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Jackson Wyndow

Critical Role Learning

Watching Livestreams as Socio-Cultural Learning

ABSTRACT

Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), as a tabletop pen-and-paper game, requires new players to learn the detailed and long rules in order to engage according to expectations. But it is not only the mechanical rules of the game that players need to learn, but also the social way to act at a D&D table: how to call out rolls, what is appropriate to ask, how a typical game runs, how to play a character, and what D&D broadly is. This paper researches the cultural and social mechanisms through which new players learn these rules with a focus on D&D-focused livestreams. Using symbolic interactionism, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), and the third season of the popular D&D web series *Critical Role* (2015-), this research argues that these livestreams are a core way for new players to easily and effectively learn the mechanical and social rules of the game in an entertaining environment.

KEYWORDS

Dungeons & Dragons, symbolic interactionism, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), Twitch, *Critical Role*, livestreaming, live-streaming, TTRPGs

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Introduction

Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)—as a board game, a pen-and-paper game, and a table top role-playing game (TTRPG)—must have its rules read and understood by both players and the Dungeon Masters (DM) to play effectively. These rules are detailed and long, and sitting down to pore over an over 300-page rulebook is likely not what most first-time players want as their introduction to a game. Compounding this, it is not only the mechanical rules that new players need to learn but also the social way to act at a D&D table: how to call out rolls, what is an appropriate question to ask, and how a typical game runs. Focusing on the learning of D&D, this paper investigates the specific sociopsychological ways that people watch and experience the web series *Critical Role* not only as a form of enjoyment, but also instructing the ways to play D&D. I explain this theoretically using Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) to learn the mechanical rules, and symbolic interactionism to learn the social rules. While both of these are distinct branches of social science, Susan Leigh Star (1996) details the way in which both schools are compatible with one another, as concepts detailing social interaction. The theories of Fine and Kleinman (1979) and Becker (1953), both symbolic interactionists and applicable to a broad approach to CHAT, work theoretically to explain social learning and how new players can learn to play D&D.

This research is drawn from previous research that involved ethnographic observation, survey, and interviews with fans of *Critical Role*, a method drawn from Fine and Kleinman (1979). While not a fan of *Critical Role*, I am a long-time D&D player and knew the players and characters of *Critical Role* from friends who enjoyed the series. In order to better situate myself with fans of the series, I watched the first eight episodes of season 3 during this research. This allowed me to connect with fans and find out how *Critical Role* can be used both as entertainment and as a learning tool for the broader rules of the broader game of D&D.

Critical Role

Critical Role can be defined as a group of friends who meet every week to play D&D, the same as every other role-playing group. The difference comes in that all the players are professional and well-known (and self-described nerdy-ass) voice actors for anime and video games, and that their weekly D&D sessions are a televised event that thousands of people watch live from their own homes or consume through archived recordings (known as Video on Demand or VODS by the fans). From the small, private affair as which it began, *Critical Role* has expanded to include a published rulebook for the core D&D game, comic books, and an Amazon animated series, *The Legend of Vox Machina* (2022-), with a fourth season in production.

Critical Role initially began as a private group of friends playing the TTRPG *Pathfinder*. The series DM is Matt Mercer—the driving force behind the show as well as its writer. It started when Mercer, a player of D&D since his childhood, held a one-shot of D&D 4th edition for *Critical Role* star Liam O'Brien's birthday (cf. Shea 2016). The game proved popular among the group, and they continued to play regularly, expanding the one-shot into a full-length campaign. The private game was scouted out by website *Geek & Sundry,* after rumors floated around about a private game starring popular voice actors (cf. DeVille 2017). They were offered the possibility of a show, and despite fears that the public attention would ruin their personal game, they decided to take the risk (cf. Shea 2016).

When the private game became a series, the game moved to the D&D 5th edition as it allowed for streamlined mechanical play, especially during combat. Its original and core cast included Mercer, Liam O'Brien, Laura Bailey, Travis Willingham, Ashley Johnson, Taliesin Jaffe, Sam Riegel, and Ashley Johnson. Orion Acaba, another voice actor, was part of this initial cast but left during the first season due to conflicts. All these players are accomplished voice actors and bring this to the characters they play. Their theatrical talents account for some of the popularity, combining their various styles to produce a largely successful series.

Since its launch, the series has run for three completed seasons, with each season corresponding to a full campaign. Season 1 ran from 2015-2017 and totaled 115 episodes, season 2 ran from 2018-2021 and totaled 141 episodes, and season 3 ran from 2021-2025 and totaled 121 episodes, with each episode running between two and four hours in length. In between the end of season 2 and the start of season 3, a mini-campaign called *Exandria Unlimited* was run, which ran for six episodes from Jun. 24 to Aug. 12, 2021, and featured a different cast from the main series with a new DM.

The Verge journalist Chris DeVille (2017) calls the genre of streamed D&D, that *Critical Role* falls into, liveplay. The first episode of the campaign had five million views on YouTube, featuring only "pals sitting around a table and acting out whimsical characters" with Mercer's "colorful D&D narration" (idem.). DeVille argues that the popularity of liveplay is its combination of "the interactivity of a live stream—which typically allows viewers to comment, pose questions, and even affect the course of gameplay—and you get a uniquely addictive viewing experience: part game show, part talk show, part fantasy-adventure serial" (idem.).

Statistically, the popularity of the show as of May 2025 is 2.45 million subscribers on YouTube and 1.4 million followers on Twitch. However, not many of their videos on YouTube have a higher number than their subscriber count, and neither does Twitch. A likely explanation for this is that excitement for the new campaign decreases over time, with only the devoted fans sticking around until the very end. This subscription success translates into being financially successful as well. A security breach at Twitch.tv on Oct. 6, 2021, revealed that the *Critical Role* channel was the top-earning channel on the platform, generating USD 9,626,712.16 in gross revenue between August 2019 and October 2021 (cf. Silberling 2021). This is from one site alone and does not include the other branches of the franchise mentioned above, such as comic books, cartoons, or sources of revenue from other sites.

Its popularity has fed not only the series' success but also the success of D&D more generally. Research by Sidhu and Carter (2020) into D&D fans found that *Critical Role* caused an increased interest in D&D, calling it the "criticality of Critical Role" (12). In interviews, they found that the high production quality of the show highlighted elements of D&D many might not have known of before, such as the social fun of going on an adventure in a group. One older player who had been playing for 19 years found

that the sudden increase in attention to the game brought about by *Critical Role* was something new and exciting.

Theories of Social Learning and D&D

If your idea of sitting down to read a 300-page rulebook sounds fun, then I suspect you to be a scholar reading an academic paper about D&D. But for readers who fall outside that group, this idea seems monstrously boring. CHAT suggests an alternative method of *learning*. Based on the theories of Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) and his work on child psychology, CHAT has been expanded to adult education (cf. Northedge 2002) and organizational management (cf. Engeström 2001).

This theory of education suggests that learning is not done in isolation, but cybernetically in interaction with others and the tools at one's disposal. These artifacts are not limited to physical objects (such as a stick to count out numbers) but also discourses, computer games, books, and recordings. Unlike a theory of education where a student learns from a teacher set to a curriculum, learning instead happens in interacting with cultural tools and through diverse methods fit for an individual pupil. One of the core features of CHAT is that it is *cultural* and not *social*, building on engagement with a student's culture rather than social interaction. Furthermore, artifacts or tools become key points in the understanding of how individuals learn. Wells and Claxton (2002) explain:

> The final key principle of CHAT we wish to emphasize here is that all learning situations are indelibly social and cultural, even if they involve no face-to-face interaction. A solitary scholar poring over her books is engaging with the voices of the books' authors, and through them with a long tradition of thought. [...] The recent proliferation of electronic forms of communication, and the opportunities for solitary and distance learning to which these technologies have given rise, have re-emphasized the extent to which CHAT thinking is fundamentally 'cultural' rather than necessarily 'social.' The final key principle of CHAT we wish to emphasize here is that all learning situations are indelibly social and cultural, even if they involve no face-to-face interaction. A solitary scholar poring over her books is engaging with the voices of the books' authors, and through them with a long tradition of thought. The recent proliferation of electronic forms of communication, and the opportunities for solitary and distance learning to which these technologies have given rise, have re-emphasized the extent to which CHAT thinking is fundamentally 'cultural' rather than necessarily 'social.' (10)

One of the key points that CHAT gives is the understanding that learning can take place in isolation with a text, reflecting a *Critical Role* viewing. Whereas for Wells and Claxton, the example is a scholar poring over books and engaging with the voices of the past, when watching *Critical Role*, one engages with the voices that tell you how to play the game, built upon years of Mercer's both private and professional experience. When one watches *Critical Role*, they are engaging with a gaming culture that tells them how to play a game.

It is likely that one reason *Critical Role* has functioned well as a teacher for so many is the clear explanation of the rules and the playing of the game in an easy-to-consume format that is suitable for those who would rather not read a long rulebook. Furthermore, through *Critical Role*, it is possible to get around the awkward first experience of learning the game (cf. Becker 1953).

Scholarship on non-didactic learning of D&D is slim. Previously, MacCallum-Stewart (2014) theorized that this learning of a game through watching is similar to collective intelligence as theorized by Jenkins (2008). However, I find the use of collective intelligence to be inadequate when applied to how to actual-

ly *learn* how to play D&D. Collective intelligence is less about learning and more about problem-solving, using the collective resources of many to find a solution. Simply connecting well-known concepts such as hitpoints in a video game to a TTRPG is insufficient to actually learning. This is not to say that their description of the phenomena of using D&D to teach is incorrect. The descriptions of how D&D live-streamers use references to real-world and larger fantasy realms work within the context analyzed here.

This ties into the second theoretical framework of this paper, symbolic interactionism. This approach is drawn from the pragmatic philosophy of George Herbert Mead and Charles Cooley, focusing on the communication and interpretation of symbols in making meaning of the world and creating community. Specifically for this paper, I draw on the work of Howard Becker (1973) as well as Gary Alan Fine and Sherryl Kleinman (1979) in understanding how meaning is created and shared by players of D&D, especially in the communication of social rules. Becker's work focuses on how musicians create meaning in the work they do and how learning to smoke marijuana is a social activity that needs to be taught rather than something that can be inherently known. Fine (1983) meanwhile produced the first ethnography of TTPRG play, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. In this work, he attempted to understand what it is that makes playing a TTRPG so enjoyable, and how players create meaning over numbers and dice.[1] The work of both theorists understands that enjoyment itself is socially *mediated*, learning an activity can be socially taught, and the activity must be learned mediated to be enjoyable. No matter how fun D&D is, learning how to play the game needs to be fun for people to engage with it.

While the two are separate theoretical frameworks that developed in different sociohistoric climates, they share historical and philosophical links (cf. Leigh Star 1996). Key for this paper is a history of anti-individualism and an understanding of cognition as socially mediated. Cognition and learning are group activities, something done among friends, older peers, and adults who can all assist in the learning of a task, not an inherent trait.

To make this connection clearer, we can contrast the work of Becker (1973) with Vygotsky (1978). Becker (1973) describes learning to smoke marijuana as a fundamentally social activity, which must be mediated through others:

> The first step in the sequence of events that must occur if the person is to become a user is that he must learn to use the proper smoking technique so that his use of the drug will produce effects in terms of which his conception of it can change. (47)

Meanwhile, Vygotsky (1978), in a much different language but with similar themes, talks about the development of new skills in children:

> It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (86)

The similarities across both align well for this paper. The theories seek to understand how human interaction is mediated, and how this interaction can be taught. Taking symbolic interactionism and CHAT, it then applies this visually to *Critical Role*.

1 Fine's work is sadly imperfect, recent scholarship has posited that he excluded women's presence in early TTRPG spaces to reinforce the argument of them being male hegemonic spaces.

Method

The overarching argument is that livestreaming sites such as YouTube and Twitch.tv provide a way to play a game without playing a game, without diminishing the pleasure of playing a game. This is itself a new subculture within the wider gaming subculture—an activity distinct from being an active gamer but still partaking in gaming subculture.

D&D was used as the example for this, due to my own experience of wanting to play the game, being unable, later having learned the game, dealing with its rule contradictions, and having taught the rules to others. The immensely popular web series *Critical Role* was chosen because I know of several friends who became active players of D&D through the popularity of *Critical Role*. Knowing about D&D and having a broad understanding of characters, voice actors, and events is crucial to being perceived as a fan by other fans (cf. Abramson/Modzelewski 2011).

This approach was further refined by the interactionist theory of subculture developed by Fine and Kleinman (1979). They argue that subcultures are not bound together by shared history and symbols, as was the common understanding, but also through their channels of communication. These channels are not only between members of the subculture but also external channels of communication, through members' other connections.

In terms of methodology, this study used ethnographic observation, surveys, and interviews, the methods presented by Fine and Kleinman (1979), which were then used in the study of TTRPG cultures (cf. Fine 1983). This approach was refined to be applicable to the study of internet culture through Kozinets (2020) which informs an ethically-minded approach to studying internet participants that preserves their privacy. Using the netnography approach, each method informed the other. The ethnography ran over the course of the project, with findings from it reflected in the survey. Those interviewed were then asked what they thought was missing from the survey and to give more detail about their answers. All interviews were then given anonymous names in order to preserve confidentiality.

Fortunately, and coincidentally for this research, the third season of *Critical Role* started just as data collection began in October of 2021. This provided a rich and active environment to collect all three types of data, as the community would be the most active during the start of a new season. In order to understand how the *Critical Role* community enjoys the series, I watched the first eight episodes of campaign 3, collecting weekly ethnographic data along the way.

Having never watched a single episode of *Critical Role* before this, I was coming into this as a completely new viewer but an experienced D&D player. By watching the series, I was given a suitable practical backing; I would understand what was being discussed in the ethnographic data, which would inform the interviews, eventually all combining in the analysis.

Critical Role, Learning, and D&D

The most recent edition of the official D&D rulebook, 5th edition, published in 2014, is notoriously vague while claiming to provide an open, flexible, and modular ruleset (cf. Prokopetz 2025). A key problem is its definitions of certain terms, which can lead to arguments and discussions during gameplay about the best way to proceed (cf. Crawford 2022). These are issues of interpretation, where unclear rules lead to arguments. These issues need to be resolved quickly and neatly for the game to run smoothly without pause (cf. Fine 1983). Northedge (2002) calls this the problem of engaging with specialist discourse, where an established field will throw terms at neophytes without proper definition. Terms such as "ini-

tiative," "armor class," and "hit points" are specialized terms that mean different things to different types of gamers, and a consensus needs to be reached on how they work within D&D.

Critical Role was utilized by some fans in order to learn the specialist discourse of D&D. There is a clear focus by Mercer and the players on what they are rolling their dice for and what they are adding to it based on their character sheet, always visible during a stream. Several responses to the survey corroborated this:

> Critical Role was how I learned to play Dungeons and Dragons; the game can often be intimidating and difficult to learn due to the volume of statistics and rules, and Campaign One served as an excellent way for me to learn how to play by osmosis.

> I literally learned how to play because of CR (when other games I tried to watch weren't compelling enough for me to grasp the nuances of the game), and CR revealed so much more about how to play and bond in the game. I went from a basically mild awareness of D&D to actually running games as a DM for the kids of some of my friends, all due to consuming CR.

> I heard about D&D before and always wanted to play. But after watching Critical Role, I finally started looking for a group that I'm currently playing with. I do feel like I picked up a lot of the basic rules of D&D, which I'm very grateful for, because the rulebook is massive!

Here, fans are using *Critical Role* as a tool for guided participation. In identifying that the game of D&D is a complex game to be thrown into, new players look for a way to learn the game that does not involve slaving over a rulebook. This is what activity theorists call the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). These are tasks which would be too complex to learn alone, but through the help of others, whether that other be another person or a non-living recording, productive learning and internalization of the ways to solve the task occur. As was stated above, even learning in isolation still engages in sociocultural learning with others.

CHAT extends to not just how to play the game but how to run the game as watched in the show. Matt Mercer is looked at as the ideal DM for many in the community, given his detailed descriptions of the setting and characters, and providing a unique voice for every inhabitant that the cast comes across, thanks to Mercer's voice acting experience. This, in turn, allowed for what one survey participant called his strongest power, "to facilitate bold role play from his table," which encourages his players to perform spectacular feats. But beyond that, viewers are also learning the ways to mechanically act as a DM, on how to handle events based on his judgments. Fans are using Matt Mercer himself as a tool to navigate the ZPD.

As stated above, there may be issues relating to the interpretations of the rules, arguments between players, and arguments between the player and the DM. It falls to the DM to act not only as the storyteller but also as the mediator for conflict (cf. Bowman 2013). Watching how Mercer makes his judgment calls, even if one may disagree with them, shows how an experienced DM solves problems through collaboration, and if need be, putting their foot down so the game can keep running.

However, it is not only the game mechanics and rules that fans are learning when watching *Critical Role* but the rules of social play, too. Social play refers to an approach to D&D as a role-playing game; it can be done without violence and through acting out one's character. For viewers who have not played

D&D prior to watching *Critical Role*, D&D was a dice-based game that involved casting spells and killing monsters. Playing becomes a game of mathematics and some chance, simply moving one's token around the board and performing the right actions at the right points to kill the enemy monsters. Bowman (2013) calls this "gameism" (13), and its focus can lead to conflict when different players come to the table with different ideas of how a game should be run, as either a combat-focused, roleplay-focused, or a mixed approach to the game.

The combat-focused approach was seemingly common in earlier games; when more social encounters were offered, violence, and therefore gameplay mechanics, were given as the preferred way to solve them. Fine (1983) writes that, in order to test his players, he formed an encounter where they would run into a group of pre-adolescent children in the woods. Despite posing no apparent threat to the group, there was serious consideration of killing the children to prevent them from being a later threat. The social element was pushed to the side, driving players away who preferred this focus. Killing and dungeon-delving were how the game was meant to be done.

Critical Role highlighted that there was also a collaborative and theatrical nature to the game, role-playing a character and what they do, that may have previously not been advertised to prospective players. Furthermore, it can help people who already know of the role-playing component to learn the correct social etiquette for a game. As was written by one of the first respondents to the survey:

> It has given me a way to think of fun characters, and I don't ALWAYS have to play as a super serious tortured past character, so no direct inspiration, just like I can do what I want.

And another:

> It made my definition of dungeons and dragons [turn upside down]. Before cr awesome explanation and rp, *D&D* was a "dice game" with short roleplay moments. Critical role has made *D&D* a lot more interactive, creative and, to be honest, important to my life.

And:

> When i started playing about a year ago, i was worried that i might not know how to behave at a *D&D* table, so a friend of mine recommended that I'd watch a couple of episodes if only to see how some other people played. That helped a lot and I've been hooked ever since.

It was Becker (1973) who identified the learning of a group within a symbolic interactionist context when he studied how marijuana smokers learn how to smoke correctly. While the comparisons may seem extreme, a drug compared to a game, the underlying theory on how one learns something new applies. For Becker's marijuana users, they first have a desire to seek out the drug in the first place and then must be taught that the drug is pleasurable. Under the subheading titled "Learning the Technique," Becker writes:

> The novice does not ordinarily get high the first time he smokes marihuana, and several attempts are usually necessary to induce this state. One explanation of this may be that the drug is not smoked "properly," that is, in a way that ensures sufficient dosage to produce real symptoms of intoxication. (46)

And:

> If nothing happens, it is manifestly impossible for the user to develop a conception of the drug as an object which can be used for pleasure, and use will therefore not continue. The first step in the sequence of events that must occur if the person is to become a user is that he must learn to use the proper smoking technique so that his use of the drug will produce effects in terms of which his conception of it can change. (idem., 47)

In Becker's conception of marijuana use, learning how to smoke is fundamentally a social process. One is taught the way to smoke through initiation by other marijuana users, who teach them that one cannot smoke it like tobacco. They must further correctly perceive the effects of 'getting high.' Once this has happened, they then further need to perceive the effect as positive and begin to enjoy the effects. Becker finds that this is more likely to happen if one has their early consumption of marijuana in the presence of others, who can teach the novice smoker that what is happening to them is normal, and help the perception of the effects as positive. Without such guidance, it is unlikely that smoking will continue.

The same applies to D&D. These elements are reflected in a survey answer:

> I also learn and when I have time/access to play again I will be better. Liam is a good example of brilliant courtesy ("excuse me DM, I must have miscommunicated my intention. May I…"). Classy af. Travis learning to romantic RP. I want to be Talison. All of them are charming and brilliant. But at the end of the day…it's Matt. Dude has a rare genius mixed with hard work, charisma, and luck. He is so freaking impressive to me. I could watch him storytell for another 500+ hours (or however long C2 is) over and over (and likely will).

One can, of course, learn how to play the game in its entirety by reading the rulebooks, much like one can (theoretically) learn to smoke marijuana by reading how to do so or smoking alone. But if one wants to really learn how to play and have it not be drudgery, they need to observe the play and be told what is happening, and learn that the experience is pleasurable. CHAT comes into play in understanding both the mechanical dynamics of play and symbolic interactionism, the social ones. Through the observation of how the *Critical Role* cast play the game, one learns the social rules for a D&D table and is introduced to the culture of D&D and how to play it. When one watches, this functions similar to Becker and the learning to smoke marijuana but instead is being shaped towards how a table runs.

For some, this learning opens doors in their personal life to the possibility of playing D&D itself. Several participants in both the survey and the interviews stated that it was learning the game through *Critical Role* that made them want to find their own D&D games, socialize with others, and learn to make friends. From this, *Critical Role* serves as an introduction to larger D&D play, allowing neophytes to enter the larger gaming culture.

Despite this positive outlook, there can be longer-term issues for those who learn of D&D solely through *Critical Role*, especially fans who see *Critical Role* as the only way to play. Respondents to the survey stated that they specifically avoided interacting with the larger TTRPG community to avoid being perceived as a *Critical Role* fan by other D&D players. While perceptions of older D&D players towards *Critical Role* fans vary and are outside of the scope of this paper, what is within this scope is the following comment from the survey:

> The most off putting thing about the community is the degree to which some take the parasocial relationship. Being part of the community is likely an escape for these people, but the intensity of their fandom and rejection of criticism means it's less pleasant to share the experience with them. It also makes me less likely to bring up Critical Role with others outside of the community, as there is a general push against it in the great *D&D* community due to those fans.

While the data generated by the survey does not explain exactly what this "pushback" against *Critical Role* fans is, certain searches on the internet can find it for us. A Reddit thread titled "Critical Role Stigma(?)" on the r/dnd subreddit asks about why there is a stigma towards *Critical Role* fans. Comments answering point toward the belief that for new players, *Critical Role* shapes their perception of how D&D is supposed to be run. When a new player joins a D&D game after their first exposure to *Critical Role*, they may find that the game they play (probably not played by professional voice actors) is not the same as the show they watch.

Complaints that "That's not how Critical Role does it" occur, causing frustrations for both the new player and the regular ones. These findings were reflected in the survey:

> Critical Role is an amazing show, but I believe it is often held to a quasi-divine regard by the community. Giving opinions about the show (i would have preferred if X had happened, I thought Y pairing had worked best, etc) should be not only possible, but motivated. I also feel that although it has taught a lot of people about *D&D*, it has also created a lot of harmful ideas about how a normal game should be played.

Furthermore, there were the comments of fans and their intense feelings towards the series, which can impact enjoyment. Christian Hoffer, writing at comicbook.com, provides an example. Following the early death of the character Mollymauk in season 2, many fans reacted with outrage at Matthew Mercer for the death. Writing on the fandom:

> While Critical Role is a show about a tabletop game, some fans have been overly critical about player choices, treating the game as if it were a sporting event meant to be overanalyzed by professional analysts. And while all celebrities in a public sphere have to deal with an extra layer of criticism in some way, Mercer and the other cast members of Critical Role are extra vulnerable to it due to how much they engage and interact with their fans. (Hoffer 2021)

As a demonstration of this, there were discussions on sites such as the *Critical Role* subreddit about the pace that season 3 was developing at, as opposed to previous seasons. The setting of this season involved the party staying in one large city and investigating everything there. Some felt this as slow; they were slowly investigating a city and getting their backstory out rather than having it woven naturally into the narrative. Others enjoyed the faster pace with cheerful characters compared to the previous campaign 2, where the characters brooded and kept secrets from one another, which was again in direct contrast to the first campaign. Taking both the media comments and the fan ones, it would seem that certain members of the *Critical Role* community develop strong parasocial feelings towards the show, feeling that it should go a certain way. When it does not, whether due to narrative progression or simply that the dice rolls gave a bad result, there is intense backlash from the community.

Furthermore, an overreliance on Mercer's style of running his game has led to what is called the 'Matt Mercer Effect,' where new players, who have only ever played experienced D&D through *Critical Role*, expect the game to run exactly the same as the show, as was said in an interview:

> I think largely it is a really great thing it has sparked an interest in a hobby that is near and dear to my heart and I think it is great that more people want to get involved. It also lead to a shift towards more story focused games and characters which I love. I do think it comes with it's own set of complications though, while the Core Rules will largely be the same at every table. Every DM has there own story their interested in telling and there own strengths and weaknesses when it comes to running the game. When new players who have engaged in days worth content of Critical Role content they can come into the game with different expectations to the DM or table which can cause conflict.

Within this space of learning, there is the issue that the way *Critical Role* plays becomes the basis for how the game of D&D is played, with new players not understanding that there are different possible ways to play. One who comes to a game for a more social experience may be disheartened to learn that the group they joined is more interested in bloodshed and carnage. One who expects that every D&D game will be the same as *Critical Role*, if the series is their only knowledge of the game, may find themselves disappointed in the variety of ways to play the game.

While a discussion of parasociality in *Critical Role* is outside the scope of this paper (see Fox [2021] and Wyndow [2022] for a more detailed explanation), it should be noted that fans' attachment to the series can become extreme, and they develop a strong parasocial bond with the cast. This presents a flaw, but not an unsolvable one, within this understanding of learning. Scholars argued that CHAT works when in a group or individually, because the individual is still engaging with a shared culture of symbols and meaning. It is parasocial feelings that complicate the learning of symbols. In isolation, without others to suggest alternatives, what is witnessed becomes the only way to experience something. Simply saying "watch something else" or "play with others" falls flat as academic and cultural solutions, especially for a social game like D&D. Instead, this paper suggests this to be seen as an important part of both learning to be a part of a group (the wider D&D culture) and learning the game itself.

Buyukozturk (2022) writes that groups police toxic beliefs around individuals, curating experiences in order to build inter-group solidarity. When it comes to parasociality, this would be policed by others the learner would eventually play with, that while a game might not be played how *Critical Role* does, there are different ways to play the game. This is one benefit of the Matt Mercer effect, too. On one hand, it can alter a player's perspective of what a game of D&D is. On the other hand, it can also be helpful for prospective players to find DMs who favor a more story-driven approach, like *Critical Role* favors, or ones that involve more combat. Taking this further, the parasociality and Matt Mercer effect could lead to further private learning. It would be the next phase of learning to expand one's horizons. Much like *Critical Role* helped viewers expand their ZPD to learn the game, so too can viewers branch out to newer gaming experiences.

Therefore, fans of *Critical Role* learn by observation. While a tautological statement, consumption of this series by fans has been shown to be incredibly useful as both an entertainment product and as a source to learn. In my original thesis (2022), I proposed the term "subculture of the lurker" to describe playing a game without playing a game; that observation and discussion of a game with others had the same benefit to people as actively playing the game. I placed learning as very important to this theory of

induction into subculture. Rather than just learning a game, this was presented as learning to be a part of a gaming subculture. This was why the use of interactionism and CHAT was essential, as both deal with mediated enculturation. This paper has summarized and expanded on theories of learning, showing how *Critical Role* has helped their viewers learn how to play the game itself and how to act socially.

Conclusion

D&D is a complex system that must be learned by fans, despite the attempts of Wizards of the Coast to simplify the game to a mass audience. This complexity can frustrate new players and eventually turn them off if done in isolation or with an uncooperative group. *Critical Role* presents an alternative to reading rulebooks; by watching how players actually play the game, the diverse ways of handling both mechanical and social problems, prospective players can understand the game in an easier and far more entertaining way than slaving over a book. I have understood these as sociological and social-psychological mechanisms through which new players watch *Critical Role* to learn D&D. I have used Cultural-Historical Activity Theory and subcultural studies in symbolic interactionism for this analysis, arguing their respective focus on tool-use and meaning-making reflects a socially mediated approach to learning a new, complex game.

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