

13 “We Play *Dungeons & Dragons!*”: How Actual Play Live Streams Have (Re)shaped the *D&D* Gaming Community

Emma French

The impact of live streaming on the digital gaming industry has been extensively documented (Taylor 2012; Taylor 2016; Johnson and Woodcock 2019). However, this new digital medium has also massively reshaped the tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) community. Live streaming facilitates “actual play”: real-time TTRPG gameplay, conducted between a cast or group of friends, often knowingly performed as a serialised fictional narrative for their audience.

Using *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) as a case study, I will demonstrate how the participatory elements of live streaming culture have altered the demographics and modes of participation available within TTRPG communities. *D&D* actual play streams such as *Critical Role* (2015–), *Sirens of the Realms* (2017–), *Dimension 20* (2018–), and *Rivals of Waterdeep* (2018–) have widened participation in *D&D* by increasing its visibility. Following the proliferation of live streamed *D&D*, sales of the introductory *Starter Set* increased by 50 percent in 2017, and 60 percent in 2018 (IGN 2019, 3:53–3:57). The vice president of the *D&D* franchise, Nathan Stewart, claims that “over half of the new people who started playing [*D&D*] Fifth Edition” since 2015 did so “through watching people play online” (DeV-ille 2017). Actual play streams are immensely popular. The most successful, *Critical Role*, had amassed 68 million views when hosted by *Geek & Sundry* (2017), and 632,000 total followers since transferring to an independent Twitch channel in 2019 (TwitchTracker 2020). It is rapidly becoming its own transmedial franchise, with an animated series on Amazon, published comics and its own games company, Darrington Press.

However, live streaming has not just expanded *D&D*'s community of practice; it has made it more accessible. Streams offer an alternative path

of entry to *D&D* subculture, bypassing the game's traditional structure and established gatekeeping mechanisms. Through their instructional showcasing of *D&D*'s rules for viewers, streams induct newcomers into *D&D* gaming culture. The types of players promoted through streams also have shifted perceptions of *D&D* player and wider geek identities, making them more inclusive. Furthermore, the creation of serialized, "endlessly deferred" narrative (Hills 2002, 98) broadens *D&D*'s "participatory culture" (Jenkins 2013) to include an array of fannish practices, offering new modes of engaging with the game beyond playing.

Actual Play Live Streams as Mentorship

The structure of *D&D* gameplay previously encouraged—even necessitated—a more insular subculture. TTRPG scholar Daniel Mackay describes the typical *D&D* play experience before digital innovations: "The sessions would take place in my basement or at another player's house, . . . averaging five to six hours . . . [and] depended upon when we could get everybody together" (Mackay 2002, 20).

This conforms to stereotypes of *D&D* players as socially isolated and insular, popularized in mainstream media such as *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–2019) and *Stranger Things* (2016–). Mackay (2002) portrays TTRPG gamers as "sequestered" and "divided" from the rest of the world, operating in a secluded and separate sphere (84). Three modes of participation are documented: gameplay at home within a small, continuous friendship group, at a club/recreation center, or—on the largest scale—at a gaming convention. All three involve gatekept boundaries. For an interested individual, access to gameplay relies upon them knowing at least one other person (or a group of friends) willing to join or to invite them to a preexisting group, enabling their engagement. A club or convention presents opportunities to foster such relationships, but it relies on the attendee being able to financially afford, travel to, and feel welcome in these environments.

Even as late as 2014, Esther MacCallum-Stewart also describes *D&D* as "actually rather socially difficult to play." Elaborating on Mackay's structure of "ideally fix to six players," MacCallum-Stewart (2014a) notes that these players must "have similar understandings of what the game is about" (181). Communal understanding is another way that *D&D* subculture tends toward self-regulation, or self-policing and gatekeeping. In *D&D*, players

play characters within a fantasy world. They encounter various scenarios, and their characters' responses to them are mediated by dice and by a referee, known as the Dungeon Master (DM). The DM's flexibility as human adjudicator—capable of interpreting all actions and responding dynamically—means that "a player could think up any possible action . . . no matter if it was explicitly foreseen in the rules" (Zagal and Deterding 2018, 83). This freedom means that definitions abound of what a *D&D* game can and should be. Jennifer Grouling (2010) identifies "three types of gameplay—the dramatist, simulationist, and the gamist" (150): players place emphasis on character interaction, immersive worldbuilding, and game mechanics and combat, respectively. But definitions of what gameplay should entail extend beyond these simple preferences, also encompassing acceptable actions and social behavior within the secondary world, and between players. While the internet has afforded *D&D* certain networked innovations, such as roleplay chatrooms or websites like Roll20.com, which enable remote play, individuals must still establish expectations of acceptable play. They must find groups who agree with their definition or conform to those already in place. As with TTRPG conventions, participation relies on feeling like you are welcome and accepted.

Using actual play live streaming as an introduction to *D&D* gameplay circumvents many of these barriers to entry. Actual play streams feature preestablished groups of players for an interested viewer to engage with, anonymously and remotely. The surge in their popularity means there are numerous streams to choose from. Viewers can select groups whose understanding of the game matches their own, those they simply find entertaining or, through the composition and established social mores of the group, make them feel welcome and represented—the importance of which will be explored later in this chapter.

Live streams provide an alternative means of educating and inducting oneself into *D&D* subculture. Viewers may consume actual play media solely on a narrative level, enjoying the heroic story of the campaign. However, T. L. Taylor (2018) notes that watching live streams is often aspirational: a wish to learn skilled gameplay from "professionals" (39). When *D&D* is performed in real time, it showcases players navigating *D&D*'s complex rule system and mechanics. Actual play can therefore also be "instructional" (MacCallum-Stewart 2014a, 185), allowing viewers to learn without the same intense buy-in described by Mackay.

Playing *D&D* (or *D&D 5th edition*, considered the simplest version of the game) requires a working knowledge of the basic rules detailed in the 300-page *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook* (WotC 2014c). It may also require an understanding of the *Dungeons & Dragons Monster Manual* (WotC 2014b) and *Dungeon Master's Handbook* (WotC 2014a) if the participant wishes to be the DM, managing and refereeing gameplay. Although these guides are readily available, disseminated on various websites and even made freely accessible by Wizards of the Coast (WotC), this reinforces the fact that this level of knowledge is expected of everyone. Navigating these rules is often difficult when one is unfamiliar and unpracticed: Stewart has admitted that newcomers often feel like “you have to cross all these hurdles [just] to be a fan” (IGN 2019, 4:53–4:56).

Live streams show these extensive rubrics being practically applied. Unedited live streams such as *Critical Role*, whose sessions typically run for four-plus hours, demonstrate players interacting with routine combat rules. More complex disputes are also workshopped when resolving complicated narrative events: for instance, the “interesting physics experiment” of what happens when a Wall of Fire spell clashes with a wall of “non-magical” water (“Duplicity” 2019, 1:22:01–1:26:12). *Dimension 20* places narrative weight on *D&D*'s essential mechanic, the dice roll, by introducing the “Box of Doom” with its own close-up camera whenever a player's roll will have a particularly dramatic effect on the story. Viewers gain understanding of each mechanic through its incorporation in the wider narrative.

Actual play uses *D&D*'s mechanics and the risk of failure to enhance the stakes of their storytelling. But streaming these elements unedited also allows viewers to learn the game's rules second-hand, seeing how they operate within a dynamic, real-time context. *Critical Role*'s Laura Bailey explains, “My favourite analogy for it was: no one would play football if they were handed the rulebook for football” (IGN 9:59–10:04). Making *D&D* into a spectated event instructs viewers in the game system, without prejudice, derision, or frustration from other players. It is telling that *Critical Role*'s main, continuing sponsor is “DnD Beyond,” an application designed to streamline *D&D*'s many rulebooks into an accessible digital toolkit and prevent players being overwhelmed by the game's complexity.

Furthermore, as MacCallum-Stewart (2014a) notes, “*D&D* games can vary wildly from purely spoken role-play to meticulously detailed movement on maps and charts” (181). The variety of streams available, spanning from

rules-light comedy to serious high-fantasy storytelling, demonstrate that there is no right way to play. This can prevent viewers who eventually wish to participate from being daunted if they do not, for instance, enjoy the heavily numerical aspects of *D&D*'s rule systems, or from self-rejecting after a bad experience with a group or play style that they did not gel with.

D&D's High-Profile Players

Actual play live streams have expanded the *D&D* community of practice by educating viewers, lowering the threshold for understanding gameplay. They have also diversified the subculture by visibly broadening who is included within *D&D*'s player demographic. This is achieved through the exposure of certain "nerd celebrities," who inadvertently—and sometimes deliberately—become representative *D&D* players through their streaming presence.

As with the gamer (Consalvo 2012; Taylor 2018) and geek (Salter and Blodgett 2017) identities that it comprises, the stereotypical *D&D* player is often represented as a white, cisgender, usually straight man. Mackay, who used his personal *D&D* game as a representative case study in his scholarship, described a group of male friends: "Wesley as Dom Ixhil Contelliat, Josh as Minya Mardin, Neal as the crazed korred Kurgo Shinsplinter, Darren as Gwendolin the Mad Mage, and me, the gamemaster" (Mackay 2002, 21). Despite extensive convention attendance and observation of numerous games, Mackay's account of *D&D* from the 1980s to early 2000s makes no reference to nonmale players. This exemplifies a bias within his own auto-ethnography, but one which—when treated as representative within the academic tradition—demonstrated the privileged position of white men within the *D&D* subculture of the time. Even MacCallum-Stewart's account of *Acquisitions Incorporated*, a spectated *D&D* game performed at the PAX Prime gaming convention, documents a 2011 cast of all-male "nerd celebrities": Wil Wheaton, Jerry Holkins, Mike Krahulik, Scott Kurtz, and Chris Perkins (MacCallum-Stewart 2014a, 176). MacCallum-Stewart considers them to be *D&D*'s brand ambassadors, reinforcing the fact that until recently, the *D&D* player community still visibly presented as male and white.

The means by which the presumed white, heterosexual, and male geek identity has been maintained at the detriment of women and other minorities has been addressed in both game and fan studies (Consalvo 2012; Taylor 2018; Salter and Blodgett 2017; Wilson 2018). *D&D* subculture is already

insular for the structural reasons discussed in the previous section. When combined with identity policing, its “invite-only” system and reliance on maintaining small, close groups offer unique methods by which to exclude outsiders. *Critical Role* DM Matthew Mercer has noted how the social mores of *D&D* facilitate this: “If you weren’t already in it, there was already this kind of predisposition that it was super difficult to get into . . . People just bounced off the idea so easily and [only] those who were gently brought in by a friend . . . discovered it really wasn’t that hard to engage with” (The McElroy Family 2020, 13:19–13:33).

Mercer focuses on benign misconceptions around *D&D*’s complexity—however, his wording hints at how *D&D* can also be maliciously exclusionary. Only those “gently brought in by a friend” continue to engage. This statement alludes to anyone who does not find their introduction gentle—perhaps even facing active harassment—as well as those who are never invited to the table in the first place. In many ways, *D&D*’s structure physically embodies the “painful irony at work in game culture,” in which “a space for outsiders” strictly gatekeeps entry in order to secure its own identity (Taylor 2018, 234).

The players who have gained the most exposure through live streaming are markedly different from the presumed stereotype, and this has shifted cultural perceptions around *D&D* substantially. *Critical Role*, the most popular actual play stream, presents a new brand of “nerd celebrity” (or as they introduce themselves, “nerdy-ass voice actors”). The stream celebrates their three female players, Laura Bailey, Ashley Johnson, and Marisha Ray. They have also actively distanced themselves from the presumed straight white male “geek.” Since June 2019, their merchandise store offers a Pride T-shirt featuring *D&D* dice in the colors of LGBTQIA+ flags, with the words “Don’t Forget to Love Each Other,” placing the cast’s catchphrase into a new social justice context (“Beneath Bazzoxan” *Critical Role* 2019, 9:11–9:22). They similarly leverage their stream’s popularity to promote guest players of color, including Aabria Iyengar, Mica Burton, and Khary Payton. Already nerd celebrities through their professional careers as voice actors, their newfound status as *D&D* influencers works to alter geek identity.

Perceptions of this cast refute exclusionary gatekeeping. Deborah Ann Wohl praises their welcoming attitude toward new players: “They’re good, nice people, . . . they’re not elitist, they’re not any of that” (IGN 2019, 7:36–7:43). The *Critical Role* stream is staged as inclusive through its imperfections.

Unedited gameplay, including mistakes, is showcased alongside pop-culture references, in-jokes, and "bloopers" moments. The focus is not necessarily on gaming skill (beyond their talent as actors), but instead on the domestic interactions within an established group of friends, stressing *D&D's* social aspects. Viewers' sense of inclusion is rooted in the cast's personas. While video game streams use direct interaction with fans through functions such as Twitch's text chat to build a sense of community (LaRell Anderson 2017), actual play does not typically include this. Instead, player-to-player interactions are foregrounded, and chat remains solely for discussion and speculation among fans. However, the cast also make choices to include their audience in their friendship group during the stream through direct address and recurring in-jokes. The most notable example is the stream's closing catchphrase, "Is it Thursday yet?" Scheduling conflicts are often cited as the main obstacle to *D&D* gameplay, and this phrase reframes the stream's serial broadcasting schedule as simply a group of players all eagerly awaiting the next time they play *D&D* together—an anticipatory atmosphere in which viewers are included.

Although *Critical Role* remains predominantly white, its popularity has paved the way for streams that make deliberate statements about the diverse, intersectional forms of geek identity. These include *Sirens of the Realms*—an all-female cast playing as a girl-power bard band—and *Rivals of Waterdeep*—a stream featuring only POC actors. Both examples are notable as they are hosted on the official DnD Twitch channel curated by Wizards of the Coast, demonstrating a marketing effort to broaden concepts of who can play *D&D*. In 2020, no actual play live streams hosted by the official DnD channel featured an all-male cast—showing a massive shift from the brand ambassadors endorsed by Wizards of the Coast in MacCallum-Stewart's account of PAX 2011.

These members of the *D&D* subculture have always existed, but live streaming has boosted their visibility and made *D&D* approachable for a broader subset of people. MacCallum-Stewart describes performed *D&D* as not only instructional, but also endorsing certain modes of play as "correct" (MacCallum-Stewart 2014a, 183). By promoting diverse brand ambassadors, live streams build and validate a multifaceted and inclusive geek identity. Satine Phoenix, the female, bisexual, and Filipina DM of *Sirens of the Realm*, has described her streaming career as motivated by "representation, right? Representation is a big deal . . . [it becomes] a sucker punch to the world saying,

‘guess what? So many other people are playing this’” (The McElroy Family 2020, 14:22–15:05). If a person sees themselves represented in actual play, they may overcome not only the daunting aspects of the *D&D* rule set, but any feelings of exclusion. “By being out there,” Phoenix argues, “all these other people come out of the woodwork” to join her (The McElroy Family 2020, 15:06–15:14). Marisha Ray has similarly described *Critical Role*’s aim to improve accessibility: “[A] mission in the company . . . [is] to lower the barriers of entry to storytelling” (CNET Highlights 2020, 19:10–19:18).

***D&D* as Endlessly Deferred Narrative**

The statement that *Critical Role* makes “storytelling” more accessible demonstrates another way in which actual play streams have modified *D&D* subculture. Through their formation of participatory cultures that are predominantly engaged with a stream’s fictional narrative, actual play is creating a variety of ways for individuals to interact with the *D&D* game product, many of which do not actually involve playing.

In many ways, the *D&D* system functions as a microcosm of game studies’ wider debate of narratology versus ludology. It can be a rules-heavy or narrative-heavy game (or both) depending on the preferences of the players and DM, with divergent interpretations of gameplay acknowledged within its own flexible structure. As previously discussed, when hosting or joining a game, players secure a consensus on what they want from gameplay, whether it be “storytelling, playing a role, simulating a world, or achieving goals and progress according to rules” (Zagal and Deterding 2018, 49).

Such flexibility means there are multiple forms of “gaming capital” available to *D&D* players (Consalvo 2007). It can be earned from expertise in *D&D*’s complex rules, but also (and sometimes simultaneously) through a dedication to strong roleplay, compelling character choices, or a DM’s storytelling skill. *D&D*’s extensive backlog of paratexts detailing additional rules and settings may fit in with the traditional assignation of gaming capital as “expertise in gaming and knowledge of everything related to [the] games” (Consalvo 2007, 20). However, as Consalvo (2007) notes, gaming capital is a “highly flexible” (184) currency that changes according to what is assigned significance within the subculture itself. This is where actual play streams have a particular impact. As actual play shifts the purpose of

D&D gameplay toward story creation, the types of gaming and "subcultural capital" (Thornton 1995) that earn players status also shift.

Successful actual play shows typically involve strong roleplay and compelling narrative, relying on investment in character, plot, and worldbuilding to sustain viewers' interest. While ludic skill—such as a creative or knowledgeable use of powerful spells or combinations of abilities—provides entertainment, players are more often praised for how they enhance fictional narrative. For instance, while Laura Bailey's decision to nonviolently defeat an opponent using an insignificant, novelty magical item—the Dust of Deliciousness—in *Critical Role's* "Misery Loves Company" made expert use of in-game mechanics, it was mainly praised for how it served the narrative. Bailey was perceived as remaining true to her character, Jester, foregrounding her traits of trickery and kindness alongside her love of confectionary. By having Jester remain her "usually charming self" under pressure, weaponizing aspects of her roleplay performance, Bailey earned the title in one fan's eyes of "the undisputed Queen of *D&D!*" (Grizbehr 2020). Such affective forms of gaming capital have always been available, but the consumption of actual play live streams as serialized fiction renews their significance as currency within *D&D* subculture.

Treating actual play streams as serial entertainment foregrounds *D&D's* ability to generate "endlessly deferred narrative," which Matt Hills (2002) identifies as a method for fostering fan participatory culture (98). Speculation surrounding endlessly deferred narrative is something that *D&D's* episodic gameplay structure naturally enables: not only can campaigns last for hundreds of sessions/episodes, but *D&D's* dice roll mechanics mean that no outcome is certain. The ultimate narrative end point, as well as any story beats along the way, are always in flux. With viewers and players on-screen constantly speculating about how in-game decisions, dice rolls, and the overarching plot threads are going to resolve, new modes of *D&D* participatory culture emerge around a stream's narrative and its fictional player characters.

While *D&D* live streaming encourages individuals to play *D&D*, it also lowers the barriers to participation by enabling viewers to engage with the game through other fannish practices: extensive discussion on social media, the transformative use of stream content in gifs on Twitter and Tumblr, and the creation of fan art and fan fiction. These practices have long historically complimented *D&D* gameplay, with character artwork and/or written documentation of campaigns commonplace since the game's inception (Mackay

2002; Zagal and Deterding 2018). But such works were typically created for the pleasure of the individual player or their small five- or six-person community, not on this new, networked scale of transmedial fandom.

As previously discussed, Twitch's chat function is used differently within actual play streams, as a space for viewer commentary and speculation of a session/episode as it unfolds. It can also allow viewers to express their affective responses to a particular real-world player, in-game character, or in-game romance. Fannish speculation has become such a key part of *Critical Role's* community that their streaming schedule includes "4-Sided Dive" and "Critical Recap," shows devoted to discussing pivotal in-game events, character motivations, and predictions surrounding wider narrative trajectory. Streams such as *Critical Role* and *High Rollers* (2016–) have celebrated their fans by conducting a fan art gallery in streaming breaks, meaning that viewers and fans gain recognition from both the cast and wider audience through their fanworks.

Developments in engagement make *D&D* more accessible. The shift in gaming capital caused by live streams, which rebrands *D&D* as predominantly a storytelling medium rather than a complex, rules-heavy game, circumvents certain biases surrounding skill. It makes *D&D* subculture available to anyone with a predisposition toward or prior engagement in fannish practice, and broadens the types of participation available to interested individuals. Henry Jenkins (2013) has argued that "male interest around transmedia" typically manifests as "information hunting and gathering," while creative and transformative engagement are "feminine fan pleasures" (xxvi). Although needlessly gendered, the two streams of fannish practice that Jenkins identifies here are useful because actual play enables *D&D* to encompass both. Live streaming means that fan "information hunting and gathering" occurs within a wider transmedial context—no longer solely focused on the contents of *D&D's* extensive paratexts, but also on pivotal moments across multiple streamed narratives. CritRoleStats.com tracks "stats, lore, and anything that can be quantified on *Critical Role*," and encourages fans to voluntarily aid in their data collection (CritRoleStats 2015). Actual play has also encouraged viewers to apply transformative, creative fan practices to *D&D*, replicating the emotional investment of a TV/media fandom. Both these new modes of participatory culture circumvent the need for gameplay entirely, broadening the subculture to engage media fan circles.

Conclusion

The popularity of live streamed *D&D* gameplay is having a sizable impact on *D&D*'s gaming culture. *Critical Role*'s Sam Riegel notes: "It's been a running joke for . . . decades now that all *D&D* players are 'basement dwelling nerds.' But I think that shows like ours, and ours particularly, has changed that perception" (Whitten 2020).

Actual play media circumvents *D&D*'s insulated or exclusionary aspects, skewing away from "basement dwelling nerds" in favor of a networked, global fandom. Live streaming is now a means of introducing individuals to the game, bringing it into the mainstream at a time when other geek pursuits have also achieved wider visibility and popularity (Salter and Blodgett 2017). Performing gameplay in real time improves accessibility by instructing those mystified by the game's complex rules. High-profile, celebrity members of *D&D* subculture—not only those made famous by chance through successful streams, but also those selected and curated through deliberate marketing decisions—have broadened perceptions of the *D&D* gamer identity. By stressing the importance of narrative already present within *D&D*, the subculture extends beyond gamers, appealing to the speculative and affective investment of media fans and coopting their practices.

But actual play live streams are not simply altering the gaming subculture—they are altering the gaming product itself. When the *D&D* publication *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* (*D&D* 2020) was released, its YouTube and Twitch promotion campaign involved cameos from diverse nerd celebrities such as Mica Burton, Tanya DePass, and Omega Jones, all of whom rose to prominence as players through live streaming (*D&D* 2020). *Critical Role* has also been directly acknowledged by Wizards of the Coast through its publication of *The Explorer's Guide to Wildemount* (*WotC* 2020b). While this may simply be a decision by Wizards of the Coast to capitalize on the new revenues that actual play's popularity has generated, it shows that these live streams have the ability not simply to promote, but also to alter the game product with which it is engaging.

This is important, as it means that actual play's efforts to shift the geek identity away from the presumed white male "basement dwelling nerd" may be successful. Alongside Wizard of the Coast's legitimization of players from a diverse range of backgrounds through their live streams and promotional campaigns, 2020 saw direct action taken against previous exclusionary

behavior in the blog post “Diversity and Dungeons & Dragons.” In this article, the company acknowledged its problematic handling of race within the *D&D* rubric and highlighted its plans to correct it (Wizards of the Coast 2020). Not only is actual play changing *D&D*’s participatory culture, it is altering its cultural artifacts. While *D&D*’s fan base has always had input into the franchise’s development, rarely has direct interjection from fans focused on making the game more progressive. As more people interact and engage with *D&D* because of actual play, the game itself comes under closer interrogation. Problematic aspects which may have passed unnoticed and unremarked upon by the all-male—or at least all-white—echo chamber that Mackay describes circa 2002 now face scrutiny. Thus, the product is changing itself accordingly, continuing to make the subculture more accessible and inclusive, and ultimately capitalizing on an unprecedented means of free promotion and market growth.

As actual play live streams broaden the range of customers that *D&D* can market itself to, it may enact real, seismic change to the mainstream perception of geek identity, and contribute to a push for diverse representation within geek subculture as a whole.

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Real Life in Real Time

Live Streaming Culture

Edited by: Johanna Brewer, Bo Ruberg, Amanda L. L. Cullen, Christopher J. Persaud

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