoy their fandom experience more completely. Watching *Critical Role* is a community effort: archiving information relevant to *Critical Role* is an ongoing group project.

In the rest of this chapter, I will look more closely at how the fans must work to engage with the world of *Critical Role.* First, I will survey a few examples of how fans engage with the narrative frame, the social frame, and the entertainment/performance frame of *Critical Role*, but

the majority of this chapter will be spent on how fans engage in the mechanical frame. In particular, I will discuss the most comprehensive attempt fans have made to understand and catalogue *Critical Role* as a game – the fan-run project CritRoleStats.

Story and Celebrity: Narrative and Social Frame Engagement

When we look at this system of questions and answers that circulates on social media during *Critical Role,* we are seeing little more than the baseline of what is required to understand the story. In order to see how audiences engage with *Critical Role* beyond this baseline, we can look to two different places. Firstly, we can look at the additional content offered by *Geek and Sundry* and the creators of *Critical Role,* which is designed to facilitate audience understanding and engagement. Articles on Geek and Sundry, YouTube videos, or even posts made by players or crew members on social media sites provide more detail on the game, its narrative world, and the players exploring it. Sometimes, these supplemental texts quite obviously appeal to certain frames. Similarly, we can look at the supplemented texts gathered, created, or curated by the audience themselves. What the fans label as reference material for other fans indicates what information they find valuable across three hundred hours of gameplay.

Looking at *Geek and Sundry's* supplementary texts, their efforts to foster engagement in the narrative frame are the most obvious. One such project is a video called "The Story of Vox Machina". As I mentioned before, the *Critical Role* cast had played together for a few years prior to streaming their game. When *Geek and Sundry* asked them to move their home game to Twitch, Matt – with the consensus of the players – decided to simply continue the story of Vox Machina from the midpoint, well after they had all met and become traveling companions. In that sense, there is not a single Critter watching who has seen the entire story of *Critical Role's* central narrative; it is eternally bigger than those three hundred hours imply. Sometimes, characters or events would be mentioned in the course of *Critical Role* that the viewers would have no context for, which could add frustration to an already convoluted viewing experience. Eventually, the cast hired a *Critical Role* fan artist, Wendy Green, to create a series of storyboards of Vox Machina's adventures prior to *Critical Role.* The cast recorded themselves recounting this story in their character voices, and released this narration over the storyboards as a YouTube video called "The Story of Vox Machina". Similar projects have been completed across *Critical Role's* two year run. Laura Bailey released a short story about how her character Vex met her pet bear,

Trinket.[28] The entire cast made character playlists of ten songs that they felt would express some of their characters' internal thoughts.[29] (This experiment also proved to be an almost accidental window into the social frame in that we learned about the players' tastes in music; Taliesin, jokingly called 'the most interesting nerd in the world' by the other players, produced a playlist that was exactly as eclectic as expected).

These notes are all dwarfed by the release of Matthew Mercer's Tal'Dorei campaign setting book. *Critical Role* takes place in a fantastical world of Matt's own design, Exandria, with its story centred on the continent of Tal'Dorei. Such fantasy worlds are a staple of tabletop roleplay. These worlds are what Montola, borrowing a term from Matt Hills, refers to as a *hyperdiegesis* (2012). The term "diegesis" is typically used in cinema or media studies to refer to every event or object that exists within a narrative world. By contrast, a hyperdiegesis is a narrative world that is too big to be entirely explored or documented by the characters in it. Daniel Mackay is evoking a similar idea when he uses the phrase *imaginary-entertainment environment.* In fan culture, these spaces are usually called universes*,* hence the term *expanded universe* for tie-in products that explore a hyperdiegesis more thoroughly. The purpose of Matthew Mercer's book – titled *Critical Role: Tal'dorei Campaign Setting* – is to document and give broad access to his own hyperdiegesis of Exandria. The guide provides historical, geographical, and biographical detail on Tal'Dorei, with the explicit purpose of allowing other players to explore that universe. This gesture appeals to a number of fannish impulses regarding engagement in the narrative frame. When observing fan practices, Jenkins notes that media fans enjoy speculating and elaborating on narrative elements that might be neglected in the main text; this impulse informs both essays and fanfiction that focus on supporting characters, events, or locations the text itself has neglected (1992). Particularly in the context of *Critical Role*, where certain narrative details are only expressed and concretized once the players ask about them, viewers may be desperate for sensory information that the players *don't* ask about. For example, it took the cast well over one hundred episodes until somebody in the party thought to ask how Tal'Dorei's calendar worked. Other frustrations arise from the primarily oral nature of the text of the show: since the names of supporting characters are only ever spoken, and never written down

[28] Bailey, Laura, "The Saga of Trinket: The Surprising First Meeting Between Vex and Her Companion", *Geek and Sundry,* August 13 2016, http://geekandsundry.com/the-saga-of-trinket-the-surprising-first-meeting-between-vex-and-her-companion/

[29] Jaffe, Taliesin, "Critical Role: Percy's Soundtrack – Number One with a Bullet", *Geek and Sundry,* Oct 22 2015, http://geekandsundry.com/critical-role-character-soundtrack-number-one-with-a-bullet/

as they would be in a script or credits sequence, it can be difficult to guess how to spell them. Recurring villain Sylas Briarwood's name was frequently misspelled as "Silas" until a photo of Matt's notes confirmed it as "Sylas"; even now, uncommon or fantastical names like "Kynan" suffer all manner of imaginative spellings until Matt can be prodded into Tweeting the correct ones. Of course, the clarification of these details pales in comparison to the explicit invitation offered by the campaign setting's very existence: Matt has opened Tal'Dorei to fans not just as fans, but also *as roleplayers,* encouraging them to insert their own characters into his universe and to explore it – more specifically, to *elaborate* on it – as they so desire. This is perhaps the ultimate blank check for narrative frame engagement, in that it provides a framework for dungeon masters and players to engage in the world of Exandria and Tal'Dorei just as the cast of *Critical Role* does[30]: through an avatar, a character who can explore, influence, and change the fictional world as they please.

The audience response to the campaign setting was positive across the community. Critters verified their interest in this hyperdiegesis by their mass purchases of the campaign guide; the guide's publisher, Green Ronin Publishing[31], claimed in a tweet[32] that the release of *Critical Role: Tal'Dorei Campaign Setting* was the most successful in the history of their company. A few days after the guide's release, some basic details about the world of Exandria – most notably the months of its year, days of its week, holidays, and Gods of its pantheon – were spread across social media by Critters who had purchased the guide. Speaking personally as both a dungeon master and a writer of fanfiction, these details are nowhere near enough to actually set up a full tabletop campaign, but they are more than enough to potentially inspire stories about secondary characters or events, *and* they are helpful for the practice of fannish elaboration as

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[30] This invitation requires that the fans and creators share an understanding of the Exandria hyperdiegesis as necessarily changeable, differing from game to game. Various dungeon masters will stage different and perhaps contradictory adventures within their own versions of this hyperdiegesis, and so Exandria can never be a truly concretized world. Even *Critical Role*'s narrative cannot pin the history of Exandria down beyond a certain point. While members of Vox Machina are mentioned by name in the guidebook, the book also describes Tal'Dorei as it exists *before* the fifth arc of *Critical Role* starts. Players could easily overturn the plot of *Critical Role* in their home game, or even overturn it accidentally. Matt's explicit invitation for fans to play within his world means that he understands his hyperdiegesis as a place for exploration and creative play, rather than the setting of a singular, incontrovertible narrative.

[31] Green Ronin Publishing specializes in publishing tabletop roleplaying games, sourcebooks, and related content. The company was formed in 2000, which makes *Critical Role: Tal'Dorei Campaign Setting* its most successful release in seventeen years. ("About Green Ronin Publishing")

[32] GreenRoninPub, Twitter post, July 18, 2017, 10:44 a.m. https://twitter.com/GreenRoninPub/

described above. Thus, the campaign setting promotes fan engagement in the narrative frame of *Critical Role* both for those who enjoy fannish speculation and for those keen to explore it with their own tabletop roleplay groups.

Beyond the narrative and setting, fans are also interested in the players themselves, and their lives outside the game. This interest corresponds somewhat loosely to the social frame, but also to the entertainment frame: those rare moments when the cast members engage in off-the-record speech, and gesture towards their lives and relationships outside the game, spark curiosity about the players as people – or, more accurately, as celebrities. Critters might seek out other work the actors on *Critical Role* have done, digging up credits including everything from their major voiceover roles to their obscure cameos on television shows, and share these pieces of trivia with other Critters. Perennial favourites include Travis's role as the owner of a drag costume store on *Nip/Tuck* and Taliesin's roles from his time as a child actor. The presence of these actors on social media also aids in their development as celebrities within their particular geek-niche. Hagen discusses the presence of stars on social media in his article on fans of musicians and real-person fanfiction, particularly in relation to the apparent authenticity of these platforms (2015). As he says, "the idea of a private or "authentic" identity plays a significant role in bandom" (Hagen 2015, 48). Members of bands like My Chemical Romance, Panic at the Disco, and Fall Out Boy post "personal and mundane details" on their social media feeds, granting their fans considerable access to their everyday lives (Hagen 2015, 50). Fans assume that these band members are image-conscious, wearing and performing fake, glossy personalities when they appear in public for interviews or concerts. By contrast, fans interpret those same celebrities' social media feeds as glimpses into their private, authentic identities. Like their fans, they might have favourite foods, or disobedient pets, or lazy pyjama days, all of which social media encourages them to share stories about. These anecdotes humanize celebrities, allowing fans to deepen their sympathetic connections with someone they will likely never meet.

Similarly, a large part of *Critical Role*'s appeal is the authenticity of its players as perceived by the viewers. Fans who enjoy this authenticity chase it to the players' social media platforms, particularly their Twitter feeds, which offer amusingly mundane details aplenty as well as major updates on *Critical Role* and related projects. The appeal of this authenticity is compounded by the fans' assumption that the players are not forced to curate particular celebrity images in the same way as the more widely-known musicians referenced in Hagen's article. The

players are their own publicists, and their fans value them in particular for their candid passion for geeky pastimes. Hagen's bandom-fans imagine a tension between celebrity identities and "authentic" selves in their writing, but this theme is largely absent from Critter real-person fanworks[33]: Critters instead take for granted that the players are acting authentically both on social media and on *Critical Role* itself.

Geek and Sundry has recognized the niche celebrity of the *Critical Role* cast, and capitalized on it on more than one occasion, either by inviting the actors onto other shows or even allowing them to launch their own. Taliesin now hosts *The Wednesday Club,* a weekly panel discussion about comic books; Marisha produces and runs *Signal Boost,* in which the host "boosts" media projects, stories, or activities they are fond of; both Taliesin and Matt play characters on *Dread,* a horror-drama produced in part by Marisha and available on Geek and Sundry's Alpha channel[34]. The most unconventional appeal to the celebrity of the players is the two-part spinoff of *Critical Role* known as "Liam's Quest". If Matt is not available to run the game, Liam O'Brien will occasionally step in to act as the dungeon master instead. He will run short adventures that have nothing to do with the main story of *Critical Role*, either in remote parts of Tal'Dorei or in his own quirky universes. In a particularly twisted two-part episode, he has the players play *as themselves.* The players use classes they believe represent them best (Travis is athletic, so he chooses to play the strength-based Fighter class; Marisha has training in dance and mixed martial arts, so she plays a Monk, a class focusing on fluid movement and barehanded martial-arts style combat; Taliesin, a self-titled "recovering goth kid", plays the appropriately disturbing Warlock class, a spell-caster who obtains their magical powers through deals with otherworldly demons). The characters spend half an hour role-playing as themselves in a recording session at Warner Brother Studios in Los Angeles before the entire world falls apart in a Lovecraftian apocalypse. In the second half of the episode, the players perform as themselves again, except that they are transformed into themselves as children, complete with art by fan artist kendrawcandraw referenced from actual childhood pictures. These episodes acted as a window into the social frame of the actors beyond the context of tabletop and into their personal and

[33] The actual themes and tensions in *Critical Role* RPF centre on the players' relationships with their characters, often involving plot contrivances that lead the players to meet their characters in fantastical contexts. Similar to bandom-fic, these fics are about contrasting a performed and an authentic identity, except the performed identity is a fictional character, and the "authentic" selves are assumed to be those we see during *Critical Role.*

[34] It is worth noting that as of January 2017, Marisha has also been working as Geek and Sundry's Creative Director. Geek and Sundry benefits from *Critical Role*'s players both as stars in front of the camera and as managers behind it.

professional lives, revealing information about everything from the actors' daily schedules, to the layout of the studios where they work, to the people they work with, to the way they behaved as children, to the paraphernalia they keep with them. Travis carries a gym bag through the apocalypse; at one point, he blinds an enemy by throwing a packet of protein powder. Taliesin bitterly burns pages of a beloved graphic novel to make a torch. Laura's first reaction when the apocalypse strikes is that she needs to check on her dog, Charlie.

The pattern suggested by these supplemental texts is that fans engage with *Critical Role* on different levels. The fans are curious about both the social and narrative aspects of the game, and occasionally, Geek and Sundry can capitalize on these interests by providing more relevant content. In this sense, Critters behave similarly to other productive fan cultures (Jenkins 1992). They engage in *Critical Role* as a narrative: they study the narrative elements of the story, and they expand on them, depict them in fanart, and debate them online. They also engage in *Critical Role* as a performance platform for geek-celebrities, following their everyday lives on social media and seeking out their other works. These two modes of engagement are complemented by a third: while *Critical Role* facilitates stories and performances, it also facilitates *a game,* and audiences also engage with the rules, strategies, and records of this game. In this arena of engagement, we can find perhaps the most unique project of the *Critical Role* fandom. There is an undisputed authority on the documentation and exploration of the mechanical frame in the form of CritRoleStats, a fan-run project that has become a staple of the *Critical Role* experience. I will now look at CritRoleStats in greater depth, and consider their role in facilitating audience engagement with the mechanical frame. This discussion will also reveal how participatory spectatorship may resolve the conundrum proposed by Mortensen – that a spectator to a roleplaying game will always be fundamentally "missing the point".

CritRoleStats and the Spectacle of Datafication

Predictably, *Critical Role* has attracted the attention of tabletop roleplayers. Among these players was Andrew, who began watching *Critical Role* with his wife around the airing of Episode 19. As Andrew explains in his interview on *Talks Machina*, he was at that time a novice dungeon master, and he was interested in how Matt built his combat encounters. Combat is, as aforementioned, the most mechanically dense area of *Dungeons and Dragons.* Characters are taking damage from enemies, dealing damage to enemies, navigating environmental hazards,

healing their allies, managing their magic, or even solving puzzles or seeking items while in combat, and all of these actions are strictly regulated by *Dungeons and Dragons* rules.

In Episode 19, Vox Machina fights an adult white dragon. During the live airing of this episode, Andrew began recording the monster's damage and hit points[35] throughout the fight to see what he could learn from Matt. Andrew also used his personal Twitter account to report these stats as he gathered them. He discovered, among other things, that Matt had more than tripled the recommended hit point value for an adult white dragon.[36] His curiosity piqued, Andrew continued to monitor stats during *Critical Role* episodes, and eventually created a separate Twitter account to report his findings. He named the account CritRoleStats – and in doing so, he inadvertently created one of the single most important entities in the media ecosystem of *Critical Role.*

CritRoleStats expanded hugely after its Twitter debut. CritRoleStats has its own website, which is monetized through advertisements and also features a system for donations. Andrew is assisted by three permanent volunteer statisticians, Lauren K., Katherine K., and Singing Badger.[37] CritRoleStats also regularly incites waves of volunteers to join them on particularly dense stat-gathering projects. The CritRoleStats website now tracks forty different streams of quantitative and qualitative information for each episode. Not only do they document every single player dice roll, every kill, and every natural twenty and natural one, but they also record recurring tropes or habits, as well as the media references and puns made by the players each episode.[38] They also document stats that emerge from running jokes in the *Critical Role* subculture. After Episode 29, in which Scanlan, Percy and Vax's attempt at opening a barred

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[35] "Hit points" refer to how much damage a creature can take. If a creature's hit points are reduced to zero, they fall unconscious. Characters who are not swiftly revived from unconsciousness are at a high risk of death.

[36] Matt greatly increases most recommended hit point values in his boss battles. This may be because *Critical Role's* party is above average in size (numbering between six and eight combatants when the guides recommend parties of three or four), which means they can deal more damage in a single round. The hit point values in the 5th edition Monster Manual are also quite low to begin with, so Matt typically increases them to increase challenge.

[37] The screennames of these contributors actually vary across different social media platforms: these are their names as they appear on the CritRoleStats site.

[38] CritRoleStats' records can only be so comprehensive because of *Critical Role*'s mode of production and its style of play. The players tend to announce the numerical totals of their rolls, and Matt is usually explicit about whether the rolls are successes or failures, particularly in combat situations. While Matt's rolls as dungeon master are kept secret behind his DM screen (and therefore they cannot be documented), the livestream ensures that all of the other players' rolls are recorded in some manner. Edited tabletop roleplaying shows, such as *The Adventure Zone* or *Heroes and Halfwits,* would have little use for a project like CritRoleStats, because it is impossible to know how many rolls have been eliminated from the final cuts. Moreover, other dungeon masters (and other tabletop games) might remain vague about exact numbers of damage and hit points, but Matt and his players are mathematically strict.

door goes so poorly it actually injures Scanlan, doors were jokingly dubbed the party's worst enemies.[39] CritRoleStats has recorded every door that has ever troubled Vox Machina. According to their stats at time of writing, Vox Machina has spent almost exactly five hours trying and failing to open doors. During *Critical Role* episodes, Andrew also runs a live Twitter commentary of the events of the stream, much like a commentator at a sporting match. These reports include statistical information as well as snippets of dialogue and summarized narrative events.

I believe it is useful to step back and put CritRoleStats' purpose in a larger context. Historically speaking, official stat-gathering and commentating bodies begin to emerge around a particular game once the game is opened for broader public consumption. Professional sports provide the most fertile ground for examples here; Millington and Millington trace the role of data-gathering entities in the history of baseball, while TL Taylor observes the activities of volunteer commentators in e-sports. Taylor explains that commentators primarily help *clarify* e-sports, which can be particularly impenetrable for novice viewers. Commentators do this by describing the action, but also by situating it historically in the achievements of previous players. Technological upgrades – such as instant replay – are also often integrated in the spirit of clarification (Taylor 2012). CritRoleStats performs a similar service through their livetweeting: their commentary is a combination of statistical reporting, action summary, and the occasional interjection of historical or contextual facts. These strings of commentary help viewers engage with the mechanical frame by providing a record of events as they occur, and by contextualizing them in the larger rules of *Dungeons and Dragons* or previous occurrences on the show.

Once each episode finishes, the members of CritRoleStats assemble the data they have gathered into various lists, charts, and other compilations on their website. Their role moves from one of live commentary to one of archiving, where they strive to be as accurate and comprehensive as possible. Taylor observes a desire to collect e-sports history among its volunteer commentators, a desire that CritRoleStats shares for its own object. CritRoleStats could have simply continued livetweeting after episode 19, but they returned to the eighteen episodes before Andrew's first encounter with the show, and updated each of their forty running stat categories to include these episodes. In performing these acts of archiving, clarification, and commentary, CritRoleStats has been woven into the experience of *Critical Role:* they have been

[39] The three characters try to leverage the door open using a sword, and Scanlan cuts his hand.

referenced by name during the show and at conventions;[40] their livetweeted commentary is marked with the #CriticalRole hashtag, so their commentary is easy to find on Twitter; and Geek and Sundry have both written articles on their work[41] and collaborated with their statisticians[42]. For a new fan to *Critical Role,* particularly for one who engages with the Critters on social media, encountering CritRoleStats either directly or indirectly is only a matter of time.

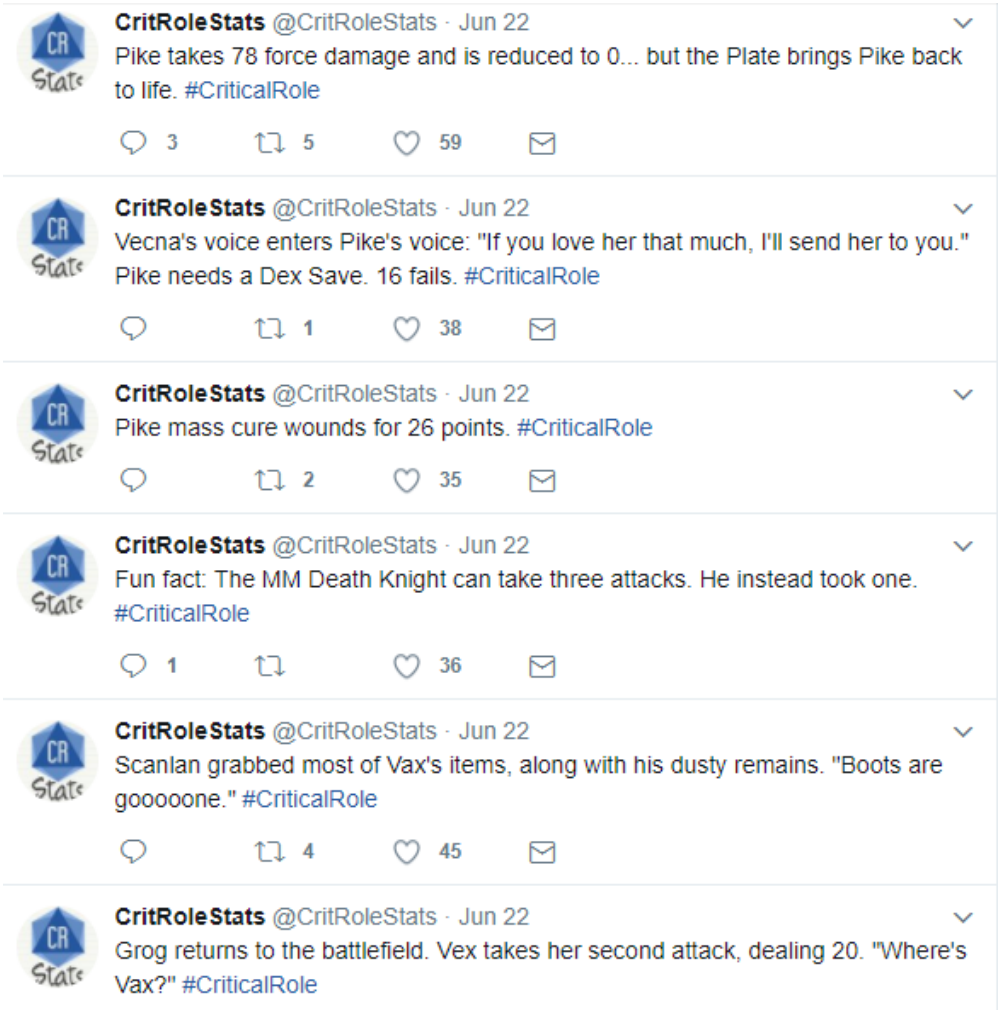

Fig. 6 – A section of CritRoleStats commentary from Episode 102. Note the direct quotes of in-character speech and the reference to the 5th Edition Monster Manual (The "MM" in the fourth tweet stands for "Monster Manual"; CritRoleStats is comparing the Death Knight's rules in the official book to Matt's Death Knight)

[40] For example, after Taliesin rolls a seventh natural 20 in Episode 33, Marisha looks directly at the camera and asks, "CritRoleStats, how many is that?" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iP1gylnxfLU
[41] http://geekandsundry.com/crit-role-stats-uncovers-the-history-of-the-cinder-king/
[42] https://www.critrolestats.com/blog/2017/6/8/episode-100-infographic

CritRoleStats, as aforementioned, is a prime example of fan engagement in *Critical Role* as a game, which exists alongside the fan engagement in its narrative and its stars. Their commentary has become part of the spectacle of the game for many fans. And, like the most knowledgeable sports commentators, they can make statistics themselves into a spectacle. CritRoleStats' project resonates with the contemporary fascination with "datafication" – the transformation of everything into quantifiable packets, which can then be analyzed or repurposed. Datafication is often lauded by tech magazines or businesses as a positive phenomenon, one linked intrinsically to progress: its purpose is the betterment of democracy, health, or society in general (Millington and Millington 2015, Kosciejew 2013). However, there are some failings in the supposedly objective power of data. Data-gathering, despite its scientific appearance, is never neutral: defining the boundaries and the intended purpose of the gathered data can change its impact quite significantly. Spurious correlations, manipulated temporal dimensions, and uncertainty prove that data can be subjective, or even skewed to point towards certain conclusions (Strauss 2015). As a relevant example, Millington and Millington discuss baseball statistics in their Datafication and Sport article (2015). In 2002, Billy Beane, the manager of the underfunded Oakland A's baseball team, built a surprisingly effective team despite the fact that he could not afford to hire star players. These "star players" were often labeled as such because they scored high in certain statistics traditionally gathered by the MLB, such as their batting averages. Beane analyzed supposedly lower-performing players using different statistical parameters and built The Oakland A's around these neglected talents, leading them to a twenty-game win streak (Millington and Millington 2015). In the previous chapter, I chose to represent CritRoleStats' statistics in an argumentative rather than objective way, as I used run times and gameplay times to prove a point about narrative content. Data can be used competitively, creatively, argumentatively, or even for profit or victory.

Therefore, if we are to understand how CritRoleStats engages with the mechanical frame of *Critical Role,* we must consider the type of data it gathers, how this data is transformed, and how it is presented. Firstly, *Critical Role* includes a considerable amount of qualitative information through its performances and its narrative. CritRoleStats transforms some of these elements *into* quantitative information through various tallies and collections – their lists of puns-per-episode is one such example. Furthermore, unlike the data gathered by Billy Beane or marketing departments in previous examples, CritRoleStats' data is not primarily used to

manipulate numerically superior outcomes in the future. Tabletop gameplay data *can* be used in this way[43]: as an example, CritRoleStats occasionally gathers all their information on Vox Machina's attacks and spells to calculate the maximum amount of damage each character could theoretically deal per turn.[44] However, even in this case, the data would need to be interpreted further in order to be of tactical value.[45] CritRoleStats' data tends to be retroactively framed instead, focusing on how many times something has *already* happened. This leads them to focus on milestones, pattern-seeking, superlatives, and archiving, instead of prediction or theory-crafting.

Because the data is not being used for predictive purposes, there must be something that fascinates viewers about these patterns and superlatives. I believe this fascination is linked to a phenomenon Gary Alan Fine observed in his ethnography: tabletop roleplayers have a tendency to mythologize their dice. The dice decide the fates of the characters in a very real way, and they become the central objects of what Fine calls "engrossment beliefs". These beliefs are usually superstitions regarding luck, where some players or dice may be considered lucky or unlucky. Players might use particular dice for specific situations, or claim that one dice-rolling technique (flicking the wrist, or shaking the dice a certain number of times before rolling), is superior to another. Such superstitions are logically groundless, but they are also acceptable within the sphere of tabletop roleplay: and while the game is on, they can be taken quite seriously. Fine calls these superstitions "engrossment beliefs" because they are acceptable only when – and perhaps *because* – the believer is engrossed in a particular social scenario. Examples of such beliefs certainly exist on *Critical Role.* Of the seven regular players, Laura Bailey is likely the most superstitious. She notoriously hoards many sets of dice[46], and if one set rolls poorly, she will refuse to use it for the rest of the evening. Meanwhile, Taliesin is indisputably the "luckiest" player at the table, and his golden twenty-sided die (nicknamed "The Golden Snitch") is

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[43] For comparison's sake, there are countless online forums that assist people in building the most statistically effective *Dungeons and Dragons* characters or monsters. *EN World* and *Giant In The Playground* are two examples; there are also a handful of *Dungeons and Dragons*-related sub-reddits.

[44] CritRoleStats, Twitter post, November 2, 2016, 12:03 p.m., https://twitter.com/critrolestats/

[45] "Maximum damage" does not take the influence of chance into account. While Percy can theoretically deal the most damage by CritRoleStats' calculations, he would need to make so many dice rolls that his chances of dealing maximum damage would be (roughly) 1 in *14 undecillion*.

[46] Dice for tabletop roleplay usually come in sets of six or seven, with each die having a different number of sides. The twenty-sided die is the most important of these, at least in *Dungeons and Dragons,* because it is rolled for all skill checks and attacks. The other dice in the set are used to calculate damage from different kinds of attacks. (For example, to calculate the damage dealt by a dagger, the player rolls a four-sided die).

particularly legendary. This belief seems to originate from Episode 33, "Reunions", in which Taliesin rolls seven natural twenties. Jokes are repeatedly made that Taliesin's luck can rub off on the others. He borrows Marisha's 'misbehaving' dice in Episode 62, "Uninviting Waters", making a show of whispering to them, and then he rolls a much higher number than what Marisha had managed to roll that night. Seven episodes later, when Keyleth is making her offering in the ritual to bring Percy back to life, Marisha says she'll "use the gold die – for Percy." She rolls a nineteen.

Beyond the engrossment beliefs relating to specific dice, players and fans of *Critical Role* imbue the dice in general with symbolic significance. Somewhat paradoxically, the dice are indisputably impartial because they are completely beholden to chance, *and yet* Critters express a belief that the dice are somehow steering the players towards their narrative's ideal incarnation. Sometimes, after tragic plot events, this sentiment circulates between the Critters on social media as a kind of comfort. As an example, Episode 103 features another major character death (Vax). In response to the episode's events, Twitter user and long-time Critter Geonerd Tweeted,[47] "The Dice always know what makes the best story." While there is obviously no basis for this claim in fact, it can indeed be reassuring to think that an omniscient entity has inflicted bad luck upon the characters for a narratively sound reason.

If this description sounds nearly divine, that is no accident: many players, not just players of tabletop games, refer to such interventions of chance as the acts of a "Random Number God". When chance is implemented into gameplay, it can dictate the life and death of characters or even change the entire fabric of their play-world, and such an impact on a story-world can indeed seem godlike. In relation to this, Gary Alan Fine also observes that players have an only semi-joking tendency to refer to their dungeon master as the "god" of their game. The impartial-yet-all-knowing dice often become symbolically intertwined with the dungeon master, who is also expected to both lead the story to satisfying conclusions *and* to act impartially as an arbiter of game rules. This belief system informs many of the depictions of Matthew Mercer in fan art. Matt is often drawn blindfolded, like the statues of Justice in courtrooms, to symbolize his fairness; sometimes, he is shown observing the world of the players from afar, or creating their world through writing, verbal narration, or magic. At other times, as in the original opening credits of *Critical Role*, he is depicted holding or tossing dice.

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[47] Geonerd, Twitter post, June 22, 2017, 11:15 p.m., https://twitter.com/Geonerd/

Fig. 7 – Matthew Mercer as the blindfolded dungeon master (Art by Kit Buss)

Engrossment beliefs regarding the role of the dice are actually distortions of a truth implied by things like Cover's model of narrativity. Neither the dice nor the dungeon master are as subservient to chance as they appear, because the dungeon master is still the ultimate authority on every story element. The dice do offer guidance in the direction of success or failure, but it is up to the dungeon master to interpret what this success or failure will look like. Marisha rolls a nineteen on her golden die to attempt to resurrect a fellow player character, and she succeeds – but Matt decides that the nineteen *counts* as a success. Even the fact that Marisha must roll in the first place is an artificial construction on Matt's part. In the rules of the fifth edition of *Dungeons and Dragons,* resurrection rituals are always automatically successful. Matt leaves them partly up to chance in order to increase the potential threat of death and the dramatic intensity of resurrections. If there is an entity ensuring that the story ends with narrative satisfaction of some kind, it is the dungeon master; the dice are merely tools to help him or hinder him in achieving this end. Both Cover and Fine observe dungeon masters actually disregarding the verdicts of the dice; Cover believes they do so primarily for the sake of creating better stories, as they might discard rolls that feel "unfair" to players. From my own experiences as a dungeon master, I can admit to reducing damage rolls that could have killed my players – although this penchant for "fudging" rolls varies from dungeon master to dungeon master.

Either way, the players must believe in the impartial force of chance to a certain extent, in order to hold the apparatus of tabletop play together. The story can still shift dramatically due to an unexpected success or string of unfortunate failures, and these shifts may themselves be slightly beyond the dungeon master's control. Natural twenties are a perfect example: when players roll a twenty, they expect it to indicate success, regardless of the action they are attempting. In the right circumstances, this can result in dungeon masters allowing the players to perform extraordinary feats.[48] The dice can therefore push against the authority of the dungeon master without ever overturning it. It might be best to imagine the story as a river, where the dice rolls are dams redirecting its flow. This dynamic, wherein the dungeon master and the dice both retain some control over the fates of the player characters, leads to a symbolic conflation of numbers, chance, and authority by viewers and players.

It is here that CritRoleStats re-enters the picture because of their relationship with dice rolls and data. Through their persistence and the comprehensiveness of their statistics, CritRoleStats is perceived by fans as an impartial authority, similar to the way fans perceive the dice. Shortly after the site's debut – as early as Episode 33, in which Marisha turns to the camera and openly asks CritRoleStats how many times Taliesin has rolled a critical hit – they were granted this authority by the players themselves. Even Matt, the blindfolded deity, defers to their judgment in the same way he appears to defer to the dice. In a panel at a convention, the group is asked about the combat effectiveness of Vex'ahlia's animal companion, Trinket. Andrew, the creator of CritRoleStats, is sitting in the front row of the audience, and he shakes his head. Matt says, "When CritRoleStats shakes his head, you know…" and Laura looks appropriately crushed. CritRoleStats is manifestation of the engrossment belief that "the dice are absolute", assisted by their access to the technology of datafication. Though their intervention is limited so far to minor alterations to spells or useful combat reminders, the verdict of CritRoleStats can theoretically supersede even the dungeon master himself. Their verdicts are rarely contested *because* their image trades on impartiality and thoroughness; we trust the mathematics, the statistics, and the records, and CritRoleStats does an admirable job of restricting their analyses to provable, quantitative data. If they are tallying something more subjective – such as Taliesin's different

[48] In *Critical Role* episode 83, Keyleth rolls a natural twenty to pinpoint two of Vox Machina's allies adrift in the middle of an ocean at an extreme distance. Similarly, Percy succeeds at maintaining his focus on a magical curse in episode 68 even as he is hit by a massive gunpowder explosion. Both of these checks would have failed with anything other than a natural twenty.

hairstyles, or the number of times Matt tries to take a drink of water and is interrupted – they will always stipulate their boundaries and gesture towards borderline cases.

Their performance of self on social media is also key to this engrossment belief. While the individual members of CritRoleStats have their own online personalities and Twitter accounts, the CritRoleStats pages are heavily depersonalized. In fact, one of Andrew's first goals in creating the CritRoleStats Twitter feed, as he reveals in his *Talks Machina* interview, was to "separate" the stats from himself. The icon of CritRoleStats is a stylized twenty-sided die. This being the primary die for most rolls in *Dungeons and Dragons,* it is as much a symbol of impartiality and fate as Matt's blindfold. Moreover, the CritRoleStats tweets, posts, and analyses are always written in the first person plural – "we". This creates an impression of committee consensus, rather than the opinions of a single data-gatherer. The CritRoleStats accounts are not completely devoid of personality, as they do have a rather playful sense of humour, but that humour is carefully detached from a specific identity.

Considering all of the above, CritRoleStats' participation in datafication originates in the most optimistic, even sublime, interpretations of the phenomenon. As I mentioned above, datafication processes are meant to facilitate some kind of *progress*; the assumption is that data can be manipulated to produce more efficient and effective outcomes. CritRoleStats does not need to manipulate their data to achieve this, because the architecture of a tabletop series *already* facilitates growth. Characters become stronger, patterns repeat, and the pure quantity of content expands exponentially. Because of this, CritRoleStats and all their followers can revel in increasing numbers and iterative patterns. Much of the site's interpretive work revolves around calculating superlatives, finding interesting mathematical details (like the dragon's tripled hit points), or announcing record-breaking moments. CritRoleStats is, in both genesis and operation, an amateur's passion project. In Andrew's interview on *Talks Machina,* he brings photos of his CritRoleStats computer setup. The photo shows a single desk with a careful array of five monitors atop it, multiple windows open on each screen. While the public face of CritRoleStats largely trades on anonymity, when we do catch glimpses of the faces behind it, they are clearly using their personal resources for a considerable amount of voluntary work. Much in the same way that the cast of *Critical Role* is "a bunch of nerds at a table", CritRoleStats appears to be, for all their rigor, a bunch of nerds in a Google Doc sharing their excitement about numbers. Moreover, they are open to suggestions. On the occasions where Critters find fault with their stats

– usually by reminding them of an example their comprehensive lists have neglected – CritRoleStats will graciously change it. They also make an effort to consult with the community, with many volunteers double-checking their work[49]. Due to the broadly positive – and carefully maintained – image of CritRoleStats, they are never challenged on anything larger than minor calculation issues: to my knowledge, they have no stat-gathering rivals nor any notable detractors[50]. One of the only difficulties I can imagine in their future is if one of the major figures running the website can no longer afford to volunteer their time, because stats-gathering is quite a time-consuming process. The fans and the show itself have grown quite reliant on CritRoleStats, and I imagine someone would step in to rescue it: considering the collaborative nature of the site, it would most likely be other Critter volunteers.

However, characterizing CritRoleStats as a group that simply revels in the pleasures of data-gathering vastly underrepresents their greater impact. In the way they perform their data-centric authority, they are also emblematic of an interesting restructuring of power in the tabletop roleplay series. Conventionally, the dungeon master is the absolute authority over the tabletop game. We have seen this in everything from Cover's hierarchy of narrative, which places the dungeon master's speech acts at the top, to the way in which players jokingly refer to and depict their dungeon masters as gods. However, the actual architecture of the tabletop roleplay livestream grants the power of surveillance to the domain of the spectator. When describing the role of the dungeon master in private tabletop roleplay, Mackay mentions the metaphor of the Panopticon. He sees the dungeon master as an omniscient overseer who dictates all events and permissible behaviours within his world. While this is arguably compelling, an even more powerful similarity exists between the overseer of the Panopticon and the livestream's unblinking camera-eye, which subjects the players to an invisible yet undeniably persistent viewer presence[51]. The viewers even retain the all-important anonymity of the surveyor in the original Panopticon model; players can usually see their dungeon master, but player/performers cannot

[49] This I can personally attest to. I am quite vocal online about my theories regarding Delilah Briarwood, my favourite villain in the campaign. CritRoleStats asked me to share the information I had gathered about her for one of their articles.

[50] The closest CritRoleStats has come to a "rival" is the Critical Role Hit Point Tracker, a Twitter feed that exclusively tracks character hit points during combat for the Geek and Sundry Alpha channel. This group performs more of a basic mechanical function for Alpha in comparison to the broader social role of CritRoleStats. Moreover, they recognize CritRoleStats' comparatively titanic reputation and regularly defer to them.

[51] This is why this metaphor is only appropriate for *livestreamed* tabletop series; the presence of post-production editing in series like *The Adventure Zone* or *Heroes & Halfwits* removes the factor of persistent, immediate surveillance.

witness the reactions of their audience. When *Geek and Sundry* begins their *Critical Role* broadcast, the players remain under constant surveillance until the camera turns off again. CritRoleStats is emblematic of the precision with which viewers can documents events – and, more importantly, infractions. While CritRoleStats will rarely, if ever, correct the players directly, individual viewers will frequently take it upon themselves to inform the players when they have made a mistake regarding rules. Foucault postulates that the purpose of the Panopticon is to instill its participants with self-discipline. Once the players learn which codes of behaviour are acceptable and which are not, they will correct and modify their own behaviour without needing to be directly reprimanded, because they know they are being constantly watched.

The players on *Critical Role* are absolutely aware that up to thirty thousand pairs of eyes are watching them during every live episode, and such potent surveillance further impacts gameplay. One of the most notable changes from previous academic observation of tabletop roleplay behaviour is the attitude towards cheating. Fine describes cheating as "extremely common" and "implicitly condoned" in tabletop roleplay, explaining how players and dungeon masters alike will alter their rolls to sculpt the story in more favourable ways (Fine 1983, 99). While this phenomenon does vary across observers – Cover argues that cheating is more the purview of the dungeon master than the players, who may change dice rolls to make a more exciting story – the complete absence of cheating on *Critical Role* is still a striking contrast. An anonymous representative of CritRoleStats, in a personal correspondence, revealed that there were *no* observed instances of *Critical Role* players cheating or changing dice rolls. Cheating by manipulating dice is not so much unwelcome as unthinkable: it simply doesn't occur to viewers that it could or would happen[52]. For particularly important rolls – such as those that determine whether or not a dead character can be resurrected – Matt will take a photograph of the die and immediately post it on Twitter to reassure the fans that he is not lying about its result.

[52] This stands in stark contrast to other accusations of different *kinds* of cheating. It is very telling that skeptical viewers can argue that *Critical Role* is staged or scripted – a common accusation on Reddit – but making the comparatively facile accusation of a player manipulating their dice just doesn't occur to those same skeptics.

Fig. 8 – Matt's photo of Percy's resurrection roll in Episode 69[53].

The absence of cheating is, in itself, not nearly as important as the attitude towards it. In a private home game, cheating might be glossed over, jokingly permitted, or generally frowned upon. However, the presence of the anonymous audience and their idolization of numbers, fairness, and the entity that manages them, means that cheating is inconceivable.

Using the Panopticon as a metaphor may seem to paint the surveillance of *Critical Role* as an oppressive power structure, but that is not wholly the case. Over the previous decade, the actual architecture of surveillance has become available to the larger public through cellphone cameras and digital distribution. In this context, certain theorists have reimagined surveillance as an opportunity for caring, participation, or resistance. *Critical Role'*s model surveillance, while it can apply pressure to the cast members to behave in certain ways, also facilitates these more positive facets. In particular, Koskela notes that performance before a surveillance system can be a rebellious activity (2004). Performers in these surveillance systems enjoy what they are not "supposed" to enjoy, and, through their exhibitionism, retaliate against the shames of a

[53]Matthew Mercer, Twitter post, September 29, 2016, 8:32 p.m., https://twitter.com/matthewmercer

disciplinary society by performing transgressive material with pride. This meshes well with tabletop roleplay's natural gravitation towards Carnivalesque content (Mackay 2001). *Critical Role's* humour is unabashedly crude and lewd, openly discussing "impolite" topics of sex (both queer and otherwise), explicit violence, and grotesque bodily functions. Vex tends to strip naked or flash her breasts on a whim; Scanlan frequently shoots bolts of magical lightning from his groin, which is replicated in the opening credits. Each episode, the question is not whether jokes about vomit or intoxication or genitalia will occur, but how many jokes there will be. Putting the cast under audience surveillance has not repressed their urges to discuss socially unacceptable topics. Instead, it has given them a platform where they can repeatedly transgress those boundaries of social acceptability.

The impact of shame is particularly powerful during something like tabletop roleplay, which has been unfairly branded throughout its history as deviant at best or satanic at worst. Moreover, tabletop roleplaying has been overwhelmingly researched and classified as a male subculture.[54] Although every player on *Critical Role* takes defiant enjoyment in their geeky hobby, it is particularly powerful to see the three female players on *Critical Role,* Laura, Ashley and Marisha, throw themselves into an overwhelmingly male-coded culture without apology or hesitation. They are active participants in combat and story, with their own plotlines, powers, and agency. Marisha Ray's Keyleth is one of the most powerful combatants in the group, and Keyleth frequently transforms into an earth elemental (a massive, humanoid monster made of stone) to pummel creatures and buildings with her bare hands. Writer Fiona Kelly conducted a linguistic analysis of foul language in certain *Critical Role* episodes, and found that Marisha and Laura swore about as frequently as the male players, with Laura being the most likely of any player to swear: Kelly characterizes this as a "rejection of feminine standards" of behaviour (2017a). Thus, in some ways, Marisha, Ashley, and Laura prove that women and men alike can enjoy traditional, dungeon-crawling, evil-crushing tabletop roleplay.

However, these female players also shake the tabletop subculture up by challenging some of its unhealthy tendencies. In his 1983 book, Gary Alan Fine recounts that a disturbing number of all-male gaming groups would roleplay the rape and assault of barmaids or princesses, usually

[54] Gary Alan Fine's research suggests that in the early days of *Dungeons and Dragons*, only around ten to fifteen percent of roleplayers were women. It is also revealing that the original Advanced Dungeons and Dragons handbook lauds the diversity of tabletop players, and delightedly adds that "even a fair number of women" have joined in the hobby, clearly painting women as the exception rather than the rule.

in celebration for gameplay victory. In contrast to this undeniably disturbing history, *Critical Role's* depictions of sex and sexuality are far more positive. Laura Bailey's Vex, in particular, possesses a great deal of sexual agency. Vex is attractive, but instead of being harassed or objectified, she will more frequently take initiative, cheerfully flirting with merchants and guards to gain advantage during negotiations. She instigates a romantic and sexual relationship with Percy in the latter third of the story, which is memorably characterized by enthusiastic consent from both parties (consent so enthusiastic, in fact, that it becomes another source of comedy). Contrasting with their gleeful participation in spectacles of action and sex, the female players are also slightly more likely step back and interrogate these performances. Keyleth is powerful in combat, but she constantly questions the morality of the party's actions, particularly the cost in innocent lives. In a scene where Taryon Darrington is seduced by a female Whitestone guard, Vex notices how uncomfortable Tary is, and makes a point of ensuring the encounter is consensual. Furthermore, the female players enjoy challenging the kinds of imaginary pleasures one can extract from tabletop roleplay outside of fictional sex and action. In Episode 57, Ashley, Laura, and Marisha interject a scene of their characters dressing up in party dresses, doing each other's hair, and gossiping about their love lives. In Episode 41, Laura and Marisha discuss magically transforming Vex's pet bear Trinket into a smaller animal for a sneaking mission. They spend several minutes deciding which cute, furry creature Trinket will become, eventually settling on a red panda. While scenes like these are not a frequent occurrence, they are performances of exaggerated femininity in a male space. *Critical Role* is a collective fantasy, and on these rare occasions, the female players introduce fantasies that are usually neglected because masculinist fantasies of violence dominate gameplay. Even better, these moments open such fantasies to male players as well. The women are not the only ones permitted to enjoy dressing up: in Episode 57, Scanlan and Grog take an extended, indulgent trip to a hat shop.

Fig. 9 – Sam Riegel as Scanlan Shorthalt, and his unique method of casting the lightning bolt spell

Though their primary rebellions are against strictures of shame – particularly gendered shame – the players do push back against their watchers. Perhaps because authority on *Critical Role* is more diffuse than in a typical tabletop game, Matt and his players must reaffirm their creative power at times. As befitting the largely positive and collaborative relationship between the creators and fans, these affirmations are usually in the form of quick jabs or gentle satire. Sam Riegel gives a pre-show monologue in Episode 81, "What Lies Beneath The Surface", in which he mimics an automated answering machine telling viewers to press one to "argue against Matthew Mercer's many, many rule violations". Alternatively, if you, the viewer, are offended by his foul language on the stream, "you can go fuck yourself".

In summary, the addition of an all-seeing audience to a tabletop game has created opportunities for the redistribution of power between audiences and performers. Both the viewers and the performers are perpetually seeking ways to involve the audience in what is traditionally a participatory genre without completely overturning this balance, which is certainly a difficult project. As a result, new roles and pastimes and projects for audience members have been created. Documentation of the kind CritRoleStats performs is very time-consuming, requiring the reporters to watch the episode multiple times. The surveillance of the audience is characterized

by their untouchability and inaccessibility – they cannot be argued with or communicated with while the stream is on. Even the Carnivalesque content of tabletop roleplay takes on new meaning and new weight as it is broadcast to larger audiences. In short, the spectators are performing roles during these tabletop game series that could *only* feasibly be performed by spectators. As aforementioned, Mortensen says that spectators to a tabletop roleplaying game are always going to miss the point somehow, because the spectacle is not for them. Not only have the players of *Critical Role* changed their spectacle in order to appeal to an audience, as we saw in chapter one, but audiences are constantly seeking ways to imbricate themselves in play even though they can never be players themselves. It is a curious paradox: by aspiring to understand the game in ways that players do (seeing the numbers at work and manipulating them towards victory, or crying out injustice when the rules are violated) we are doing some things that players cannot, or that spectators can accomplish far more effectively.

This paradox is not necessary in the process of imbricating oneself in the game, however. To contrast with how spectators can create their own modes of engagement within the mechanical frame, I will now provide a counter-example of how viewers can mimic player-like engagement. Conveniently, the process in question also relates to the navigation and interrelation of frames. This engagement occurs through something that neatly parallels – and also depends on – datafication: the process of storification.

Storification: A Tale of True Love's Crit

When I use the term "storification", I am referencing the process of creating a chain of cause-and-event relationships between events, and extrapolating a theme, lesson, or meaning from that chain: in short, the process of creating or understanding a story. "Creating" and "understanding" may seem like two vastly different actions at first, but this is not necessarily true. Cognitive models of narrative understand it as a *process* or *experience,* where an actor interprets a series of signs as a story (Lattu 2014). This process can be as straightforward as watching a movie and understanding its sequence of pictures and sounds as a narrative, or as complex as transforming our own lives into stories by selecting certain memories as significant. Some signs or pieces of information are more easily transformed into a meaningful story than others: these signs have a greater capacity for narrativity. This way of imagining narrative might be familiar, because it is how Cover imagines the scale of narrativity that helps define tabletop

text. The dungeon master's speech has a high capacity for narrativity, because all of it is immediately taken as narrative truth: off-topic chatter has a very low degree of narrativity because it is not related to the central text: dice rolls have a middling degree of narrativity, because while the numbers themselves might not be part of the narrative, the numbers must be interpreted in relation to narrative situations.

Because tabletop roleplay involves combining all these different textual elements, with multiple actors contributing throughout the process, tabletop roleplay is essentially playful storification. The players and the dungeon master create a narrative chain of cause-and-effect by describing actions and impacts to each other. These usually follow a logical pattern. Matt describes a temple with a heavy door: Taliesin, Sam, and Liam say that their characters approach and try to open the door: Matt explains that the door will not open, probably because it is barred from the other side: the players then try multiple strategies to open the door until they finally succeed. All actors are contributing to a progression of events that creates a simple narrative of challenge, perseverance, and triumph.

However, as I suggested above, storification is not just the process of arranging events into a cause-and-effect sequence: it also involves reading a certain amount of meaning or significance into these events. It assumes that there is a reason a story is being told, and a reason it is being told in a certain way. When someone asks what a story is *about*, the answer could be given as events and characters (this story is about a group of heroes saving the world from dragons and undead), *or* it could be explained as overarching themes (this story is about family, vengeance, and forgiveness). Despite being so unplanned and spontaneous, *Critical Role*'s stories develop along powerful thematic threads. These threads might be openly expressed by the characters, or implied across various scenes. Percy's quest for vengeance and his subsequent journey to forgiveness and self-acceptance is among the most well-explored plotlines. In Episode 27, he dreams of a demon whispering the word "vengeance" in his mind, and urging him to return to his home, Whitestone, and slaughter the five people who are responsible for the deaths of his family. Over the next few episodes, he successfully kills all of them (except for Doctor Ripley, who escapes), but laments in Episode 35 that "nothing is better". By the time he crosses Ripley again, in Episode 68, he has decided to try forgiving his enemies. To Ripley, he says "I forgive you – but I cannot let you leave." Ripley kills Percy, and Percy's soul is almost devoured by the very demon who initially coaxed him into vengeance. In the next episode, Percy is rescued

from the demon and resurrected. Vex, who has been struggling with her own problems of self-doubt and self-loathing, and who is instrumental in Percy's resurrection, tells Percy in Episode 72 that she was moved by his forgiveness of Ripley. She carves the elvish word for "forgiveness" into her longbow, and tells Percy that he must learn not only to forgive his enemies, but also to forgive himself. As I retell the story here, it seems ripe for textual analysis – almost heavy-handed with its themes. Percy is quite literally consumed by his quest for vengeance when Ripley kills him, but his last words are words of forgiveness; his soul is freed from its torment and he is restored to life, as if he has been forgiven in turn.

While Percy's themes are perhaps the easiest to trace across the story, every character has their own struggle that is discussed by the players and signified through gameplay. Vex struggles with issues of self-worth, gradually gaining confidence in herself and her abilities, until the Dawnfather, god of the sun, chooses her to be his champion. Grog is, at first, needlessly violent and destructive (in the earliest episodes, he frequently picks fights for no reason) but he realizes that Vox Machina is more important to him than the instant gratification of violence, and restrains himself for their sake. These thematic lines intertwine with each other, as well. Keyleth struggles with her own violent impulses when she faces Raishan, the dragon who betrayed and slaughtered many of her own people, and she asks Grog for advice:

> Keyleth: You're able to utilise your rage when necessary. How do you keep it suppressed when it's not needed?
> …
> Grog: Right. It all comes down to one word, really: family. Before I was a part of this group, I had no family. Then Pike took me in, I met all of you, and I had a purpose. So before that, like, I would be down to fuck anything up at any time, no problem. I still kind of am. But I realize that if I fly off the handle too soon, it screws over my family.
>
> (*Critical Role* Episode 73)

These narrative threads develop across conversations between players, combat events, and other actions within the story. However, the fact that *Critical Role* is fundamentally a game introduces an interesting twist to the typical process of storification: a single roll of the dice can disrupt logical causality, change the path of the story, or force characters to interpret themselves in different ways. Fights may go unexpectedly poorly or surprisingly well, or players might succeed at challenges they were likely to fail at. A handful of times on *Critical Role*, a single roll – usually a natural one or a natural twenty – has shifted the course of the game. This is the place in

which that artificial infusion of wisdom into the "all-knowing" dice takes place. This wisdom is actually a process of narrative interpretation, enacted by the dungeon master or the players, and it is one of the main ways in which the mechanical and narrative frames interact. In situations where the dice return unexpected results, the players must think quickly and creatively in order to fit these rolls into their story; and retroactively, it appears as if the dice "knew best" all along. When the viewers make comments like "the dice always know what makes the best story", this is the process they are gesturing toward.

A shining example of this phenomenon is in Episode 40, in which certain members of Vox Machina fight over a magical skull. A spirit trapped within the skull promises to grant a wish if someone releases it. Grog wants to use the wish to kill a group of dragons that are attacking a nearby city, but Percy is skeptical of the spirit that will be released as a result. The conflict escalates into a full-blown fight. Grog wrests the skull from Percy, and Travis announces his intention to have Grog smash the skull on the ground in front of the rest of the party. Matt asks him to roll a strength check, and Travis rolls a natural one:

> Matt: Natural one?
> Laura: Yes.
> Matt: As you reach up, at the apex of your throw, you look down and-
> Travis [*staring up at the ceiling*]: I don't believe it-
> Matt: -and your eyes catch Pike-
> Travis: -I don't *fucking* believe it-
> Matt: Travis. Your eyes catch Pike, and there in that brief moment of slow-motion as you reach up, you see her face, this look of complete heartbreaking disappointment, and…just like that – it shakes you in a way that you didn't expect, and as you go through the motion you'd already anticipated your brain's already wandered and in doing so, you slam it halfheartedly and it just kind of bounces and skids across the ground.
>
> (*Critical Role* Episode 40)

Grog is physically a titan, and only a natural one could have caused him to fail such a simple check and derail this scene in the way it did. The thought of Grog failing to smash the skull is so inconceivable that Travis slips out of character, and Matt has to quickly conjure a reason for the scene to continue. Pike is Grog's oldest friend, and Matt reasons that only her disapproval could stop Grog from achieving his goal. In choosing this justification, Matt shapes Grog's character in a certain way by creating a new cause-and-effect relationship between his motives and actions. Matt explains that Grog's loyalty to Pike is stronger than the fear and desperation motivating his

theft of the skull, which reinforces themes Grog's character will continue to explore throughout the story. As I quoted above, Grog will eventually realize that staying loyal to Vox Machina is more important than giving in to his impulses. Matt "storifies" a random result by justifying it with in-story logic, and logic can also inform narrative themes. The players perform this sort of storification as well, when they excuse their natural ones by saying their character is distracted or disinterested. We can also frame this process as one of the processes completed by the interactional membrane as mentioned in chapter one: dice rolls are transformed into narrative information, moving from the mechanical frame and into the narrative frame.

Furthermore, the storification of dice rolls is one of the few play-processes that both spectators and players can engage in almost equally. If a particular roll is left unexplored by the players, spectators can easily inject their own meaning into the dice, usually by explaining their theories on social media channels. This process obviously benefits from the fact that it is more or less inherently fallacious: there is no meaning in what numbers appear on the dice other than what an interpreter creates. Anyone can come up with significance behind a particular dice roll without needing to invoke the authority of a dungeon master. In fact, there is at least one storification pattern that seems to be largely fan-created, known colloquially by Critters as "True Love's Crit." During Percy's resurrection ritual in Episode 69, as described above, Vex gives an offering to help bring him back. She confesses that she has fallen in love with Percy, kisses him, and asks him to come back to life. Matt has Laura roll a diplomacy check, and Laura rolls a natural twenty. The players are struck speechless, and once they regain their composure, they move on to the next offering in the ritual. The moment of initial shock after the roll, and the fact that the ritual is still in session, prevents the players from making any real comment on Laura's natural twenty. The fans, however, took that natural twenty to its logical extreme, dubbing it "True Love's Crit" (as a pun on "true love's kiss" and the "crit" Laura rolled). After this, the fans began to identify other natural twenties throughout the series that they believed were motivated by true love, whether of a romantic or familial kind. Natural twenties represent the best result in any situation, sometimes provoking impossibly heroic feats, and the fans now interpret some of these feats as inspired by the power of love. Critters have spotted these events both before and after the natural twenty in Episode 69, indicating that some amount of archival knowledge figures in to the pattern. Vex rolls two natural twenties in Episode 25 to defend her brother from vampires; these are retroactively dubbed True Love's Crits (in the familial sense of love). In

episode 83, a supporting character, Allura, rolls a natural twenty to haul her nearly-unconscious girlfriend out of the ocean and onto a flying carpet so they can escape drowning. Allura is not terribly strong and her girlfriend, Kima, is wearing full plate armor – but the power of love prevails. To my knowledge, "True Love's Crit" is exclusively a fan moniker. I have not heard the players use it or reference it in any side material so far. As such, this pattern represents a case of spectators engaging in a kind of play that mirrors the play of the actors. The random results of the dice are imbued with significance in both realms. Both players and viewers can engage in the process of storification, and create meaning that becomes a part of the viewing experience.

Conclusion: Participating as a Referee, Critic, or Creator

In this chapter, our investigation of the mechanical frame reveals how audience members can engage in multiple frames in multiple ways. The mechanical frame alone has inspired fans to document rules and play statistics, to survey and referee rule infractions from afar, and to construct narrative meaning out of mathematical fragments. These modes of participation indicate an attempt to overturn the verdict that Mortensen originally gave – that spectators would never properly understand the impact of tabletop roleplay. Spectators of *Critical Role* carve out new roles for themselves or mimic the processes of players in order to feel the engagement that Mortensen denies them. Similar to how the cast members are re-negotiating their identities as players and performers, audience members are deciding what their values should be and where their boundaries should lie, constantly exploring how they can engage with *Critical Role* as a media product. Audience members seem to agree that *Critical Role* should be valued as a historical artefact, given the effort going into its archiving. Critters have also labeled themselves as passionate and generous participants, meaning that volunteers do a great amount of work to preserve *Critical Role* and make it more accessible. The valorization of fannish passion – as well as the cast's encouragement of creative freedom – allows Critters to participate in the game by developing their own meaningful readings and sharing them with each other. However, despite all of the work Critters do to absorb and understand this information, boundaries still remain in place when it comes to influencing the cast's performance directly. CritRoleStats is not a referee, more of a record-keeper, and their role does not seem likely to shift. The players encourage fan interpretations to a point, but they are drawing lines in the sand elsewhere, claiming ownership

over their characters and occasionally performing with gleeful defiance (and if you don't like it, "you can go fuck yourself").

Importantly, while I have gestured towards certain power struggles in this chapter over things like adherence to rules, the spectators' attempts to engage in *Critical Role* content is fundamentally not a battle between creators and fans. Instead, it is a struggle in which fans and creators are both trying to *understand* the boundaries of participation. The cast members praise fan projects like CritRoleStats, collect galleries of fan art, and participate in discussions on social media. Audience members have been given opportunities to vote on monsters the players will face, and Geek and Sundry has begun experimenting with chat participation in their other shows. Fans and cast members alike are eager for a collective, creative experience, even if they encounter stumbling blocks such as the aforementioned difficulties over rules and authority. In light of that, this last chapter will venture into another frame: the fan frame. I have yet to explore this frame in detail, but I believe it contains the best examples – and the biggest opportunities – for collaboration and understanding between the *Critical Role* cast and their Critters.

Chapter Three: Coexistence and Conflict in the Fan Frame

It may seem unconventional to describe the cast members on *Critical Role* as "fans" of their own show. None of my predecessors have discussed fandom as its own frame, though they do acknowledge the importance of fandom in tabletop roleplay. Firstly, Mackay notes that many players are also media fans, and that they recombine their cultural knowledge to formulate the stories of their roleplaying games. For Mackay, roleplaying games are composed of "strips of culture": familiar references, tropes, and iconography in playful combination (2001). *Dungeons and Dragons* itself invites pastiche through its own lore. The monsters in the fifth edition *Monster Manual* originate in multiple different folklores and legends – a party might encounter angels, devils, demons, djinn, sphinxes, dragons, vampires, golems, and medusas in a single campaign, to say nothing of the creatures the dungeon master invents.

The *Critical Role* cast members delight in media pastiche, particularly through on-the-spot references. Allusions to songs, films, video games, tv shows, and other media abound, sometimes as quick jokes, sometimes as comparisons to allow the players to understand the scope or type of an unfamiliar monster. Fannish merchandise is also present at the table quite frequently, usually via slogans and graphics on the players' t-shirts. While references are a common language for all players, the most dedicated user of pastiche is Sam Riegel. Sam's character, Scanlan, is a bard whose powers involve playing magical music. He can grant "inspiration" to other characters, which will allow them to add a bonus to one of their upcoming rolls. To give inspiration, Sam usually performs a short, on-the-spot song parody. These parodies range from everything to Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons' "Sherry" (addressed to an NPC named Sherri) to songs from *Hamilton.* Perhaps nothing is more revealing about the importance of pastiche on *Critical Role* than the fact that CritRoleStats keeps track of it; they release lists of media references for each episode – and they maintain a separate list exclusively for Sam Riegel's songs ("Running Stats").

Notably, many of the media references are drawn from video games, cult films, science fiction, or other bastions of geek culture. The *Critical Role* cast members are naturally embedded in these cultures in their professional lives, as they provide voices for video games, anime, and cartoons. Sometimes, their references reveal not only a familiarity with geek media, but also with jokes emerging from fan culture. For example, one of Matthew Mercer's recent roles is McCree, a cowboy gunslinger in the multiplayer shooter *Overwatch.* McCree is particularly notorious for

saying "it's high noon" before his ultimate attack. In *Critical Role* episode 74, "The Path of Brass", Matt describes the environment in the Plane of Fire, including the position of the sun. He laughs at himself halfway through the description, and says, "I'm not going to say it, but the sun is high in the sky." The other players burst out laughing, and Sam and Taliesin imitate McCree's Texan accent and fire off some parody phrases: "It's full sunlight!" "It's lunchtime!" This joke is not contingent on the line itself, and relies instead on how the line has become a joke for *Overwatch* players, and how often Matt is prodded into quoting it at events[55].

The players themselves can be considered fans, and their fannish knowledge regularly comes into play in multiple frames. Sometimes, players will use media trivia to inform their direct speech within the narrative frame. This is most obvious with Scanlan's parody songs, which he sings in the narrative world in order to cast magic spells. At other times, media references slip into the mechanical frame in order to provide comparisons for attacks or monsters. Travis, in particular, likes to describe his attacks quite vividly: in Grog's pit fight in Episode 17, "Hubris", he describes an elbow-drop move Grog allegedly learned from "renowned warrior Macho Man Randy Savage". Other references exist in the social frame, such as when the cast collectively bursts into the opening lines of Jerry Lee Lewis's "Great Balls of Fire" as Keyleth casts a fireball spell in Episode 99, "Masquerade". This song does not exist within the *Critical Role* narrative, but is instead a spontaneous moment of social bonding. The use of fannish knowledge for multiple purposes suggests to me the fan-frame is yet another frame at play on *Critical Role.* This frame is entered when two or more players communicate by referencing their mutual familiarity with a piece of media, and, in some cases, by sharing a similar emotional reaction to it. These references may subsequently be filtered by the interactional membrane into a different frame, transforming them into narrative information or mechanical information that can be used in play.

So far, this model seems straightforward, but one of its key complicating features is that the players are fans of *each other,* and, in many ways, of *Critical Role.* Being a fan and a creator simultaneously may be a difficult position to imagine, but it becomes simpler when you remember all tabletop roleplay is inherently a collaborative effort. Not even Matthew Mercer is independently responsible for the shape of the show. More specifically, players (including the

[55] For one of many examples, in an interview with Gamespot during E3 2016, he is dared to give the "high noon" line during a promotional spot for *Critical Role.* He then admits that he uses his McCree voice to prank his teammates while playing *Overwatch.*

dungeon master) can lapse out of the position of a creator and into the position of an audience member at certain points in the game. When players are not engaged in first-person roleplay, they become spectators, watching scenes as they unfold (Mackay 2001). The players can surprise each other and provoke genuine emotional reactions from each other. One of the most illustrative examples is the argument between Scanlan and the rest of Vox Machina in Episode 85, "A Bard's Lament", specifically because it places the dungeon master in this spectatorship position. Typically, the dungeon master is a near-constant presence in the dialogue of play, because he must evaluate every action the other players take. However, when players are simply having a discussion in-character, the dungeon master might be able to pull back and watch. During the argument in "A Bard's Lament", Matt is silent for nearly eighteen minutes while the characters argue; later, on *Talks Machina,* he describes those eighteen minutes as some of the most rewarding in his time as a dungeon master:

> It's a gift to people who run games when those moments happen. As a gamemaster, when you can craft a narrative that the players then pick up and run with to that extent, and scenes that are that charged…I loved it because, for me, it allowed me for that moment to…be the audience…That, to me, is the reward for all the hard work, watching these guys do such an amazing job.
>
> (*Talks Machina* Episode 13)

The fact that the players watch each other perform would make them, as McKay suggests, audience members at best; the way they *behave* as audience members is what defines them as fans. They exhibit fannish behaviours towards their fellow creators both during play and afterwards. In the following sections, I will demonstrate a few of these fan practices in action.

Firstly, engaging with a narrative as a fan is a profoundly affective experience: it impacts the body and the emotions in a visceral way. One of the very first journal entries in my ethnography also reflects this:

> I feel the role of the fan in my body, a physicality I inhabit wholly and shamelessly for those three thrilling hours every Thursday night. My legs and shoulders shake, as if I were stepping on a stage like I used to in high school. I shriek at the screen. I put my hands over my mouth. I laugh too loudly. I knock things from my cluttered desk. There is a window nearby, and I occasionally direct horrified grins at my reflection…This is my fundamental experience of the show in the moment, and it is childlike in its honesty.

My interviewees have also described physical reactions to impactful events in the story. In her interview, mischief7manager described her reactions while witnessing the events of Episode 39, when four villainous dragons attack the party with very little warning:

> I have this really vivid sense-memory of lying in my bed with my iPhone smushed against my face…biting my hand so I won't make noise and wake up my roommate…yeah, I have physical reactions to everything that happens on the show.
>
> (mischief7manager, personal interview)

Fig. 10 – Liam, Laura, Ashley and Travis celebrate a victory in *Critical Role* Episode 52

Fig. 11 – Sam, Taliesin and Marisha reading a letter in *Critical Role* Episode 69

The players demonstrate their own affective engagement in the story as they play. They scream for their victories, cling to each other in moments of suspense, cry when their heartstrings are pulled and laugh hysterically when things go awry. I chose to include an image of the cast's reaction to a killing blow after a hard-fought battle, and another of their tearful reaction

to a letter received by Keyleth. These moments are particularly resonant because the players' temporal and emotional engagement mirror those of the fans. Grog's killing blow in Episode 52 came after a three-hour battle with his uncle Kevdak – a fight that nearly cost Grog his life, but ended in a last-minute dramatic victory. When Matt asks that fateful question – "How do you want to do this?" – the whole table erupts into cheers and hugs. Other victories see players falling out of chairs, pounding the table, and applauding. Emotionally invested fans follow a similar affective arc, experiencing growing nervousness as the fight continues, and ending in celebrations when Vox Machina emerges victorious. These emotions are often vented onto social media: every Thursday, Critical Role hashtags and chatrooms are replete with frantic questions, capital letters and exclamation points.

Visceral excitement and life-or-death situations engage the viewers, but so do quieter moments of emotional drama. Most players have cried on set during harrowing scenes. In the example above, Keyleth has just received a letter from another character, Kerrek. Kerrek is played by a guest player, author and fan Patrick Rothfuss. Kerrek's first appearance, in Episode 56, "Hope", led to him striking up a friendship with Keyleth. Rothfuss himself does not appear in Episode 69, but Matt plays a recording of him reading the letter aloud. At this point in the story, much of Tal'Dorei has been ravaged by dragons, and several cities have been destroyed. Kerrek's letter is meant to comfort Keyleth, reminding her that the world can be rebuilt. By sheer coincidence, the letter arrives mere minutes after Percy's first death and resurrection, rendering the letter's theme of destruction and rebirth all the more relevant. Both Marisha and Taliesin – the people who portray Keyleth and Percy, respectively – burst into tears. Kerrek's reassurance that "some things must pass through fire before they can grow" provides the episode's title, "Passed Through Fire". Affect is, by its definition, subjective; but again, testimonies from interviewees and reactions on social media suggest that the cast members are not alone in shedding tears over moments like these.

Kerrek's letter is also the result of another fannish practice. In many ways, it resembles a work of fanfiction, in that it is an unprompted, unsanctioned, and unpaid work that transforms the canon story. The letter does not serve much of a plot function; instead, it is more meditative, reflecting on the similarities and differences between Keyleth and Kerrek. Such extrapolation on the lives or thoughts of secondary characters is also a common practice among fan writers (Jenkins 1992). The letter is only debatably a fanwork, as it was incorporated into the story, but it

is a product of the fannish desire to investigate and communicate more about characters. Additionally, the letter is not the only work of its kind. Laura Bailey's character, Vex, has a pet bear named Trinket. When the *Critical Role* campaign was still a private game, she wrote a short story for Matt to explain how Vex and Trinket met. Eventually, Laura posted the short story on the Geek and Sundry website ("The Saga of Trinket"). The fact that Laura wrote the story before the launch of *Critical Role* suggests that players in private games may act fannishly towards their tabletop campaigns by writing short stories, and indeed, this is quite a common practice for players who enjoy creative writing. This assertion stems both from personal experience, and from the fact that we have seen numerous writers such as George R. R. Martin novelize their tabletop campaigns.

In her book on narrative in tabletop roleplay, Cover points out the similarities between the use of fannish pastiche in tabletop roleplay and its use in fanfiction. I interviewed six fanfiction writers for this thesis, and when I asked where they found their inspiration for writing, they would often describe a kind of cultural chain reaction. A phrase or moment might inspire them to connect *Critical Role* with other media:

> I'll see something on TV, or I'll watch a movie, or I'll listen to a song, and suddenly like this picture forms in my head.
>
> (Asia, personal interview)

> I came across a gifset on my dash that was *Stardust* [the film] at some point, and I was immediately just like, "what if that was Percy and Vex?" …one of my favourite things to do is take different works of fiction and say 'who would this character be in this world'
>
> (Sara Rokhov, personal interview)

This playful recombination is inherent to fan culture, particularly because fans rarely adhere to one specific fictional universe. As Jenkins says when he characterizes his fan-poachers, fans are migratory, bringing with them elements from other stories (Jenkins 1992). Cover compares these fan writing practices to Mackay's observation that tabletop roleplayers behave in much the same way when they combine cultural elements as they roleplay. The fact that many roleplayers also write fiction related to their campaign only reinforces this similarity. In short, not only do the players on *Critical Role* display a fannish emotional attachment to their story, but they also understand the fannish penchant for expanding on, experimenting with, and mixing texts. These are not simply cosmetic similarities: the sympathy between player-fans and Critter-fans has

helped direct the development of *Critical Role's* fan culture in a number of significant ways, which we will examine next.

Cultivating a Fan Community

When I conducted my interviews with six fan authors in the *Critical Role* community, most characterized it as one of the more positive experiences they had seen in an online fandom. Matthew Mercer himself has characterized the Critters as "a juggernaut of positivity" ("Critical Role's Impact on D&D"). This is also a sentiment frequently echoed by the cast and Critters on social media. In March of 2017, for *Critical Role's* second anniversary, Brian Wayne Foster assembled videos of fans describing what *Critical Role* meant to them, and how participating in the *Critical Role* fandom had changed their lives for the better ("What Does Critical Role Mean to Me? Fans Respond with Love, Thankfulness"). One of the key threads uniting many of these sentiments is the constant encouragement fans receive from the players to participate in the fan community. This also seems to be a topic that piques curiosity in critical-minded fans; the question I received from user wishiwould, which I quoted in the introduction, asked for my thoughts on why *Critical Role's* "exchange of the ideas with the audience is so much more free", suggesting it might have something to do with *Critical Role's* "format". This is perceptive: the format of the show, and the different frames accessed by the players within the show, help encourage and facilitate audience participation.

Before I explain how this show encourages fan participation, I should clarify what I mean by "participation." Academic research on fan culture often focuses on participation through the creation of derivative or transformative works of art (Turk 2014). Research on fan art, fan fiction, cosplay, and fan videos are plentiful. The very existence of the *Journal of Transformative Works* suggests this through its title: it focuses on the "works" fans produce through voluntary creative labour. However, some theorists have begun to criticize this focus on fandom's concrete products. Tisha Turk, writing in the *Journal of Transformative Works,* points out:

> … Much of what [fans] produce is not art but information, discussion, architecture, access, resources, metadata. Think about all the behind-the-scenes labor, for example, that goes into commenting on stories, beta-ing vids, writing essays and recommendations, reviewing and screen-capping episodes, collecting links…animating .gif sets, creating user icons, recording podfic, editing zines, assembling fan mixes…updating wikis, populating databases…planning conventions, volunteering at

> conventions, moderating convention panels—and the list could go on.[56]
>
> (Turk 2014)

When I refer in general to Critters "participating" in their community, I am very much including this kind of participation. A great amount of the work that Critters do is archival, because there is so much content for fans to absorb. Projects like CritRoleStats, Critical Role Transcripts, and anonymous edits to the Critical Role Wiki or TV Tropes pages fall into this category. When I speak of a show and a fandom that encourages "participation", I mean participation through the creation of fanworks, but also through other contributions of labour and time. Brian Wayne Foster's "What Critical Role Means to Me" video is an example of this kind of participation. The Critters involved took the time and effort to film their video clips; many also performed some considerable emotional labour by explaining how *Critical Role* helped them combat social isolation or depression.

As with the case of this video, a great amount of fan participation has been facilitated by the creators simply asking fans to join in. As we will see later, fans have voted on monsters for Vox Machina to fight throughout the series. They have also answered calls for holiday-themed fan art galleries and t-shirt design contests. Cast members encourage fanwork at every juncture, gathering art for slideshow galleries that play before each episode, complimenting Critters for their creativity and passion during convention panels, and even devoting an entire spinoff show, *Talks Machina,* to answering fan questions and championing fan work. A number of fans have been invited to *Talks Machina* to answer questions about their projects. Alongside the interview with Andrew from CritRoleStats, which was mentioned in Chapter 2, *Talks* has also featured blacksmith Gil Ramirez, who forged steel dice sets for the players; members of Fan Friction Films, who film music videos in *Critical Role* cosplay; and Kit Buss, one of the show's official artists. However, these occasional contests are far outweighed by the amount work that fans do spontaneously; and some of these unsolicited projects can be massive, as with CritRoleStats and Critical Role Transcripts. Outside the creators' open calls for fanworks, a number of subtler factors that encourage fans to participate in different ways.

Firstly, structure of the show itself plays a large part in encouraging creative fanwork. Watching the players on *Critical Role* enjoy their game has inspired a considerable amount of

[56] This list *does* go on: I cut nearly half the immaterial labours identified by Tisha Turk in this paragraph, and Critters engage in all of these and more.

activity among fans. When I spoke with my interviewees, there was one question that they all answered in the exact same way: I asked if watching *Critical Role* had sparked the interviewee's interest in playing tabletop games themselves, and every single one of them said yes. Some were inspired to run their own games; some returned to playing tabletop after negative experiences; others even decided to livestream their games online. *Critical Role* makes the game look so compelling and fun that many, many viewers want to try it for themselves. Those who cannot find groups to play with might purchase the handbooks or create characters using the *Dungeons and Dragons* ruleset, keen to enjoy the fantasy even if they cannot participate in an actual game. This kind of participation is also broadly encouraged by the creators. Matt has mentioned that one of his favourite things about *Critical Role* is how it has introduced or re-introduced tabletop roleplaying to a whole generation of fans ("Critical Role's Impact on D&D"). Now that Matt's *Tal'Dorei Campaign Setting* has been released, the invitation to participate as a fan by 'playing along' in his fantasy world is explicitly open.

The fact that the show is built around a tabletop roleplaying game impacts fans in other ways, as well. As I have mentioned, some tabletop roleplay series are distributed as podcasts; Geek and Sundry has also begun to re-release *Critical Role* in podcast form. Tabletop roleplay is tantamount to oral storytelling, and almost all of the information traded between players is auditory, not visual. This gives fan artists who work in visual media a massive amount of flexibility. In *Critical Role's* case, there are three sets of semi-official character designs by artist Kit Buss serving as icons for the characters during the stream. Wendy Green, who has been paid to create comics of Vox Machina, uses her own designs. The designs are similar to Kit's, but not identical. The *Critical Role: Origins* comic also uses slightly different costumes, and some of the costumes made for the cast in the opening look different from Kit or Wendy's designs. None of these depictions supersedes any other as "official". Instead, the characters retain a handful of iconic elements across different pieces, such as Vex's blue feather hairpiece, Grog's gray skin and black tattoos, or Percy's white hair.

The world of *Critical Role* possesses a flexibility specific to its auditory medium, because there is no singular visual referent that fan artists or cosplayers might feel compelled to replicate. During a Q&A session, Travis Willingham reflected on this flexibility while speaking with Wendy Green. He says, "We see so much art and rarely do we ever go 'No, that's not how I saw it.' We're like 'yes!' 'also yes!' 'also yes!'" ("Critical Role Q&A!") Fans and players alike

accept and recognize an extremely broad array of visual material. In a similar vein, this flexibility can be encouraging in that it removes hypothetical restrictions on quality and style. Vox Machina have been depicted in hyper-realistic portraits and in exaggerated, deformed cartoons. Because so many different representations exist, and because so many of them make it into *Critical Role's* official fanart slideshow each week, it becomes less likely that a new artist will see their style as too strange or inappropriate for the tone. Moreover, less experienced artists might be encouraged by seeing their work acknowledged alongside other fanartists, some of whom are professionals.

Conversely, while visual information is very limited, *Dungeons and Dragons* has very specific rules relating to space and combat, meaning dungeon masters are naturally well served by describing them in detail. Matt's descriptions are very vivid and sensual, often incorporating illustrative hand gestures and sound effects, to transmit his own mental picture as clearly as possible. My interviewees praised his narration, recounting stories of how his descriptions painted vivid pictures in their minds Combining all these factors, we have a situation in which prospective fanartists, cosplayers, and archivists receive copious amounts of information almost every week, but with no stylistic or visual restrictions.

For an illustrative contrast, I would like to point out how *Critical Role* has encouraged a specific type of fanwork – cosplay – as compared to Bioware and Blizzard, two major video game developers. All three of these entities have used cosplay to promote their games, but they have approached the practice of cosplay very differently. Bioware decided to assist fans of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* by releasing detailed reference sheets for costumes appearing in the game. These reference sheets were not just high-resolution images, but actual piece-by-piece breakdowns of outfits so cosplayers could theoretically sew them as accurately as possible ("From us to You – Introducing Dragon Age: Inquisition Character Kits"). Meanwhile, Blizzard promoted the release of two new characters, Sombra and Doomfist, in *Overwatch* by hiring models to cosplay as those characters. They also hired Henchman Props, a professional prop- and costume-making company, to create the cosplays these models would wear, and filmed mini-documentaries of the craftspeople making these costumes ("Creating the Doomfist Cosplay for Blizzard & Overwatch") ("Sombra in Real Life: Behind the Scenes"). Both of these efforts by Bioware and Blizzard can genuinely help cosplayers, both by providing them with more accurate materials and by demonstrating the labour behind their craft. Bioware's character kits give close-ups of jewelry and fabric textures; Blizzard's behind-the-scenes videos at Henchman Props

features intricate 3-D printing, sculpting, airbrushing, and sewing. In Blizzard's Doomfist video, seamstress Kiga Tymianski claims the challenge was to make the cosplayer look "exactly like he just stepped out of the screen." Both of these examples encourage fan participation, but they also valorize precision and skill.

By contrast, *Critical Role* held a costume contest in October 2016, where fans were encouraged to Tweet pictures of their *Critical Role* cosplays at the cast. The contest was initially supposed to have only a first, second, and third place winner, but by the end of the contest, each cast member had also selected a personal runner-up. Some of these winners were indeed notable for their skill and accuracy (Sara Rokhov's Vex'ahlia costume was Laura's favourite because of how accurate it was when compared to the costume in the opening credits; the winning costume was a version of Percy that featured incredibly detailed props). Other winners were more remarkable for their creativity. Marisha chose someone dressed as a male version of Keyleth, complete with an impressive ginger beard; Sam picked a cat dressed as Scanlan. Matt chose a Ripley cosplayer "not just [because of] costume and presentation, but just the intensity of expression, the personality…the minute I saw it I was like 'oh, there she is'" (*Critical Role* Episode 74).

Furthermore, the week before the winners were announced – the week of Halloween – the cast themselves dressed up as non-player characters from *Critical Role.* Sam painted his face to look like a Rakshasa tiger demon; Matt wore a bald cap, glasses, and blacksmith's gloves to be his crazy black powder merchant, Viktor; and Laura and Travis dressed as Lord and Lady Briarwood, complete with vampire fangs and makeup for Travis. The cast were all dressed as non-player characters or enemies, usually played by Matt – and of course, they had already dressed as their own characters earlier that year in order to film the opening credits.

When the cast asked their fans to dress up as *Critical Role* characters on Halloween, it came from the mouths of creators who had already thrown themselves into cosplay. They were able to approach creative fans as creative fans themselves, on a level playing field. Of course, there is a considerable amount of costuming skill on display during the opening credits, thanks to the work of a number of make-up artists, costumers, and photographers. However, the way these creators are credited is quite different from how Blizzard acknowledges them. Blizzard's Doomfist video emphasizes skill, elaborating on precise techniques used for construction, and lingering on what the craftsmen consider their biggest challenges or triumphs. In *Critical Role's*

case, when the opening segment first launches at the beginning of Episode 50, we are introduced to the costumers and craftspeople through the lens the cast's fannish glee. The players gush about the props and costumes made for them, directing viewers to their collaborators' websites and Etsy stores, and teasing Travis how long he spent in the makeup chair applying body paint. Marisha is still wearing her Keyleth headdress, and Ashley is wearing her blonde Pike wig. They ask the crew to play the opening twice before the episode starts, simply because they are so excited to see it. The emphasis in this segment less on skill, and more on collaboration and excitement – on the feelings of being a fan of someone's work, rather than strictly on skilled labour.

Some creators have, in the past, reacted quite negatively to fanwork. Ann Rice is particularly notorious for her hard stance against fanfiction writers ("Anne's Messages to Fans"); Henry Jenkins famously points to *Saturday Night Live's* derogatory depiction of *Star Trek* fans, which featured William Shatner (Jenkins 1993). These sour attitudes still linger, but are far from universal in media. Other creators encourage fanwork, in the manner of Blizzard and Bioware, and because of this, *Critical Role* does not differentiate itself purely by being fanwork-friendly. Instead, if *Critical Role* does have an edge in appealing to its fans, it is because the cast members can communicate with their fans through their shared fan-frame. Like their fans, they are expressive and passionate and excitable about *Critical Role* and about the fanwork surrounding it; more generally, they know fandom's language and its social codes. Fannish glee is not just implicitly permitted by the cast, but openly performed. Their can't-get-enough excitement over their super-cool new title sequence matches our own: on the *Critical Role* Facebook page, where the title sequence was first uploaded, it has been viewed over 1.6 million times.

Critical Role **and the Fan Gift Economy**

One of the most important ways in which the players on *Critical Role* act as fans of their own work is through their engagement in the fandom's gift economy. More generally, gift economies operate through three principles of giving, receiving, and reciprocating (Hellekson 2009). Participants in gift economies give their gifts without the expectation of payment: instead, the economy perpetuates itself through a general understanding that all participants will contribute or reciprocate in some . Fan cultures are often discussed as gift economies, as fans create fanworks for free and then "give" them away, either to specific fans or their community at

large. These gifts strengthen social bonds within the fan community, creating feelings of gratitude and indebtedness that motivate further work and deeper friendships[57]. Reciprocation in the fan gift economy can be direct or indirect; two fans might directly trade work, or an artist may feel a responsibility to "give back" to their community as a whole. It is important to note that the "gifts" in question here include visual art and fanfiction, but also the products of emotional or immaterial labour: these include encouraging comments on fanworks, the facilitation of discussion or theories, or helping other fans research their shared objects in more depth. Tisha Turk, when she points to fan projects that are not as frequently recognized as fan works, is speaking specifically in the context of this gift economy. She calls information-gathering and cataloguing efforts "gifts of labour".

In the *Critical Role* gift economy, even the cast members are participants – they give, receive, and reciprocate. In the earlier days of the show, the Critters often sent hand-made presents to the players. Some early episodes featured special "Critmas" segments, usually lasting an hour or more, where players would open gifts sent to them by fans. The Critmas streams would overwhelm the game tables with knitwear, stuffed animals, charitable donations made in the name of the show, and all manner of handmade knickknacks and trinkets. In the first fifteen episodes, it was also common for viewers to order pizzas or snacks for the cast and send them to the Geek and Sundry studio. While the practice of sending food has fallen out of fashion, and there are no more official Critmas segments, players still receive gifts from fans and will often livestream "unofficial" Critmas episodes of themselves opening presents. Particularly impressive gifts are still recognized on stream at times, as when Matt and Marisha, who had announced their engagement in Episode 73, received a handmade wooden chest as a wedding present.

Players also give gifts to each other on the stream, acknowledging important relationships or the hard work of making the show. Because they are fannish gifts, they tend to be inspired by elements of the show's central narrative. Kerrek's letter to Keyleth came with a ring for Marisha, inscribed with the words "I have passed through fire" on the inside. Liam has given Laura a broom, because her character Vex notoriously stole a flying broom from a guest in Episode 64.

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[57] Hellekson genders fan communities in this article to an uncomfortable extent: in her view, female fans exchange gifts as a repudiation of "masculine" economic power in favour of social bonds, which are, in her words, "traditionally the woman's sphere". Hellekson is probably accurate in reporting that female-identified fans are more common. However, male Critters make a significant impact on our community, and female Critters can be as equally complicit in consumerism as in fannish rebellion. Furthermore, because Critters are a very queer-positive community, the reduction of fan economies to a gender binary, and an analysis bordering on gender essentialism, seems inappropriate in this context.

This gift was specifically a celebration of Laura's character choices. In Episode 36, Keyleth (in-character) gives Percy a necklace made out of a raven's skull; Taliesin can later be seen wearing a necklace shaped like a raven's skull during the show's opening credits. The language of gift-giving is also used quite frequently when the cast has produced new material for *Critical Role*. When a new opening sequence was unveiled at the beginning of Episode 50, Matt introduced it with the words, "we want to show our first big *present* to you guys". Even the show itself is sometimes discussed using the language of gift-giving. Fans often describe the players as being "generous" or "kind" enough to permit us to watch their tabletop campaign, as if *Critical Role* is a gift of entertainment. Matt has also spoken about tabletop roleplaying as an ongoing exchange of immaterial gifts between himself and his players:

> For any dungeon master, you do it out of love. It's fun, it's a game, but it's a gift to your players. And as such they gift it back to you – they take something that you built, something you've made for them, and they bring it to life, and change it, and twist it, and make it into something you didn't expect, hand it back to you, and say 'what's next'? And it's that…perpetual gifting back and forth that makes such a magical experience at the table.
> ("Critical Role's Matthew Mercer on saying goodbye, but not yet")

Matt's perspective on perpetual gift-giving highlights another important aspect of the gift economy. His players will manipulate and change his ideas before gifting them back to him, painting a picture of perpetual growth and metamorphosis. Hellekson similarly explains that gifts given in a gift economy are not consumed and destroyed; rather, they are elevated into a metatextual mass that defines the experience of a text for a fandom. In the case of *Critical Role,* the show's central narrative text is already a product of a creative gift-giving process. Because players are connected to fans on social media, and very encouraging of derivative works, creative gifts pass between fans and cast members with great frequency: they are all engaged in this gift-giving dynamic.

To put this simply, fan ideas are often incorporated into the text of *Critical Role*. As a quick example, some artists started drawing Keyleth with shorter hair after she fell in a pool of lava in Episode 80, "Raishan", reasoning that her hair would have been burnt off. A few episodes later, Marisha warmed up to the idea, and she and Liam staged a scene in which Vax trimmed Keyleth's burnt hair to match the fans' new design. In light of contributions like this, the creative authority of something like *Critical Role* is quite diffuse. Players have their own push-and-pull

dynamic with the dungeon master, the presence of audience surveillance and monitors such as CritRoleStats further challenge that dynamic, and now, ideas from fans can be incorporated into the text. The cast members frame *Critical Role* as a broad, flexible hyperdiegesis, which cannot fully exist under the dominion of one person: due in part to all the creative works deriving from *Critical Role,* Matt sees the game as "so much bigger than us [the players] at this point" ("Critical Role Q&A!"). However, the exchange of ideas between fans and creators does not always run smoothly, and may even be unsettled by this diffuse power structure. To demonstrate this, I have selected two examples.

Firstly, in Episode 32, "Against the Tide of Bone", the group is traveling through the city of Whitestone, which has been infested by undead creatures. They come across a zombie giant in a graveyard, and they work together to kill it. Vex and Vax exchange a quick in-character dialogue during Vex's turn, where Vex asks Vax if he remembers the way they killed a giant together when they were younger. This comment was a reference to a piece of fanfiction about the twins' childhood called "Side by Side" ("Side by Side"). In the story, Vex shoots an arrow into the giant's shoulder; Vax grabs onto the arrow, and uses it to swing himself up onto the giant and stab it in the neck, which finally fells the creature. Liam and Laura are clearly in sync, both of them thinking about the fanfiction; they are both prepared to re-enact it on the giant they are facing in Episode 32. Matt doesn't know what they are trying to do, and Laura needs to barter with him to get the set-up she wants.

> Matt: The other arrow just sticks and disappears into its torso, you don't even see the impact, it just pushes through the flesh and then vanishes-
> Laura: The whole arrow goes in? I wanted to leave some of it out.
> Matt: Okay…okay, uh…roll a strength check…this is [to represent] control over your [arrow]
>
> (*Critical Role* Episode 32)

In this case, some members of the cast are keen on integrating fanwork into their universe, but they meet with stumbling blocks when they are not all familiar with it.

The second event relates to the fanart slideshows that open each episode of *Critical Role*. Every Thursday, fanart created over the previous week is assembled into a slideshow, which plays before the episode officially starts, during the midpoint break, and again after the episode ends. At the beginning of Episode 79, "Thordak", the weekly slideshow featured a piece of Percy and Vex by the prolific Critter artist shalizeh7.

Fig. 12 – artwork of Percy and Vex'ahlia by artist shalizeh7

I was surprised to see this particular piece in the slideshow, because according to shalizeh7, it was inspired by *The Wise Man's Tree*, a piece of *Critical Role* fanfiction that I have been writing over the past two years. Though it was inspired by *The Wise Man's Tree,* its differences from other *Critical Role* fanart are minimal enough that perhaps only shalizeh7 and I would know for certain where it came from. After all, the important *Critical Role* iconography is there: Vex's blue feathers, Percy's white hair. When this piece was put in the slideshow, its connection to my fanfiction vanished. I later learned that there were other *Critical Role* galleries with similar lineages: pieces of fanart derived from *Critical Role* fanfiction and then re-incorporated into the show[58].

[58] As an example, an interviewee, teammompike, has had two pieces of fanart based on her written work displayed in *Critical Role* galleries, and mentioned knowledge of one other case. I would also wager there are more occasions that I am simply unfamiliar with, since the *Critical Role* fanfiction scene is now quite expansive, to say nothing of its fanart.

The stories of the giant fight and this piece of fanart are emblematic of how creative ideas spread between Critters, cast and crew under this diffuse model of creative authority. Ideas are transformed and reused, with new ideas added or excised as their new use demands. In the end, one element of *Critical Role* might represent completely different things to different viewers. We already know that variety, even self-contradictory variety, does not bother the people involved: as Travis pointed out, our reactions to differing works are largely "yes, also yes, and also yes". This is how ideas become part of that "metatextual mass" Hellekson described as existing in the fan gift economy. I envision it as a water cycle of creative material. Raw ideas (say, Keyleth's short hair, the reasons behind it, and the symbolism attached to it) are like water molecules, freely given to a cloud of thought that anyone can access. From there, individual artists – whether they are Critters or cast members – may condense these free-form ideas into their own works (pictures of a short-haired Keyleth, or the scene where Vax cuts her hair). When those works are completed, they are released and returned to the atmosphere, where they can be reused (perhaps in the form of fanfiction narrating Keyleth's thoughts about her new hair). Molecules of certain ideas will always escape in this process, meaning no two rainfalls – or mental images, or physical images, or fanfictions, or performances – will use the same raw material. As we have also seen, due to the prevalence of pastiche in fandom, both the cast and the Critters repurpose raw material from cultural spaces outside *Critical Role* in the same manner.

This analogy suggests an exchange of creative material that is somewhat loose, disorganized, and hard to track. However, the players have also experimented with more direct input on the story from the fans. As a reward for reaching a certain donation threshold during a charity event, Matt hosted a livestream in which he collaborated with viewers to design a non-player character and an enemy encounter. This exercise was made simpler by the fact that *Dungeons and Dragons* classifies both monsters and people into archetypes for mechanical purposes. So, monsters are divided into broad types (demons, beasts, dragons, or constructs, for example) and size categories (tiny, small, medium, large, huge, and gargantuan). Matt reminded the viewers of these categories, and then an assistant would paste a link into the Twitch chat. This link led to an online poll, allowing the viewers to vote on their preferences within these categories. He also allowed the viewers to vote on what kind of attacks the monster would use, and selected a handful of suggestions for the creature's name directly from the Twitch chat, which were then also put to a vote. Normally, due to the presence of around thirty thousand

viewers, the Twitch chat moves far too quickly for players to read during episodes of *Critical Role*. Very early episodes feature some chat interaction – Laura thanks the chat for reminding her to use a particular spell in Episode 2, for example – but this eventually became less plausible as the fanbase grew larger, the Twitch chat grew faster, and the gameplay tighter and more intense. Interaction with the chat is important for Twitch streamers looking to grow fanbases; because *Critical Role* itself cannot easily facilitate it, Matt's voting session – which also served as yet another Q&A – is in some ways the closest facsimile of direct, sustained interaction through Twitch the show can support (Hamilton et al., 2014). The chat voted for a tiny-sized celestial named Symphior[59], who would attack using environmental effects rather than spells or melee weapons. Tiny enemies (roughly speaking, those the size of a house cat or smaller) tend to be rare, as do celestials, and attacking "with the environment" is unconventional.[60] The chat voted for something very different from what they had seen on *Critical Role*. Using the general guideline of a tiny, angelic creature, Matt described Symphior as a corrupted cherub, provoking a delightfully illustrative response from the Twitch chat, as seen here:

[59] In *Dungeons and Dragons,* celestials are typically good-natured creatures that hail from divine realms. They include different types of angelic humanoids as well as unicorns. Celestials tend to be quite rare and powerful; the 5th edition *Monster Manual* only has seven celestial-type enemies in it, whereas it has nearly fifty different stat blocks for dragons alone.

[60] Some enemies can threaten creatures with the hazards in their lairs. A fiery red dragon's lair, for example, might shoot jets of lava or bursts of toxic fumes each round. These effects are called "lair actions", and are usually only available to very powerful creatures. This is likely where Matt drew his inspiration for Symphior.

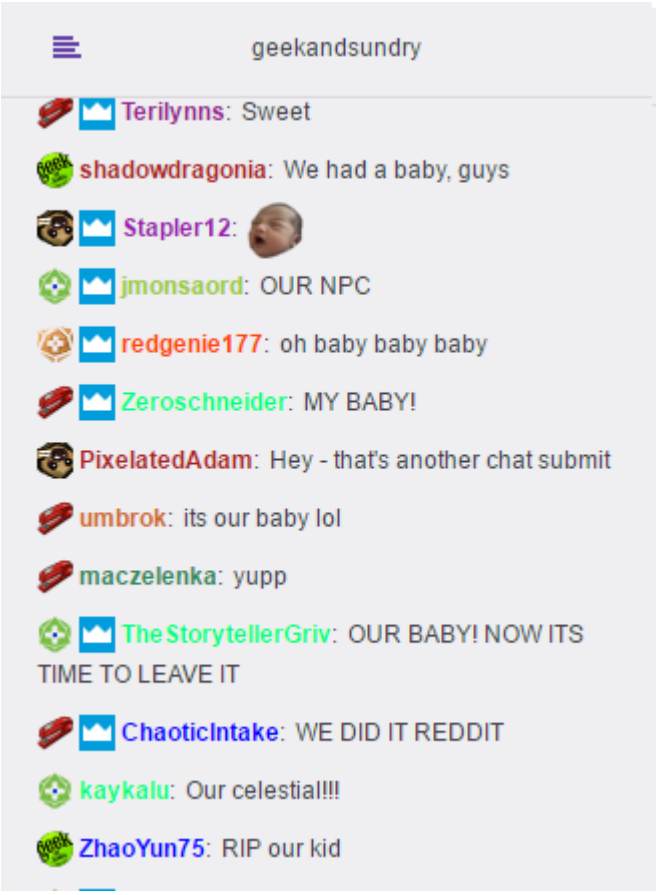

Fig. 13 – the Geek and Sundry Twitch chat celebrating their "baby"

This fan-made "baby" is (almost accidentally) a perfect metaphor for the excitement and creative power the fans felt in that moment. The frequent use of first person plural – "our" baby – is particularly indicative of the sense of community this created among the fans. After this, fans gleefully encouraged their "baby" either to die or kill everyone in Vox Machina (known as a total party kill, or TPK). As Gary Alan Fine observes, jokes about inflicting TPKs are usually made by, or directed at, dungeon masters. Symphior put fans, albeit briefly, in the dungeon master's shoes, as they had created a challenge for a group of players to overcome. Earlier on in the series, it was more common for Matt to pick a handful of enemies from the monster manual and allow viewers to vote on which ones Vox Machina would face. This resulted in the party facing classic D&D enemies such as a black pudding (a tarlike puddle of sentient, corrosive goop) and the aforementioned white dragon from Episode 18 and 19[61].

[61] I expect this idea of letting viewers vote for enemies fell out of practice for several reasons. It takes considerable extra work for Matt to organize votes such as these, since it is infeasible to do them during regular *Critical Role*

It is worth noting here that open solicitations for fan contributions to a narrative are not exclusive to *Critical Role*. The process of creating Symphior through voting will be familiar to viewers of reality TV like *American Idol* or *So You Think You Can Dance,* in which phone-in votes are collected at the end of each episode to choose who will stay for another week. *American Idol* established its voting schemes both to increase the illusion of "reality" for viewers by allowing their votes to impact the progression of the show, and for the sake of sponsor AT&T, whose text messaging system ended up being the most efficient way to vote for contestants (Jenkins 2006). Around the time of *American Idol*, Jenkins notes, production companies began to notice the intense energy of dedicated fans and fandoms. Fans "build a long-term relationship" with their objects of fascination (Jenkins 2006, 346). It is possible for franchise producers to commodify this relationship by creating purchasable supplementary content or merchandise, or by weaving corporate sponsorships into their franchises. Jenkins quotes Kevin Roberts (CEO of Saatchi and Saatchi) and his rather chilling realization that "emotion is a limitless resource" – meaning that emotions can be endlessly exploited for profit gain (Jenkins 2006, 346).

The contradiction here is that gift economies, in *principle,* rely on a rejection of capitalist values. Gift economies require giving (of labour, objects, and creative work) without expectation of reciprocation or monetary gain. However, recent scholarship has pointed out that fandom requires, to a certain extent, capitalist consumption of media commodities (Scott 2009; Jones 2014). All fans must confront this paradox, often while facing the commodification of their beloved media, advertising targeted directly at their needs, and potentially even the exploitation of their fannish labours. Many corporate entities have attempted to monetize fan practices, resulting in infamous disasters such as FanLib[62], but they have also made subtler moves to "restrict the gift's movement and capitalize on it" through the production of ancillary content (Scott 2009). They seek to manipulate the fandom gift economy externally. In the case of *Critical Role,* the cast members behave more as internal participants *in* this gift economy. As fans themselves, they understand what it means to have a beloved series get cancelled mid-run, or

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sessions. Furthermore, the plot premises for later arcs revolved around certain types of enemies (The Whitestone Arc featured undead, and the Chroma Conclave arc featured dragons), which would drastically limit viewers' voting options.

[62] FanLib was a monetized fanfiction archive launched in 2007. Fan writers openly loathed the concept, railing against it as corporate, for-profit exploitation of their creative work. Some of FanLib's features – particularly its overbearing restrictions on fanfiction content – also betrayed the ignorance of an executive board that knew very little of the community they were attempting to commodify. FanLib collapsed in 2008, just over a year after its launch.

drowned in sponsorship, or sold to a disliked creator. While the Critters struggle to maintain their gift economy regardless of the pressures of commodification, the fan-producers are also struggling, trying to navigate the contradictory demands of capitalism and the fannish personas on which they have built their appeal. To illustrate this struggle, I will finish this chapter by providing some examples of how the commodification of *Critical Role* has been handled by fans, cast members, and producers.

Commercial Personalities

With *Critical Role's* growing success, Geek and Sundry has made a number of starts towards merchandizing and sponsorship. Before each episode, Laura Bailey reminds us that *Critical Role* T-shirts, dice, pencils, posters, hoodies, are available on the Geek and Sundry site. The *Tal'Dorei Campaign Guide,* as well as an upcoming art book and comic series, fulfil demands for ancillary content. Corporate sponsors include LootCrate, BackBlaze, Marvel Puzzle Quest, and the video game *Middle Earth: Shadow of War*. To continue with our comparison to the early days of *American Idol,* the overwhelming presence of corporate sponsorship on that show apparently grated on the fans' nerves (Jenkins 2006). This is not the case with *Critical Role* so far*;* by and large, these elements of commodification are all received rather positively by the fans. *Critical Role* merchandise regularly sells out; supplementary books and comics are widely purchased and celebrated; and even the brief commercial spots for LootCrate or BackBlaze – usually given by Sam Riegel before the game starts, or played during the gameplay break – are funny, enjoyable, and quite beloved.

There are a handful of reasons why these signifiers of commercialization might be tolerated, or even embraced, by the fans. Firstly, *Critical Role* producers weave the appeal of the show's geek-celebrity personalities into its commercials and sponsorship spots. This is also a tactic used in fan-targeted marketing; among other things, it inspired a Coca-Cola commercial featuring *American Idol's* notorious judge, Simon Cowell. This Coca-Cola spot forms an interesting parallel to the *Critical Role* cast's commercial for the launch of a new piece of merchandise – the 'Slayer's Cake' apron.

Fig. 14 – Simon Cowell's Coca Cola commercial (2003) and Laura Bailey in *Critical Role's* commercial for Slayer's Cake aprons (2017)

The commercial is presented as a commercial for the Slayer's Cake bakery, which Taryon, Vex, Keyleth and Pike own in the *Critical Role* universe. Performing as their characters, the players show off the bakery's treats and direct people to their imaginary store. In an apron, a blonde wig, and a jeweled helm, Sam delivers pitches for Slayer's Cake pastries with Taryon's heroic panache. Laura, pretending to be Vex, fake-eats a chocolate doughnut and winks at the camera. The Slayer's Cake does not exist in our universe, only in Tal'Dorei; the advertisement is actually for aprons bearing the Slayer's Cake logo. Only at the very end of the skit does Marisha (in Keyleth's voice) remind viewers that Slayer's Cake aprons are available for purchase.

This kind of in-character spot is comparable to a joint *American Idol*/Coca-Cola commercial released in 2003. In the Coca-Cola commercial, Simon Cowell is coerced by a mobster into reading "I enjoy the smooth, intriguing flavour of Vanilla Coke" from a cue card; the mobster seeks a positive review from "America's most notorious critic", playing to Simon Cowell's reputation as the harshest judge on the *American Idol* panel. Despite the forced reading, Simon's expression does imply that he does, indeed, enjoy Vanilla Coke. In his essay on *American Idol,* Jenkins notes that even fans who disliked the commercialized aspects of the show itself begrudgingly enjoyed that particular TV spot. Jenkins suggests that these "series-targeted" commercials are an example of a corporation effectively courting series fans by appealing to their love for Simon Cowell's persona. The Slayer's Cake commercial works on a similar premise, banking on the fans' adoration of Vox Machina and their bizarre pastry schemes in order to sell aprons.

Critical Role's advertisements actively differ from the Coca-Cola commercial in that they are delivered with an air of parody. Coca-Cola may be making fun of Simon Cowell's persona,

but the Slayer's Cake commercial mocks commercials *in general.* The Slayer's Cake advertisement includes stilted deliveries from Marisha and Ashley, and purposefully bad editing. The caption underneath Laura as she fake-eats her doughnut, "Real people. Not actors," is steeped in self-conscious irony. Vex is not a real person, but Laura Bailey is both a real person *and* an actor, performing in a show that – as I have thoroughly reviewed in chapter one – requires her to be both actor and person throughout *Critical Role*'s main spectacle. Through this identity play, the disclaimer is also a jab at actual commercials using (or abusing) the same disclaimer. (Do you not become an actor as soon as a camera is pointed your way?) This pattern continues throughout other commercials and pitches. Sam uses his spots for BackBlaze and LootCrate as excuses to deliver increasingly ludicrous monologues and parodies. In Episode 114, he needs to advertise for Marvel Puzzle Quest, but Vox Machina is about to fight the climactic boss of their entire campaign, Vecna. He spends the advertisement sarcastically claiming that Marvel Puzzle Quest has distracted him from the "immortal psychopath that will probably wipe out three years of hard work on this show" (*Critical Role* Episode 114). Sam recognizes that fans and players alike only have Vecna on their minds, and are far more invested in that than anything he could say about Marvel Puzzle Quest; pointing this irony out makes the other cast members repeatedly burst out laughing, and makes the commercial far more memorable than it would have been otherwise. By poking fun at the more ludicrous elements of commodification, the players somehow make commodification more palatable. Fans already enjoy the performances on *Critical Role;* Sam's commercials, which are almost always demonstrations of his comedic chops, are just another performance.

While these parodic commercials are quite dismissive of commodification, the actual acts of purchasing merchandise and media consumption are instead lauded throughout *Critical Role* and Geek and Sundry's other content. The strongest indicator of this attitude is *Signal Boost.* While *Signal Boost* is not technically a spinoff of *Critical Role,* it was a direct consequence of its cast meeting with Geek and Sundry, as it is the brainchild of *Critical Role's* Marisha Ray. *Signal Boost* is a five-minute show in which a host reports on a half-dozen of their favourite activities, products, websites, places, people, or things, with these "boosts" interspersed by comedic skits. *Signal Boost* episodes play during the *Critical Role* break, Marisha advertises runs of *Signal Boost* before the game begins, and several players (Laura, Marisha, Ashley, Liam, and Taliesin) and guest stars (Darrin de Paul and Mary Elizabeth McGlynn) have hosted the show. The selling

point of *Signal Boost* is that the endorsements are sincere ones, given by familiar personalities who are genuine *fans* of the products, since the show is not influenced by sponsorship. These hosts are akin to the "brand advocates" or "inspirational consumers" identified by Henry Jenkins – they advocate for consumption from a position of fannish knowledge, and not because they will receive any monetary benefit. Like the Coca-Cola and Slayer's Cake commercials, *Signal Boost* relies on the personality of the host to "sell" the experiences or products it supports. Taliesin Jaffe wraps his endorsements in one *Signal Boost* episode with references to goth subculture, which is a large part of his online persona (found in everything from his Twitter handle, @executivegoth, to his colourful and ever-changing hairstyles). *Signal Boost* is a curious beast, and one viewer found it curious enough to write an essay calling it a celebration of fannish consumption and consumerism (Kelly 2017b). *Signal Boost* is indeed celebratory in tone: it is high-energy and bright, presenting positive characterizations of media consumption as exciting and fulfilling.

These aspects of both *Critical Role* and its sister projects (*Signal Boost,* the commercials, and the associated merchandise) help to characterize a particular type of Critter-fan-consumer. Critters already identify their own community as generous, active, and supportive. Their reputation for buying out entire stocks of new merchandise, raising thousands of dollars for Geek and Sundry fundraisers, or crashing company websites has been woven into this characteristic. Fans use the language of the gift when speaking about these monetary donations as well as their own work. In the meantime, the sarcastic self-awareness of the commercials and the peppy, comedic tone of *Signal Boost* paint consumers as wise (because they are smart enough to understand when Sam is mocking insincere commercialism, and smart enough to look to trusted personalities for advice on what to buy) and consumerism itself as a fantastic way to pass time. Most importantly, that sense of genuine investment and love on the part of the players – because they are ultimately fans as well – paints all of these other investments of time and money as equally genuine. In this way, *Critical Role* has managed to quite effectively re-tool aspects of commercialization that would, in other contexts, cause fanbases to cry foul at how slick and corporate their beloved fan object has become.

This is somewhat ironic, because the actual function the Critters perform when watching *Critical Role* – specifically, when watching its advertisements – is not terribly different from the work of audiences watching hyper-commercialized reality TV. The satirical messages in the Slayer's Cake advertisements and the positivity of *Signal Boost* do not erase the fact that Critters

spend portions of their *Critical Role* viewings absorbing advertisements. Regardless of an advertisement's content, the time the audience spends watching it is very valuable, to the point where some theorists define ad-watching as a kind of work (Jhally and Livant, 1986). This work of watching ads will hopefully produce more revenue for the companies in question as audience members buy their products; the entertainment extracted from the show itself is the "wage" audiences are paid to absorb these advertisements. Despite its occasional self-consciousness about commercialism, *Critical Role* is uncommonly good at facilitating this kind of commercial work. For contrast, Sut Jhally and Bill Livant, writing in 1986, identify some of the difficulties advertisers at the time were facing when purchasing fifteen or thirty seconds of a television audience's attention – namely, that audiences don't enjoy watching advertisements (just as many of them don't enjoy performing other kinds of labour) and that even if they *do* watch, not all of them will be interested in purchasing the products for sale, rendering their labour of watching useless. Through its extreme narrowcasting (targeting a very specific niche of geek collector-consumers) and its entertaining, self-conscious attitudes towards advertisement, *Critical Role* has managed to overcome both of these familiar problems. Their advertisements often feel more like entertainment than work, and the products for sale (video games, fan memorabilia, dice and dice boxes) interest a large percentage of the audience. If the show's increasing number of sponsorships and Geek and Sundry's perpetually sold-out merchandise is any indication, the work Critters do as watchers is highly productive work.

However, I do not wish to give the impression that the Critters have somehow been duped into their labour, or that they perceive a heavily consumerist culture as a fannish gift economy that just happens to include monetary exchange. Indeed, Critters have embraced some aspects of consumerism that they might have otherwise reeled at, but they have not done so uncritically. The essay written by a viewer on *Signal Boost's* consumerism is one such example, but there are also commercial changes that Critters have railed against. While fans may be willing to purchase merchandise, watch ads, and give to fundraisers, they are still quite invested in the ethos of a gift economy. If the sense of selfless giving is ever violated – more specifically, if any of Geek and Sundry's actions are seen as exploitative, or as somehow counter to the sense of trust and shared fannish community the players and Critters have built together, the backlash from fans can be severe.

#NeverAlpha

Project Alpha is a joint venture between Geek and Sundry and Nerdist (a multimedia site, similar to Geek and Sundry, started by comedian Chris Hardwick). It was conceived as a subscription based platform that would host both old Geek and Sundry and Nerdist productions and new, exclusive series. In theory, these shows would benefit from Alpha's five-dollar-a-month subscription fee, using the funds to produce works with higher production values. As an arm of Geek and Sundry, however, Alpha also would be used to livestream certain shows – *Critical Role* included. One of Alpha's flagship programs was intended to be *Talks Machina, Critical Role's* spinoff talk show and celebration of its fans and fanworks. The Alpha site launched in late 2016, and it was met with an extremely vitriolic and negative reaction from fans.

It is worth noting that a number of events contributed to this negative reception. Alpha was launched soon after Geek and Sundry was purchased by Legendary Digital Networks, and a number of Geek and Sundry's original employees left the company around the same time. Creators caught in this executive shuffle remained tight-lipped about its causes and impacts, largely for legal reasons. In this chaotic atmosphere, the Alpha launch also suffered from major technical difficulties and a number of dissatisfied subscribers. Fans lamented that Geek and Sundry had been purchased by big business: to them, it seemed that corporate hacks now wanted to squeeze money out of a lazy, faulty product, while established Geek and Sundry creatives resigned in protest. Fans threatened boycotts, using the "NeverAlpha" hashtag on Twitter, discussions on Reddit, and Youtube vlogs to unify their voices, declaring that they would not pay for shows that had previously been free ("Random Vlogging: #NeverAlpha", "Very Frustrated with G&S and this nonsense"). Critters, in particular, did not want their community divided between those who could afford subscription dues and those who could not.

In retrospect, Alpha was probably not the product of a sinister corporate plot. Taliesin Jaffe, who had by mid-2016 become one of Geek and Sundry's recurring personalities even outside *Critical Role,* released a confessional-style video to apologize for Alpha's faulty launch, and, perhaps more importantly, explain its intended purpose:

> There are things that exist brilliantly on Twitch, where it's a thriving environment for certain types of storytelling…but…a lot of us here have very grand ambitions and ideas that we want to put forward to you…that are not sustainable on YouTube and not built for Twitch. And that's the thing Alpha can do that nothing else can… there will be things that can only survive behind a paywall.

("A Note on Dread and Alpha")

While some elements of Alpha's launch remain difficult to understand – the turnover of the staff, for one, is a story no one is legally able to tell in full – other allegedly sinister aspects of it were re-contextualized. Alpha supporters explained that Alpha would actually allow Geek and Sundry to keep larger cuts of subscriptions than they would be able to take from Twitch, which further undercut the narrative of a corporate takeover squeezing fans for cash: Alpha was not about making fans pay twice, but about their subscriptions supporting Geek and Sundry creators more directly ("[No Spoilers] About Alpha"). Alpha is also intended to be a platform shaped by the demands of its fans. Unlike YouTube or Twitch, where creators must upload videos with minimal control over the larger site, Alpha can be entirely customized by Geek and Sundry, Nerdist, and Legendary Digital, who have control over everything from the content, to the layout, to the advertising, to the technical features (Rachel Romero, personal communication). In theory, Alpha would cater more directly to fans than a general video host like YouTube: this also seems to be true in practice. Alpha's producers opened Reddit threads to communicate with fans, and many concessions were made to repair their relationship ("AMA – Anything and Everything Alpha"). For the purposes of this thesis, the most important change is that *Talks Machina* is no longer Alpha-exclusive. Instead, it is livestreamed for free on Tuesdays, while Alpha subscribers are treated to an extra fifteen to twenty minutes of questions known as *Talks Machina After Dark.*[63]

I am relaying this story not in the hopes of casting any parties in a particularly positive or critical light, or for the purpose of creating a narrative with heroes and villains. Furthermore, I am not in a position to do that with any accuracy: my knowledge of the issue from the fannish perspective comes purely through research as a *Critical Role* fan, while Geek and Sundry has other fan subcultures that were impacted by Alpha. I can only give a picture of how the Critters reacted, and why they reacted the way they did. My interest is purely in what motivated the extremely negative reactions of these specific fans, because it points to a moment where fans believed their principles had been violated. Other signs of commercialization were tolerated, but Alpha was branded a product of corporate greed.

From comments on social media sites like Reddit, it seemed that fans were not only upset that Alpha would put some previously free content behind a paywall, but also what that paywall

[63] It is worth noting that Talks Machina is not released on YouTube, however, and Twitch videos are only made available to paying subscribers, making it impossible to access old Talks episodes without paying. Because of this, it is also difficult for non-paying Critters in distant time zones – in Europe, for example – to watch Talks at all.

would mean for their fan community. Unlike the sponsors or merchandise, Alpha was something that could conceivably divide a community that had previously been unified. The idealized picture of the Critter fandom – which is not necessarily equal to its reality – is that it is an accepting, generous subculture. Gifts and acts of giving helped to build this identity: *Critical Role* had been "given" to its fans, who gave back through fanworks, donations, and other means of support. Many of the Critters also "give" five dollars a month to the show through their Twitch subscriptions; while the Alpha subscription is exactly the same price, the fact that the money would be required instead of freely given made all the difference. In a final stroke of supreme irony, the very show that was intended to celebrate the dynamic of giving – *Talks Machina* – would *not* be freely given, but restricted by monetary exchange. Shifting *Talks* back to the free Twitch stream was probably a lifesaving move for Geek and Sundry.

Recontextualizing Alpha as a patronage system also helped cast it in a more positive light. Patronage is one of the ways in which fan gift-giving culture and economic exchange have learned to coexist. Taliesin's video essentially argues for Alpha as a crowd-patronage platform, calling it "investing in our college fund." In a crowd-patronage system, large groups of fans give funds to support the general creative growth and work of an artist they admire, rather than purchasing a particular work of art for consumption[64]. Crowd-patronage has been broadly successful through digital sites like Patreon, which allows fans to give periodic funding to artists they wish to support. It logically follows that there is a considerable overlap between fandom and patrons, as fans will eagerly support their favourite franchises or creators in the hopes of more content. Indeed, *Critical Role* fans in particular seem eager to show monetary support when they can, giving to charities, kickstarters, or other projects on grand scales.[65]

In the end, Alpha did benefit from technological streamlining, but Alpha itself did not change in concept or execution. Instead, *perspectives* on Alpha changed as time went on and new arguments appeared.[66] Many fans "came around" to Alpha after Geek and Sundry's first real

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[64] It is this caveat that differentiates crowd-patronage from crowdfunding. Crowdfunding is directed towards a specific product, artistic creation, or other result; crowd-patronage does not depend on the creation of a single end product. However, crowd-patronage and crowdfunding are both similar in that fans – those "brand ambassadors" Jenkins characterizes – are key to their operation and success.

[65] As just one example, prolific Critter artist Charlotte Sandmael held a kickstarter for an original webcomic, *Tavarsia.* The Kickstarter reached its goal within three hours and went on to make nearly twice its goal. Sandmael gave credit largely to the Critters. My interviewees also gave examples of Critters crashing affiliate websites, like Green Ronin Publishing, or rescuing a Critter from homelessness through monetary donations.

[66] Reddit became an important centre for Alpha-centric discussion, because Geek and Sundry executives and creators like Matthew Mercer are both known to frequent the site. Reddit discussions around the time of Alpha's launch

Alpha-exclusive production, *Sagas of Sundry: Dread.* It is a six-episode tabletop roleplay miniseries using the rather strange rule system of the eponymous game, Dread. Instead of rolling dice, players determine the success of their character's actions by pulling blocks from a Jenga tower. If the tower falls, the player's character is removed from the game (usually through a gruesome death). *Dread* (the series) features both Matthew Mercer and Taliesin Jaffe from *Critical Role* as players, and Marisha Ray as its producer. *Dread* includes costumes, elaborate sets and props, and a stylish title sequence. With *Dread* standing as a concrete example of what Alpha's funds would be used for, it proved a useful tool for rebranding Alpha as an opportunity for patronage rather than a paywall. Both Taliesin Jaffe, in his video, and Rachel Romero, in a personal correspondence, called *Dread* a turning point for Alpha: Taliesin says it is "the first thing [we] can point to and say 'this is what Alpha is good for'." *Dread* is not only valued as entertainment, but also as an argument, as it has become evidence of Alpha's potential.

On the other hand, producers were forced to compromise in the case of *Talks Machina,* which was eventually pulled from behind that paywall. Fans would not pay for content they had previously received for free, nor did they approve of content that would fracture their community; however, they warmed to the idea of supporting *new* projects from creators they already favoured. In this process, creators like Marisha Ray and Taliesin Jaffe acted as key interlocutors for the fans, translating Alpha into concepts (the "college fund") that fans would find more palatable. Marisha and Taliesin are familiar personalities, and both count fannishness as part of those personalities (Marisha is the mind behind *Signal Boost;* Taliesin hosts his own show on Geek and Sundry for comic book fans called *The Wednesday Club).* In his video, Taliesin says, "I've been in the position where I am not able to afford my media," acknowledging that some fans might not be able to afford the Alpha subscription; Marisha ventured onto Reddit and answered questions about Alpha and her new position as Creative Director. Sympathetic explanations from these identifiable personalities – who, in their own words, understood the frustrations inherent to being a fan – were a vital tool in this rebranding. In short, Alpha became fan-friendly both by reorganizing its programming to reflect fan desires and re-branding itself as a more fan-friendly concept.

("AMA – Anything and everything Alpha") tended to be extremely venomous and confrontational. Around six to eight months later, the tone became more mixed, at times reflective and even supportive ("[Discussion] Alpha – Where is this going?", "The Official Marisha AMA Thread – Marisha learns to Reddit").

Negotiations like these are perfect examples of the "struggles" Henry Jenkins foresaw in fan-targeted advertisement and production strategies. For now, Critters and creators have reached their equilibrium, with *most* of their *Critical Role* content available for free, but with enhanced versions and additional content available to those with subscriptions, and with a portion of them providing additional monetary support to Geek and Sundry's future projects.

Fanfiction and Cultural Counter-Currents

Most of the situations we have reviewed in this chapter are the result of fans, players, and producers existing in close contact on social media, where ideas and money can be quickly exchanged. I have also claimed that the players behave as fans of their own show. However, I need to introduce a caveat to this closeness. Though there is a considerable amount of overlap between the creators and the consumers of *Critical Role,* there are other social forces that actively pull these two identities apart. As our frame model maintains, some positions – such as "performer" and "fan" – are separated by boundaries for a reason, and certain things must be filtered out in order for their identities to survive. While fans can and do collaborate with the creators of *Critical Role,* fans also enjoy creating alternative readings or counter-narratives. Many Critters explore these counter-narratives simply by discussing theories with other fans, while others transform them into fanfiction. The treatment of *Critical Role* fanfiction is perhaps the best example of how fans and creators still desire some distance from each other.

While the *Critical Role* cast supports and encourages all fanworks, their acknowledgements of fanfiction are underwhelming by comparison. They have, on multiple occasions, testified to reading and enjoying *Critical Role* fanfiction, but there seems to be an unspoken agreement that they will not drop names. I mentioned previously that the actions in the short fanfic "Side By Side" were referenced in an episode, but neither the author nor the title were mentioned; in fact, on the show, Liam and Laura did not even acknowledge the idea came from a fanfic. At fan conventions, or on social media, players might make coy references to the types of fanfiction they have read, but they largely avoid specifics. *Talks Machina,* which is supposed to be a celebration of fanwork, has yet to mention fan writers. No articles on Geek and Sundry describe trends in *Critical Role* fanfiction, feature fanfiction authors, or suggest particular works. Finally, a number of official *Critical Role* products have solicited work from fan artists, including a *Critical Role* art book (yet to be released) and a t-shirt design contest, but fan writers

have had no opportunities to contribute to the actual products of *Critical Role* in the same way[67]. Fan projects of all shapes and sizes have earned nods from the cast and producers in one way or another, but hundreds of thousands of words of fanfiction have not earned that same recognition.

The *Critical Role* cast has encouraged the *principles* of fanfiction elsewhere without supporting fanfiction itself. With the launch of the *Tal'Dorei Campaign Guide,* Matt has invited people to play in his imagined world; he has even granted permission to the public at large to livestream games they play within Tal'Dorei. In fact, as aforementioned, both fanfiction and tabletop roleplay involve similar processes of cultural pastiche.

However, reactions to this whole issue are surprisingly mixed among fans. One of my ethnographic adventures into the Critter fandom was to interview six fanfiction writers. When I asked how they felt about the cast's attitude toward fanfiction, they were conflicted. They were largely understanding, pointing to a number of challenges that might prevent the *Critical Role* cast from consuming fanfiction as actively as they consumed fan art:

> I understand in general and don't fault anyone…fan art is way easier to consume than written work…I've never gotten the sense that they slight authors, or raise artists above them. I just get the sense that some content is easier to find and appreciate than others.
>
> (teammompike, personal interview)

> I wish it was different, but I'm not sure what kind of steps would be taken in order to change that situation.
>
> (Sara Rokhov, personal interview)

Additionally, all of the writers wanted fanfiction to be recognized and respected *in general*, but many of them grew quite uncomfortable with the thought of the cast reading their specific works. This discomfort did not necessarily correlate to the nature of the content, either. For example, writer mischief7manager seemed amused at the idea of the creators reading her explicit stories:

> It would freak me out…[but] I think my reaction would mostly be positive. Given that I *have* written multiple fics that are…explicit, I would be…I don't know how to verbalize that reaction. I mean, if they liked it I guess it'd be okay! [*laughs*]
>
> (mischief7manager, personal interview)

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[67] There have been three major *Critical Role* ancillary products that involved creative writing in some form – the art book, the *Critical Role* comic, and the *Tal'Dorei* campaign guide. The text in the art book will be written by Matt and Taliesin; the campaign guide was a collaboration between Matt and another writer at Geek and Sundry; and the comic was written by Matt Colville, an author and game designer. Colville is a fan of *Critical Role,* but he is also an established personality within the tabletop roleplay community, particularly on YouTube. His involvement is more of a professional collaboration than a case of fan recognition.

The writers I spoke with did not fear that the cast of *Critical Role* would judge or criticize them for the content of their writing. Instead, they worried about what the impact on the *cast* would be, thinking they could potentially offend the players or unintentionally influence the story:

> I don't want to insult anyone. I don't want to misconstrue anyone's characters because those are so personal
>
> (teammompike, personal interview)

> The cast is much more involved in the creative process than they would be on a TV show...if it was me [on the show], I would be really leery of reading fanfic, because then I would be afraid that would influence my intention with the character…you get into weird territory with intellectual property"
>
> (mischief7manager, personal interview)

> If any of the cast members were to say 'hey, look at this specific piece of writing that so-and-so did', then it starts to…I don't want to make this seem negative…[but] it starts to put the players in a box…[and] kind of takes power away from the [cast].
>
> (Sara Rokhov, personal interview)

This reluctance to influence content is specific to fan writers and their fanfiction, especially when compared with all the other ways the Critters either actively try to influence content (as when viewers argue about rule violations on the Twitch chat or on Reddit) or are invited to influence content (as when they vote to create monsters like Symphior). As mischief7manager's comment suggests, some of this reluctance might stem from the awkward relationship fanfiction has with intellectual property and plagiarism. Many authors also pointed to the impracticalities of consuming fanfiction. Reading fanfiction can be very time-consuming, much moreso than looking at visual art or cosplay. There are also problems with the content of fanfiction, which tends to discard information in *Critical Role's* main storyline. While some stories, like "Side by Side", are designed to be compatible with canon information, stories like *The Wise Man's Tree* are purposefully incompatible with *Critical Role* because they exist in different settings or as a result of alternative timelines. Authors who write AUs tend to underline the freedom that a partial divorce from canon affords their stories:

> There's a lot more freedom in AUs[68]. Operating in the canon universe, you can do little fun [stories], but I feel, most of the time, more comfortable in AUs just because it's more my own. I have more freedom

[68] "AU" stands for "Alternate Universe". This refers to fanfiction that drastically changes the original story, either by transporting the characters into a different setting (e.g., a high school or a coffee shop) or by drastically changing the outcome of a plot (e.g., an AU in which canonical character deaths are erased, usually dubbed an "everybody lives" AU).

> to do something extravagant or ridiculous or completely change the story.
>
> (Sara Rokhov, personal interview)

It is this last factor, I believe, that points to why fans still desire a certain amount of distance from the cast. Unlike fanart, cosplay, propmaking or video editing – which tend be celebrations of impactful moments, images, or characters – fanfiction is more often revisionist or even critical of the canonical story. Fanfics might explore different choices or different universes entirely, or supplement the story with missing scenes. As I alluded to before, fanfiction is also among the most notorious targets of copyright infringement lawsuits targeted at fandom, fanfiction retains an anti-commercialist streak that often places it in direct opposition to corporate owners and official artists (Hellekson 2009). One of my interviewees, who requested to remain anonymous, suggested that fanfiction is valued specifically because of its counter-cultural nature:

> Fanfic has more of a history of developing with conscious walls put up, away from creators, by the fandom…there's a lot of counterculture stuff that developed, in its infancy, as a direct – not *attack* on canon, but alternative to canon. Saying "it's ours now, we're moving with it."…I think that sort of rebellious, transformative aspect of fanfic has been a little more present than in fan art – traditionally, at least.
>
> (Anonymous, personal interview)

Writers freely create their desired revisions in fanfiction, and anything threatening to infringe on that freedom makes those writers somewhat uncomfortable. Ross Hagen discusses how the presence of band members on social media actually frustrated parts of their fandoms (or "bandoms"), because having access to so many precise details about the band members' lives actually stifled creativity in fan writers (2015). Similarly, I noticed that the fans who expressed the most trepidation about *Talks Machina* around the time of its launch were the fan writers. Since *Talks Machina* largely consists of players answering questions about their characters, fan writers felt *Talks* could potentially close off mysteries they enjoyed exploring in their fanfiction[69]. Just as creators must retain some amount of creative authority over their work – just as the Dungeon Master must retain the final say over the campaign, so the rules do not descend into anarchy – fan writers feel most comfortable when they have a space where creative authorities cannot impede their own expressions and discussions.

[69] In the end, this turned out to be both true and untrue. While some avenues were closed off through discussions in *Talks,* the questions also occasionally sparked new ideas for fanfiction from writers. Furthermore, a large part of fanfiction writing is discarding or defying elements of the canonical narrative that feel "wrong" to a writer anyway.

Currently, the question of how fan writers might interact more with the *Critical Role* cast is largely unanswered. In Alpha's case, an uneasy equilibrium was reached after much debate and scrutiny; in the case of fanfiction writers, however, an uneasy equilibrium exists because the situation has yet to be fully interrogated by either party. Discontent among fan writers frequently bubbles up through furious social media posts, lamenting that their work is undervalued and unrecognized, but the struggle has yet to burst out fully in the Critter fandom. I expect an Alpha-sized catalyst of some kind will be required to open the debate.

Conclusion: Coexistence in the Fan Frame

This chapter's focus on the fan frame has been complex, because I have argued that both the *Critical Role* cast and the Critters can inhabit that frame to a certain extent. In many ways, this has led to a fertile environment for fan producers. Fans can indulge in creative ventures and affective experiences, secure in the knowledge that the *Critical Role* cast shares and understands their passion. Fears of plagiarism lawsuits or creator backlash are largely not a concern for Critters, despite the fact that such fears were integral to the development of so many other fannish subcultures (Hellekson 2009). In its most positive and ambitious moments, *Critical Role* is a platform for fans and creators to collaborate freely, or even *democratically,* as when players accept ideas into their world that have become hugely popular amongst the fans.

On the other hand, this creative closeness does lead to conflict, awkwardness, and negative implications. Economic boundaries have proven particularly volatile and difficult to negotiate, as it is often difficult to reconcile the generosity and collective spirit of fan culture with the profit-driven values of a consumer economy. Critters are perpetually in the position of deciding which fanworks or ancillary content elements warrant purchase, which warrant sponsorship or support, and which should rightfully be distributed for free. Merchandise is desirable, and paying for it is acceptable, but paying for *Talks Machina* was not. The line between unacceptable corporate exploitation and sponsoring beloved creative personalities grew thin with the introduction of Alpha. Liam O'Brien, the key fanart collector at Geek and Sundry, used to ask artists for holiday-themed art at Christmas, benefiting from free labour and fan generosity; those galleries have fallen out of fashion, and instead, Geek and Sundry ran an article on how to request and pay for fanart commissions. Fans usually create their fanworks spontaneously, out of passion; many of my interviewees describe fanfiction as a kind of

compulsion, when they encounter ideas and think, “I *have* to write about this.” Once these works are made, the question quickly arises of how and when they will be commodified. In her essay “Should fanfiction be free?”, Abigail de Kosnik argues that fanfiction authors need to take control of their product and commodify it *themselves,* before it can be externally exploited: fan writers need to define and run their own creative market. The Critters, in my view, have reached the same conclusion. Although they have not quite hammered out all the specifics, their open dialogue with the creators of *Critical Role* has allowed fans to play a key role in shaping the economy of fanwork and merchandise surrounding the show.

Conclusions

In the course of writing this thesis, I have reached a handful of conclusions about the tabletop roleplaying series and *Critical Role*. These conclusions contribute to studies of modern digital media and digital fandom, but I believe they are particularly useful for any academics who find themselves curious about tabletop roleplay series. Throughout my research, I came across more than one student who was intrigued by the prospect of studying *Critical Role* and its generic cousins; this text can serve as a foundation for future work.

I used interactional frame analysis throughout this project to help model the complex dynamics of communication and information at play on *Critical Role.* Frame analysis, as developed by Erving Goffman, helps us understand that different gestures, words, or pieces of information have different meaning in different social contexts. People can transition between frames quite fluidly, but in order for two people to communicate effectively, they must usually share a frame whose codes they both understand.

This model has frequently been used in the study of tabletop roleplay (Fine 1983, Mackay 2001, Cover 2010) because the game requires players to switch frequently between a narrative world, a set of game rules, and the social context of friends playing a game together. Because dice rolls and game rules influence the narrative, and because external social relationships can impact the game, information exchanged during a tabletop roleplaying session is often filtered from one of these frames into another.

I took this concept – bearing in mind some useful alterations made by theorists like Mackay and Cover – and applied it to *Critical Role.* In Chapter 1, I argued that moving a private tabletop roleplaying game into a public context introduced a new frame, which I called the entertainment or performance frame. The need for the players to entertain an audience not only introduced a number of new behaviours, such as direct addresses to the camera, but also altered behaviours previously typical of tabletop roleplay. The integration of this new identity has also caused a bit of turmoil in players and fans, who are still struggling to square the identities of the carefree, casual tabletop player with the professional entertainer. Audiences of tabletop roleplaying series must also navigate these frames, which I focused on in Chapter 2, using the fan-run statistics compilation project CritRoleStats as an example. Fans must follow the players as they shift through their various frames, otherwise the spectacle of *Critical Role* would be incomprehensible. I review how audience members engage in the narrative frame – usually

through the consumption of narrative errata, such as Matthew Mercer's Tal'Dorei campaign guide – and how they interact with the social and entertainment frames, treating the *Critical Role* cast members as geek-celebrities and following them on social media. I then move into the mechanical frame, exploring how CritRoleStats provides fans with both comprehensive archives and live explanations of game rules. I also begin to illustrate, in this chapter, how fans do more with the information found in these frames than simply try to understand it. CritRoleStats uses its mechanical-frame information to celebrate gameplay achievements, clarify actions for other spectators, and even to advise the players. They have also, somewhat unintentionally, taken on a regulatory role, ensuring numerical consistency is maintained between episodes. Other viewers may re-use information in the mecanical frame for their own creative purposes.

In this second chapter, I also suggested features of *Critical Role's* format that challenged the idea of the show having a top-down power structure with the dungeon master having final say over creative decisions. The constant surveillance of the camera, the authority earned by external entities like CritRoleStats, and even the occasional narrative curveballs thrown by players all challenge the prospect of a centralized creative power. I elaborated upon this in Chapter 3, where I explained how fans are actually encouraged to contribute to the fiction of *Critical Role*, and to expand on its hyperdiegesis through fanwork or tabletop roleplay. While some order remains both in and out of *Critical Role* episodes, largely so the game itself can continue without being thrown into anarchy, the development of *Critical Role's* narrative is fluid and collaborative. When Matthew Mercer was asked during a Q&A for his opinions on how much fanwork his game had inspired, he seemed to recognize that the game was not exclusively in the hands of him and his cast. With a mixture of awe and excitement, he said, "It's so much bigger than us, at this point."

This train of thought leads into the major point of Chapter 3, which is to address what I called the fan frame. While Mackay and Cover discuss fan culture quite extensively in their books on tabletop roleplay, they do not grant it its own frame. I do this in Chapter 3 to explain how both players and viewers engage in fannish behaviour regarding *Critical Role.* The cast members are also fans – of their show, and of other media productions more generally – granting them a number of advantages when it comes to interacting with Critters. They have facilitated an environment that celebrates participation, fanwork, gift-giving, and fannish consumerism, largely by performing fannish behaviour on their own show and encouraging it in others. However, I

conclude this chapter by pointing out two places in which fans and players maintain strict standards that do not allow these two groups to fully blend into one "*Critical Role* fan club", as it were. Fans felt excluded and exploited when commodification threatened to divide their community, and there was only so much Geek and Sundry could do to regain their trust, to the point where a number of concessions were made. Many fanfiction writers still feel most comfortable when they are allowed to write completely free of restriction, without the chance that the cast members will see and evaluate their work. While most fans enjoy how positive the *Critical Role* cast members can be about fanwork, several of them see "fan-only" spaces as necessary for the health of their community.

Critical Role is, without a doubt, a complicated media object. Viewers and players alike navigate several interactional frames, and these navigations are not always stable or comfortable. Some frames grate against each other like tectonic plates, existing uneasily side-by-side, and occasionally causing a social earthquake or two. Tensions between the performer and player identities are always present, but somewhat submerged and accepted; tensions between the fan gift economy and corporate marketing erupted into heated discussion and criticism, and only eventually reached resolution. To conclude, I will offer some reflection on the process of writing this thesis, and my thoughts on how its arguments may be of future use.

Frame Analysis and Digital Media

Throughout this thesis, I have repeatedly returned to Erving Goffman's interactional frame analysis in order to examine how information is interpreted and re-interpreted by audience members and players alike. I argued *Critical Role* is a complex performance, requiring understanding in its narrative, mechanical, and social/celebrity contexts. I do not believe this complexity is exclusive to *Critical Role,* but rather that it is a common feature of media in an age of hypertext, hypermediation, and broadly accessible information. Many digital performance spectacles, including livestreaming, speedrunning, comedic criticism, or video walkthroughs, encourage multiple levels of engagement. A broad familiarity with a particular piece of media – whether a niche work or a blockbuster – is often only the beginning of the viewing experience. Perhaps the media work itself can be engaged with on multiple levels: one might be more intrigued by the narrative of a video game, or its capacity for exploration and customization, or its mechanical aspects. On top of those frames, the interjection of a media personality brings with

it its own context, often establishing coherence through running jokes, memes, or character quirks. Introducing someone to *The Adventure Zone,* another tabletop roleplay series, might not only spark an interest in *Dungeons and Dragons,* but also in the McElroy brothers' miniature media empire. Their many, many podcast series are built on their personalities and showmanship.

If the viewer does not start *out* with a familiarity with the various frames involved in interpreting a piece, they might seek to *gain* that familiarity through research. For *The Adventure Zone,* this could involve growing to "know" the McElroys through their massive backlog of podcast content. In the case of *Critical Role,* familiarity might come through an archival "binge-watch" of previous episodes, or through encountering and following the cast (and CritRoleStats, and eventually some well-known Critter artists and collaborators) on Twitter. As we have seen with many *Critical Role* fans, these shows may also provoke viewers into seeking a more intimate familiarity with the roleplay experience by prompting Critters to start playing tabletop roleplaying games themselves.

The advantage of frame analysis is that it enables the researcher to examine the multilayered nature of these and other digital spectacles *without* losing sight of how these layers interact. Ironically, it is far too simple to describe digital media as "complicated": this obfuscates the many different categories of social behaviour that inform our digital performances, and that conflict and relate in important ways. Fans of *Critical Role* perpetually struggle with questions of whether players should bend the rules of the game to make a better story, and how far this grace should extend; this is the mechanical frame negotiating with the narrative frame. Both frames must remain intact, lest the fiction of the game grow incoherent or the order of its rules dissolve, but these frames must also account for each other.

Perhaps the biggest stumbling block in frame analysis is the misconception that emerges from its name, a miconceptions that could easily turn into a misapplication. A "frame" creates an image of a rigid category, with visible, inflexible borders. This might lead to someone applying frame analysis too strictly, drawing hard lines between areas that are not so clear, or creating needless sub-categories and sub-frames to account for every eventuality. McKay falls into this trap somewhat; in trying to make verbal acts of tabletop roleplay align distinctly with five spheres of performance, he creates divisions in narrative speech that do not particularly add anything to his argument except numerical satisfaction. Cover is more understanding, in that in her model of speech acts (subdivisions of Fine's original frames of tabletop roleplay) she agrees

that some speech acts can move from areas of lower narrativity into areas of higher narrativity if the dungeon master agrees to concretize them in their world. This misconception aligns with the fact that a qualifier is often dropped from Goffman's original term: it is not just frame analysis, but *interactional* frame analysis.

When Goffman coins his term in his long essay, he envisions the "frame" of the stage, delineated by the proscenium arch (Goffman 1974). It appears to be a world cordoned off from ours, outlined by a very clear border, and thus as strictly separate as the word "frame" implies. But theatre moved beyond this boundary a very long time ago. Audience participation takes viewers and makes them part of the spectacle; inventive staging forces actors into the aisles, the seats, or the balconies; impromptu performances like crosswalk musicals or flash mobs create spontaneous, porous frames in public spaces, where some interaction is unavoidable, and yet barriers still spontaneously emerge between the performer and the public citizen – the actor who is clearly in character as he belts out *Rent* songs on a subway car, and the bank tellers on their way to work, either hoping or not hoping that the performer will address them directly. Frames are not nearly as restrictive as they appear to be at first.

Frame analysis is always the analysis of a social space, with its barriers and its codes of behaviour – *and* of the way these barriers shift to compensate for their neighbours, and of the exceptions, transgressors, poachers and insurgents from other territories. Some frame boundaries are strict; others are fluid; others are contested. Another relevant image would be that of the browser window, with its tabs, videos, streams and hyperlinks – multiple sources of information, some distantly connected (as when an adventure through Wikipedia's hyperlinks takes you to a page so strange you can't remember where you started), and some entirely interdependent (as the Twitch chat window during *Critical Role,* where the blur of text, emoticons and memes would be utterly incomprehensible without the context of the video, on which the chat is commenting, streaming behind it). I would even suggest discussing frames using one of these alternative metaphors in the future, precisely so these nuances are not so easily lost.

A model that blends both categorization and fluidity – whether it is interactional frame analysis or another, similar model – can account for behaviours that might otherwise seem contradictory or groundless. It can explore the complexities of performance in general, and digital performance in specific, without growing too exclusionary or restrictive. It can look at parts without sacrificing their relationship to the whole. I found it particularly useful in the context of a

show that relies on three (or more!) frames of engagement, requiring knowledge from a number of different knowledge bases. Doubtlessly, there are more digital entertainment products that could benefit from this kind of analysis. However, I would caution against using frame analysis to explain or encompass *everything* that happens in relation to a media object. Frame analysis is more useful for the preliminary dissection of a piece of media than for its criticism; this is why McKay, Cover and I use frame analysis to describe tabletop roleplay *as* something else (either a performance or a narrative): we are taking the game apart, and categorizing it. We must often bring in alternate theories when the parts have been assembled and discussions of impacts or implications begins.

Fan Studies, Collaborative Storytelling, and the Future of the Gift Economy

In Chapter 2 and 3, I discussed how authority over the creative world of *Critical Role* is made diffuse. Tabletop storytelling is collaborative to begin with, but the absorption of fan ideas into the narrative and the formation of external projects like CritRoleStats, which can influence the game's content, open other avenues for viewers to contribute to the story. Daniel Mackay envisioned that tabletop roleplay would facilitate the birth of a truly collaborative genre of game-based performance art, and *Critical Role* is a step closer to the achievement of that idea. The story of *Critical Role* is elastic, and its material is malleable; with so much defined purely by the spoken word, it is always possible to integrate new ideas and respond to criticism. Complaints that *Critical Role* initially lacked for diversity in representation were addressed over time, with the introduction of more LGBTQ characters and storylines the re-interpretation of other characters as people of colour[70]. When Jenkins speaks of fans with the "bargaining power" to get what they want from their media, he paints a rather adversarial picture. "Bargaining" suggests compromise, but also sacrifice, and desires only partially fulfilled. It may be true for *American Idol*; however, it seems too one-dimensional for the way information is exchanged on *Critical Role.* The interest is not in cutting a good deal, but in expansion and growth of the hyperdiegesis through the incorporation of a variety of perspectives.

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l[70] The story includes major characters identifying as bisexual, gay, pansexual, and non-binary. Some characters are frequently interpreted in art as people of colour, which can later bleed into Matt's descriptions. Most notably, the goddess of light and redemption, Sarenrae, is canonically dark-skinned in later episodes, reflecting trends in fanart. The players have all expressed interest in broadening *Critical Role's* representation because of fan comments.

Within this collaboration, however, comes the question of the time, energy, and labour spent on the development and exchange of creative ideas. Questions of commodification and exploitation arise. As I covered in Chapter 3, many corporations have tried to capitalize on fan-made products and fan labour. Fan studies researchers are wary of this looming problem, and are unsure how to approach it. De Kosnik suggests that fans should embrace commodification before it can be enforced, thereby retaining control of fannish production (2009). This is the path the *Critical Role* producers and its fans seem to be taking so far. Consumerism is celebrated, merchandise is popular, and fans are eager to give monetary gifts. The creators of the show encourage participation and the production of fanwork, offering platforms for this work to be displayed alongside the show, or even incorporated into it. Systems of patronage and commission are widely used across the fandom, allowing fans of particular artists to support the production of further fanwork. Most importantly, the Critters are vehemently opposed to anything that takes away their ability to decide what the shape of their gift economy will be. When Alpha threatened to isolate Critters from each other with a paywall, the outcry from fans forced Geek and Sundry to reconsider Alpha's programming. *Critical Role* fans value the freedom they have been given to experiment in the hyperdiegesis, celebrate their craft, and exchange ideas freely with each other: Alpha would have limited this flow of ideas, and was therefore broadly condemned. Fans have maintained control over their gift economy, and it is quite a thriving one. Merchandise is still selling, and Critters are still happily crashing websites and breaking records in their eagerness to purchase ancillary content.

A Note on Ethnography and the Critters

When I planned this project in early 2016, I intented for it to include a much larger ethnographic component. I planned for a number of interviews, extensive ethnographic note-taking and journaling, and a deep dive into the Critters' social media sites. While I have gathered a considerable amount of data using these ethnographic methods, I eventually realized that "an ethnography" was not what I was writing. A multitude of logistical and theoretical problems prevented this. The Critter community is dispersed in almost every sense of the word: they live around the world, and represent many different age groups and skillsets. Unlike some of the digital ethnographies I consulted – Celia Pearce and Lori Kendall's books among them – there was no central digital environment in which the Critters congregated. Instead, there were multiple

communities, each with their own priorities. In general, artists flocked to Twitter so players would have quick access to the art they made; writers gathered on Tumblr, where they could discuss theories and post fanfiction in relative isolation from the players; and those wishing to discuss specific elements of combat or narrative congregated on Reddit, where discussions could be isolated by topic and answers publicly evaluated. These patterns are observable but not absolute, and Critters could easily move between the various platforms, even performing their fandom identities slightly differently on each.

An ethnography on the *Critical Role* fandom might certainly be a worthwhile project, provided the theorist could narrow their scope. Looking specifically at those artists who tread the boundary between official and unofficial employees of *Critical Role* could be useful, as their work is the most central and visible in the question of how fanworks integrate with the show's central game. Another avenue of exploration would be to look at other tabletop groups who have decided to livestream their games without the backing of a production company like Geek and Sundry; *Critical Role* has inspired more than one of these amateur spinoffs. I also believe the charitable activities of Critters deserve a closer look, and I would be interested to see how a psychologist would interpret how the Critters interact with their show. Tabletop roleplaying has been used for therapeutic purposes before, and I can't help but wonder what kind of impact a show like *Critical Role* would have on the viewer in this context – particularly because *Critical Role* is also so notorious for provoking people into playing *Dungeons & Dragons* with their own groups.

In short, there is a fertile ground for future study here, not only of *Critical Role* and its community, but also of other shows within its genre, or even relating to it. We are garnering a considerable amount of entertainment these days from watching other people at play. Shows like *Tabletop,* another Geek and Sundry project in which actor Wil Wheaton plays a different board game with a handful of guests each week, are also growing in popularity to the point where they are impacting the board gaming industry. Other projects like Geek and Sundry's *Dread* use the architecture of games to design more ambitious narratives and experiments in storytelling. And as I mentioned above, YouTube attractions like Let's Plays, speedruns, and walkthroughs are also potentially worth looking at through an interactional frame model. There are many avenues to explore here, and the growing popularity of the genres threatens to open even more. I felt that, for this preliminary project, it was more important to model the show's general dynamics of

performance, information, and participation, rather than painting a specific ethnographic picture of one community.

Final Thoughts

I am writing this conclusion on October 5th, 2017: a Thursday. Fittingly, tonight is the night Vox Machina will begin their final, climactic battle with Vecna, and possibly reach the end of their story. *Critical Role* is scheduled to continue in 2018, with the cast starting over as a new group of characters. I hope this date will mark a successful conclusion for us both.

I consider myself fortunate to have stumbled across such a fruitful object while it was still relatively young. *Critical Role* changed quite dramatically over the two years it took to develop and complete this project: my thesis often changed with it. Every change was also different, either immediate or gradual, cataclysmic or minute. In the end, when it came time to model the exchanges of thoughts and ideas central to this show and its community, I turned to organic and natural metaphors – to cells, or rivers, or water cycles. Art and communication, when facilitated by technology, move quickly, but *Critical Role* demonstrates that they can also move with astounding fluidity, pushing and pulling and blurring preconceived barriers and systems. It is important that studies of digital communication do not neglect its malleability in favour of its speed. *Critical Role's* success has already triggered a wave of imitators, but I look forward in particular to the genre's next unexpected mutation. I hope new ideas will push the tabletop series formula even further, facilitating fan and creator collaboration on different scales. This thesis was written not only to celebrate and interrogate *Critical Role* itself, but also to provide a foundation for those looking to study this genre and its future modulations.

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