

Fantasy In Real Life: Making Meaning from Vicarious Experiences with a Tabletop Role-Playing Game Live-Play Internet Stream

Abstract: This study investigated the experiences of people who claimed exposure to Critical Role, a web series featuring a group of voice actors playing a tabletop role-playing game (TRPG), impacted their lives in meaningful ways beyond entertainment. Building on previous research that documented players engaging in role-playing games, livestreaming, and role-playing game (RPG) fandom subculture, this study specifically explored the perspectives of individuals who reported a transformational impact of experiencing gaming vicariously through watching Critical Role. This paper reports a detailed narrative of one of the cases from qualitative interviews, which conveys major themes that illustrate the perspective of the individual watching. The paper compliments this detailed case description with a discussion of findings from seven in depth interviews to explore the experiences of the interviewee focused on in the context of the study sample. This study is primarily focused on the individual watchers' experience of gameplay and role-playing experiences, which they attribute to personal growth. The term parasocial gaming is introduced to characterize a part of vicarious experience associated with watching media figures playing games.

Keywords: role-playing games, larp, marginalization, privilege, identity, perspective taking, empathy, dark tourism, stereotypes

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1. INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is a powerful component of human culture that has evolved alongside technology and helped shape both individual lives and society at large. Various narrative forms have influenced how stories have been told throughout history. Some games represent a unique form of storytelling; role-playing games employ narrative as a foundation and have the potential to become communal co-creative storytelling processes across forms of media (Cover 2010; Cragoe 2016; Deterding and Zagal 2018).

New technological advances continue to shape how storytelling is impacting people. Internet media with advances in social platforms and video streaming introduce yet another context -- live streaming gameplay -- which changes the communication of games and how people share play (Taylor 2018). However, much of the research on live streaming, including that presented by Taylor (2018) and cited later in this paper, has focused on esports and/or the perspective of the broadcaster, or the community at large.

Research on online games has surged alongside technological advances (see, e.g., Castronova 2005; Steinkuehler & Williams 2006; Taylor 2006). The overwhelming majority of research dedicated to video games leaves the unique genre of tabletop role-playing games understudied, however (Conner 2013; Cover 2010). The tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) industry has also grown and adapted with the rise of the internet (White et al. 2018). Massive shifts in tabletop role-playing technologies alongside increasing appreciation for games like *Dungeons & Dragons* are eliciting new frontiers to explore the boundaries of virtual role-playing and TRPG fandom (Hedge and Grouling 2021). Cragoe (2016) called for adding a focus on tabletop and live action role-playing games as new interactive narrative forms and exploring how these social structures are shaping lives. I echo this call, alongside emerging works like Jones (2021b), and add internet-streamed tabletop role-playing games to the list of interactive narrative forms deserving our attention.

The use of online streaming technology to broadcast role-playing games for internet audiences is becoming popular alongside a rise in the popularity of tabletop role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* (Jones 2021b). This new technology for sharing game stories provides an opportunity for us

to begin to explore meaningful bridges between how old and new narrative forms of storytelling impact individuals (Cragoe 2016). In preparation, we can begin by taking a closer look at how new media are being used to interact with tabletop role-playing games and being experienced by individuals. Including concepts from media studies like parasocial interaction, which is utilized in this paper, may help us gain insight about how the cultural roles of games may be manifesting in new, potentially transformative ways.

2. A NEW VERSION OF A FAMILIAR GAME

The rise in the popularity of *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)* is potentially connected to beneficial effects of gameplay, as fans have claimed to experience transferable benefits and personal transformation from both playing and watching others. Organizations like Game to Grow, Geek Therapeutics, and Geeks Like Us are using tabletop role-playing games in therapy and training therapists to incorporate TRPGs in therapeutic practice (Bean, Daniel, and Hays 2020). Alongside the use of TRPGs for personal growth, numerous live-play *D&D* podcasts and internet video streaming shows such as *Acquisitions Inc*, *Critical Role*, *Dice Camera Action*, and *Maze Arcana* have emerged in recent years. This has added a new dimension to the *actual play*, or social interaction and communication, that produces the game experience because *D&D* is now being expressed through actual play to create the fiction of a show alongside the fiction of a game (White 2016). Actual play is becoming more and more popular, transforming into a new combination of phenomena involving TRPG play, and creating new manifestations of historical, socio-cultural, psychological, and pedagogical implications to explore (Jones 2021a).

Critical Role is a well-known *D&D* live stream (Whitten 2020), perhaps even the most popular one of its kind (Jones 2021a). *Critical Role* published its first live-recorded episode in March 2015; the 100th episode aired in June of 2017 and the show continues on a weekly basis. *Critical Role* focuses on a consistent cast playing *D&D* live for an internet audience. Each episode is around four hours in length and is recorded in a live web broadcast on a weekly basis on Twitch.tv/criticalrole. Unlike many Twitch broadcasters, *Critical Role* does not allow the audience to drive the story but does promote fan interactions within the chat and paratexts online (Friedman 2021). The cast is comprised of a group of friends who have careers as voice actors outside of *Critical Role*. Tens of thousands of viewers watch the stream live each week and the episodes, which are later published on YouTube, have hundreds of thousands of views each, with some over a million.

Fans of *Critical Role* call themselves “Critters.” Throughout the rise of the show’s popularity, Critters have sent gifts and written letters to the cast of the show; some have even submitted video testimonies about how they have been personally affected by *Critical Role*. These testimonies were mostly unsolicited until the producers began sharing some of these stories. The producers of *Critical Role* created a video compiling fan submissions about how impactful the show has been for them (“Why I Love” 2017). In fact, the show is exclusively focused on gameplay and spends little time directly addressing audience members’ self-help related issues aside from acknowledging and sharing the gratitude sent in by Critters. Yet, the aforementioned reports surfaced in messages to the show and Comic-con panels of people feeling inspired and empowered by their relationships with the show to overcome significant personal challenges in other areas of life, including work, relationships, and personal well-being. This is not entirely surprising, given that sharing emotional vulnerability is a common aspect of many Twitch communities and illustrates a prominent affective aspect of live streaming community experiences (Taylor 2018).

Role-players can be seen as both fans and agents within a subculture based on three premises: 1) that RPG fandom is a subculture, 2) there are specific subcultures within that subculture, and 3)

that fandoms and subcultures are seen as interchangeable (MacCallum-Stewart & Trammell 2018). In the case of *Critical Role*, Critters can be considered as fans because they have their own niche formed around liking the show; participate in activities such as watching the show and chatting live on Twitch; and disseminate social and behavioral codes for playing *D&D* and watching *Critical Role* (MacCallum-Stewart & Trammell 2018). While this study is primarily focused on these reports of positive experiences, it is important to note that the larger *Critical Role* fandom is complicated with caustic reactions and maintaining a guise of positive attitudes (Jones 2021a).

Critters can even be considered to have a dual fandom experience with actual play media given the enmeshed elements of both actor and character being presented (Dandrow 2021). The actual play aspect of *Critical Role* is where individual experiences as fans in a fandom-based subculture may integrate with individual experiences, including but not limited to playing a TRPG, and potentially even with the experiences of the cast of players. There is a complex range of involvement to consider while trying to understand the experiences of Critters watching *Critical Role*. I have chosen to focus on the individual experience of the watcher in order to investigate specific reports of personal well-being associated with watching and vicariously experiencing the cast's gaming.

3. WATCHING GAMING

Orme (2021) reported the experiences of *just watchers* (JWs): individuals who watch others play video games on sites like Twitch.tv. In some cases, watching video games can be similar to spectating sport competitions, but many JWs reported a range of appeals including an appreciation for the narrative of the games and the narrative agency of the players being watched (Orme 2021). Collaborative storytelling, agency, and other narrative aspects of role-playing games are on display in *Critical Role* too. Audience members can shift among a range of roles, from typically assumed passivity toward active participation, while spectating gameplay (Downs et al 2015). This interaction may involve simply watching; focusing all attention to be immersed in the narrative; chatting back and forth with others during the broadcast; creating fan art; and taking actions in other platforms such as Twitter or fan sites. Such blurring of the lines by just watching is complicated further with *parasocial interaction*.

Parasocial interaction (PSI) is the relationship between media users and media figures (Giles 2002). Parasocial interaction connects fans' experiences to the social interaction of the players (cast) in *Critical Role*. Giles (2002) provides a theoretical framework for understanding PSI as a spectrum of social activity that can be experienced as a relationship between media users and media figures or characters. The emerging actual play environments retain a potential for relationships between storytellers and listeners who engage with communal narratives (Franklin 2021).

Critters engage in relationships across the spectrum of PSI ranging from simply being fans; to posting on Twitter; to sending letters and gifts; to meeting at conventions and even dressing as the characters in cosplay. The internet provides more and easier access for Critters to engage in interactive forms of PSI by facilitating communication to the cast and other Critters with opportunities for the cast to respond to individual fans and for fans to interact with each other on a large scale. Hamilton (2014) points out how live streaming platforms can form "third places" for fans to interact and form community. Twitch broadcasters are transforming private (potentially intimate) play into public entertainment powered by highly integrated audience involvement (Taylor 2018). The plethora of opportunities for interaction between play and watching may boost the effects of PSI for Critters, particularly when aided by the immersive potential of storytelling and role-playing. Live streaming on Twitch.tv and the use of live streamed role-playing has fundamentally changed PSI. "This critical difference has not only shifted the theoretical nature of the [parasocial relationships] but allowed for a new range of social emotional benefits for the viewer from their relationship with the persona as well as their larger community"

(Kowert and Daniel 2021, 5). Additionally, elements of live streaming experiences can now include improvisation, role-play, storytelling, and collective creativity. Through parasocial interaction and relationships, it seems possible for a Critter to have an experience that is similar to the experience one could have as a fan of any media and/or that of a JW or player.

4. PARASOCIAL GAMING

The advent of live streamed tabletop role-playing games has introduced new opportunities for people to experience these games. Watching *D&D* in this new form can be thought of as experiencing a creative form of social interaction among players. In exploring this new phenomenon, I focus my approach (which is described in detail later) on understanding the individual's sense of their experience, consciousness, and ascribing meaning to their experience informed by Patton's (2002) description of phenomenology. Thus, I aim to understand the experience of parasocial interaction from the participant's perspective.

Audience members could sometimes be said to be engaging in *parasocial gaming*, defined in this study as a gameplay-like experience in which fans have vicarious experiences similar to experiencing gameplay, but instead through parasocial means without directly playing themselves. Even JWs report feeling a sense of achievement from watching others make progress in games (Orme 2021). Twitch streamers convey an experience of gameplay, externalize internal experiences, make visceral experiences visible, and render affective meaning legible to spectators through an authentic performance of play (Taylor 2018). Audience members can sometimes be said to have a parasocial relationship, feeling deeply connected with media figures who are actual players of broadcasted gameplay and, as Taylor (2018) describes, to vicariously strive for meaningful creativity and connection. The notion of parasocial gaming here draws from previous research on tabletop role-playing games, and a synthesis of literature defining parasocial interaction (Bowman 2010; Deterding and Zagal 2018; Giles 2002).

Several elements of TRPG experiences are relevant to this study beginning with *immersion*, *bleed*, and *steering*. Immersion, the feeling of being in the game, narrative, character, activity, etcetera, is a key element of role-playing games that has been associated with a process in which players' emotions, relationships, and physical states effect the learning potential of role-playing experiences (Bowman 2010; 2013).

Bowman and Lieberoth (2018) describe an additional aspect of RPG experiences called bleed -- players experiencing elements of a game spilling over into real-life and vice versa -- as a key element of transferring role-playing experiences to other realms of life. Steering as described by Montola, Stenros, and Saitta (2015) may also be a factor as individuals choose to alter their own experience toward emotionally impacting factors with non-diegetic motivations. One form of steering can involve players with a desire to intentionally craft experiences toward therapeutic effects. A step further, some therapists add therapy interventions to role-playing game experiences (Bean, Daniel, and Hays 2020). Feeling immersed in a show and connected to a role-playing experience through parasocial interaction is theoretically associated with a range of emotional elements (Taylor 2018) of TRPG experiences that can be felt by fans. This study is primarily focused on the individual watchers' experience of gameplay and the role-playing experiences they attribute to personal growth.

The developmental impact that TRPGs sometimes have on people theoretically involves a shared imagination. Winnicott (1989) describes how individuals come to new understandings of self and reality in a semi-relaxed state of play, utilizing imagination and relatedness with others to spur development. Similarly, Vygotsky (1978) describes how individuals create imaginary situations in which social rules can be modified during role-play, enabling learning and development. In TRPGs, groups create fictional worlds and a shared imagination while engaging in social interaction and group dynamics (Lasley 2020).

In parasocial gaming, the benefits of gameplay, such as feelings of connection or the potential for personal development, that rely on social interaction and relationships may theoretically be transferred through parasocial relationships experienced by observers similar to how social interaction among players can influence individuals. Observers experiencing immersion in the narrative of a show consisting of players creating a shared imagination may vicariously experience both immersion in the game narrative and shared imagination with the cast. I am expanding on the historical concept of parasocial interaction (Giles 2002) to delineate the unique vicarious experience of Critters who associated personal benefits with observing media figures engaging in storytelling during TRPG gameplay.

5. THE USE OF ROLE-PLAYING GAMES FOR GROWTH

The Critters who love *Critical Role* are not the only people to associate tabletop role-playing games with transferable benefits to experiences that occur outside of gameplay. Researchers, too, have documented the impact of playing tabletop role-playing games on individuals' life experiences beyond the game itself (Bowman and Hugaas 2019; Bowman 2010; 2013; Daniau 2016). TRPGs have even been used in conjunction with therapeutic practice (Bean, Daniel, and Hays 2020; Blackmon 1994; Hurley 1994). Additionally, multiple perspectives on learning have been applied to TRPGs (Hammer et al. 2018), including transformative learning (Daniau 2016), and they have been used to enhance learning in higher education (Crocco, Offenholley, and Hernandez 2016). These are some sectors in which TRPGs have been used to intentionally utilize the benefits of gaming experiences for education, therapy, and personal growth.

Further examination of the impact of tabletop role-playing games on both players and observers is needed in order to thoroughly understand the benefits, some potentially transformational, of tabletop role-playing games. Furthermore, new forms of media being used to interact with tabletop role-playing games, such as live streaming internet shows, provide opportunities to explore more emergent tabletop role-playing game situations, particularly for increasing numbers of observers.

As examination of TRPG experiences continues and audiences grow, researchers and practitioners need to keep in mind a myriad of complex factors including the overall fraught nature of mass media, issues of representation in role-playing games (Trammell 2014), barriers within streaming culture faced by individuals with marginalized identities (Taylor 2018), historically racist dynamics in the culture of *D&D* (Hodes 2019), the nature of identity in role-play (Bowman 2010), and the importance of safety in transformational role-play (Bowman and Hugaas 2019). These complexities cannot be all fully addressed in any singular project but must be in our awareness for every endeavor. As studying role-play and streaming phenomena entails many entangled considerations of larger contexts, this study cannot address them all. Nonetheless, it is important for readers and watchers to know the aforementioned contexts and complexity exist and for future work to include other critical approaches to these topics. This study depends on and is framed by my commitment to remaining open and trusting the experience of the Critters as they report it. Therefore, I focused on taking the perspective of the participants in this study, given the novelty of trying to understand how they have experienced meaningful personal impact that they attribute to experiencing *Critical Role*.

The claims of Critters, successful applications by practitioners, and the apparent benefits being explored by academic research suggest there is value associated with tabletop role-playing games beyond the sheer pleasure people get from playing these games or watching others play games. As researchers continue to investigate the nature of what is being claimed as beneficial in gaming experiences, rationale for incorporating game design in educational and therapeutic settings will become more well-informed alongside the growth of transformative practices (Bowman and Hugaas 2019) such as debriefing in leisure gaming. There is a need, therefore, to continue to explore the potential impact of tabletop role-

playing games in new forms of media, how individuals make sense of the experience, and, also, to begin to associate any transformational impact that is reported to particular features of specific games. This study addresses the prerequisite need for a more complete and thorough description of what people mean when they say “benefits” or “transformation.”

6. PURPOSE

I sought to understand the perspectives of individuals who attribute positive personal meaning to their experiences watching *Critical Role*. The purpose of this study was to investigate claims regarding potentially transformative outcomes credited to simply watching gameplay of a tabletop role-playing game. Specifically, this study systematically investigated seven (7) individual cases of fans who reported significant positive experience that they connected to their experience watching *Critical Role*. A second purpose was to analyze the characteristics of watching *Critical Role* related to these individuals' experiences. This included attention to elements of tabletop role-playing games and transformative learning discussed in existing literature in an effort to determine what data exists that can help us understand *Critical Role* as a new medium for experiencing tabletop role-playing games:

1. What benefits, beyond sheer enjoyment, do Critters report as being connected to their exposure to *Critical Role* and to what evidence do they attribute their claims?
2. What characteristics of tabletop role-playing games are demonstrated in an episode of *Critical Role* and to what degree are they demonstrated?
3. How do Critters relate benefits reported to the characteristics of *Critical Role* and tabletop role-playing games?

7. METHOD

A phenomenological approach to narrative inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell 2016) was selected to distill the individual experiences of Critters, specifically related to the perceived positive impact that watching *Critical Role* had on them. This approach focused on the story of a Critter's experience as a first-person account that constituted a “text,” which served as data to be analyzed. As Merriam and Tisdell explain, “Stories are how we make sense of our experiences, how we communicate with others, and through which we understand the world around us.” (2016, p.33) An open, inductive approach to learning from people's stories is used here because watching TRPG live streams and in particular attributing positive impact to *Critical Role* specifically is yet unexplored. While there are other approaches and research on parasocial interaction, TRPGs, and other forms of media respectively, this research seeks first to identify the specific phenomenon being experienced by these participants who experienced it first-hand and attributed positive impact to their experience.

While I employed a systematic and responsible approach to conducting this research, my positionality shaped my ability to interpret and understand the experiences of these participants. I am a practitioner with experience facilitating both learning and development in and out of the classroom. Much of this experience has involved helping individuals through personal growth and in identity development. These skills -- notably, client centered interviewing -- enabled me to conduct interviews that guided participants to tell their stories in a way that conveys the meaning they attribute to their experience. Additionally, I am a gamer, player, and dungeon master for games of *Dungeons & Dragons 5e*. I have been a fantasy gamer since childhood but was not fully introduced to TRPGs or *D&D* until 2015. I began watching *Critical Role*, started playing at a local store, and within 6 months, initiated a campaign as the DM with a group of friends, which is now 6 years running. My experience as a gamer,

dungeon master, and Critter was essential for understanding and interviewing participants about their experiences playing the game due to significant in-group language and the need to build trust.

Interviews were conducted solely focusing on the participants' experiences and descriptions by applying motivational interviewing and appreciative inquiry techniques, in which I am extensively trained and practiced. I refrained from offering my own opinions and maintained a curious observer role with the participants during the interviews. Emerging themes and disconfirming evidence were noted while analyzing the recordings in an effort to ensure trustworthiness of my interpretations of the findings. Member checking was used to ensure these findings are conveying the story of the participant's experience according to them. The comparison of themes from individual interviews served to confirm and disconfirm my observations by incorporating multiple participant perspectives.

I employed semi-structured interviews for data collection and thematic narrative analysis to inductively form an understanding of the phenomenon from analyzing the data, anchored in my belief that participants are the best experts on their own experiences. First, semi-structured topical interviews were conducted with study participants, who were identified through the procedures described below. The participants co-constructed their story through the process of being interviewed. Then, interview recordings were systematically reviewed to identify narrative themes in and among the participants' stories. The type of thematic analysis used was one "which reports experiences, meanings, and the reality of participants" (Braun & Clarke 2006 pg.81) and discovers a plot that displays meaning among the data (Polkinghorne 1995). One interview in particular was selected for detailed narrative analysis in this paper because the participant's story conveys a wholistic meaning and is representative of the main themes from the other participants' stories; the cumulative interview data were then compared to highlight similarities and differences. Braun & Clarke (2006) describe the appropriate use of such a method

to provide a rich thematic description of your entire data set, so that the reader gets a sense of the predominant or important themes . . . This might be a particularly useful method when you are investigating an under-researched area, or you are working with participants whose views on the topic are not known. (p. 83)

8. INTERVIEW DETAILS

8.1 Participant selection procedures

I posted an invitation to participate in this study on Twitter; the group that manages the @CrittersRPG Twitter handle assisted in sharing the invitation with followers on Twitter. CrittersRPG is a network of fans of *Critical Role*. This group was selected because this group is one of the ways Critters organize and communicate as an internet community. The invitation specifically invited individuals who claimed that watching *Critical Role* had a positive impact on them.

Seven participants responded and were interviewed. Participants varied in age from 18 to 42 with a mix of genders, including two women, four men, and one individual who identified as non-binary. Two participants were from Europe; one was from Canada, and the rest were from the United States. All the individuals expressed a deep appreciation and connection with *Critical Role*, though their personal motivations and experiences varied. Along with their appreciation for the show, they also regarded the cast and characters as role models who were, to some degree, admired by fans. All the participants had viewed all the episodes at least once, while four have re-watched the entire series at least one additional time.

8.2 Interview procedures

Interviews were conducted and recorded via Google Hangouts On Air -- with use of the private listing feature to maintain privacy -- and used a topical guide format targeting the following topics: participant background, participant's exposure to *Critical Role*, meaning of *Critical Role* to the participant, and details about personal issues mentioned. Interviews were between 40 and 60 minutes in length. The interview recordings were indexed with detailed notes identifying emergent themes following each interview.

A case was selected for deeper analysis for a few reasons. Initially, deeper analysis of this case began halfway into the data collection phase -- it was the third interview -- while I was still coordinating with some of the other study participants to conduct additional interviews. The fitness of this case for primary representation in this paper was reviewed again and confirmed following the thematic analysis of all the data and finishing the deeper narrative analysis. I reviewed notes and themes identified from analyzing all seven interviews to determine whether or not this case exhibited the major themes from all the data. The notes from the remaining six participants' interviews were used to further compare the themes in the context of this study.

8.3 Data analysis

Polkinghorne (1995) has described two quite different approaches to analyzing the sort of qualitative data generated in this study; he called these two approaches the *analysis of narrative* and *narrative analysis*. The analysis of narrative strategy entails coding the qualitative or narrative data into categories and themes and then using snippets of the narrative interview data to illustrate each category or theme. This is the most common approach to analyzing the type of data generated in this study.

Narrative analysis, on the other hand, entails discovering a plot that displays the linkage among the data as part of a storied episode of a person's life (Polkinghorne 1995). For this paper, I used Polkinghorne's (1995) narrative analysis approach, instead of the more common analysis of narrative described above, to analyze the data generated by interviewing the Critter who is the main focal point and convey deeper interconnected meaning. This type of dialogic interrogation can add robustness to ethnographic accounts of play experiences (White 2016).

Consistent with the *narrative analysis* procedures outlined by Polkinghorne (1995), I reconfigured the data generated by interviewing the Critter being focused on here (using the pseudonym Megan) into a chronological story that demonstrated how *Critical Role* influenced the person's life from their perspective. This method focused on the individual narrative of the watcher as they externalized it in an interview. Hedge (2021) explains how digital modes of experiencing TRPGs contain a multitude of affordances and components of a whole narrative phenomenon in which the act of observing social and narrative frames through technology might constitute its own experience. Thus, the individual narrative perspective of the watcher making sense of what is happening in their experience and ascribing meaning to their perception is a valuable unexplored lens from which to analyze these phenomena.

The story was originally constructed by the participant in their telling of it in pieces throughout the interview and then reconstructed by the researcher writing the narrative after reviewing the notes and interview recording many times. The participant was sent a draft of my written narrative of her story and asked to provide feedback as a form of member checking. She responded with support, stating "I think you did a fine job both understanding what we talked about and putting it down in words for others to understand as well." She also included a minor revision to the wording of one of the quotes I had noted from the interview.

8.4 Comparing analyses

The other six interviews were analyzed by watching the interview recordings and taking detailed notes that identified themes in their stories. A comparison of notes from all seven interviews was used to verify that certain themes from the selected narrative analysis are not completely unique to just one person and that there are differences in some themes between cases. This was essential for attempting to understand to what degree the experiences reported by Megan may be both consistent with other reports and unique to her experience. This also served to provide some comparisons of how aspects of *Critical Role* were perceived by different participants.

The analyses produced for both the narrative analysis and analysis of narrative rely on several distinct narratives that explain experiences of watching *Critical Role* from the perspectives of 7 Critters. These perspectives were compared to reveal a complex understanding of an unexplored phenomenon, specifically: attributing positive meaning to watching *Critical Role*.

9. FINDINGS

One individual's narrative is presented first to convey a holistic descriptive understanding of meaning in this data, while the themes from other participants' interviews are added later to indicate ways in which the individual's narrative reported here is not entirely idiosyncratic. This narrative is presented to convey an understanding of her experience including attributions and claims she believes true to her experience as was described in her individual interview.

9.1 Megan's story: Searching for safety and finding growth

Some of Megan's earliest memories involve her sitting on the floor while Dad and friends played tabletop role-playing games, though many of these memories were obscured in her mind until recently. Megan "grew up" in Seattle as a teenager after moving around a lot earlier in life due to her Dad's job opportunities. Megan began playing tabletop role-playing games as a child and around the turn of the millennium began playing Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). A few years into playing MMORPGs, Megan had made many friends online. One would continue to be a lifelong best friend. Another became her husband and the impetus for her move to Sweden, where she has lived for over a decade at the time of this writing.

Amidst her job working with databases, taking care of her family, and having fun playing games, Megan struggled with several mental health challenges. She reported many efforts to help overcome these issues: "Through the course of the last 10 years or so . . . I have been on various medications. I have had psychologists and psychiatrists." Many of her childhood memories were lost to her and contributed to post traumatic stress in adulthood. She was on her way to recovery, a path that both prepared her for and was empowered by a new and unexpected source.

9.1.1 Finding Critical Role

A friend pestered Megan into watching *Critical Role* for the first time in January of 2016. Megan was immediately drawn to the obvious friendships between both characters and players. Megan was instantly hooked and began watching from Episode 1 to catch up on the whole story. She indicated she likes watching people be happy, friendly, and nice to each other. She noticed the strength of the cast's relationships on display when they made cultural and out-of-game references, showed they shared the same mindset, and got along well. Megan described what she saw:

They are having fun and they are being nice to each other . . . they have the same kind of mindset so they get along really well . . . they enjoy being with each other. They're not afraid to cry in front of each other. Which is also a big deal; they feel safe around the table.

As characters, they really do pour themselves into the situation and into the moment . . . depending on their friendships to be safe enough to cry and laugh and feel angry.

A few months after first watching an episode, Megan had an incredible experience. She was on the verge of drifting off to sleep while watching an episode of *Critical Role* one evening and could hear the kindhearted banter of the characters being good to each other while role-playing. She felt a warm and comforting feeling of safety in herself that mirrored the group dynamic in the episode at the time. Miraculously, she started remembering things from her childhood that had been blocked out. She remembered a similar feeling of safety being around the table with Dad and friends playing tabletop role-playing games. She remembered being on the living room floor at a very young age: "When my dad's friends were there, I was safe . . . That was the one time during the week where I felt safe . . . while my dad was being nice 'cause I didn't see that often." This was a pivotal moment for her moving forward. During the interview she stated:

Critical Role helped me get past some of the worst symptoms and side-effects of having PTSD and move beyond some of those feelings of not finding safety anywhere. They've helped me recognize and realize the safety that is in my life that I was blind to before, which is amazing and huge, but nothing can cure it entirely.

Megan gave credit to *Critical Role* for helping her heal by retrieving positive memories from childhood, triggering post traumatic growth and finding strategies to deal with mental health challenges. Her psychologist even offered to prescribe her a computer since it is integral to her healing through relationships in MMORPGs and watching *Critical Role*. The feelings she got from watching people be good to each other while enjoying a game that she loved her whole life, *Dungeons & Dragons*, provided a sense of safety when she was stressed or tired. For this, she was very grateful, saying, "I'm so happy that I've gotten pieces of me fixed."

9.1.2 Enduring impact

The cast, characters, and their relationships continued to inspire her. Megan continued watching, re-watching and incorporating aspects of *Critical Role* into her life. She described it as contributing to her identity "It's who I am now . . . I'm happy with that." *Critical Role* is a model for Megan in many ways including gaming, personal growth, and relationships. She said, "They give me goals: they give me life goals, and friendship goals, relationship goals." The players felt genuine and were good people. The characters had depth, realistic flaws, and were also good at heart. Megan pointed out specifically how: ". . . they are honest and they are tolerant; they are non-judgmental." Watching them be good people, players, and characters motivated Megan to be more like them.

They were depending on their friendships to open up to each other in- and out-of-game, all while on camera. Megan hadn't had friends that were this vulnerable with each other. She wanted that in her life and around her own gaming table. Megan played a weekly tabletop role-playing game with some local friends and family. Her games were still rising toward the social dynamic in *Critical Role* since her teenage daughter was still learning about relationships. But the whole group was working with her

and learning together. Megan predicted the group would grow to be like *Critical Role*: “Eventually I can see it happening which is what we’re trying for.”

9.1.3 Personal growth

Megan’s husband saw another clear difference at the gaming table: Megan had grown too. He noticed her gaming style become enhanced as Megan learned from seeing *Critical Role*, tried new things in her own game, and acted differently in general. Megan stated, “It’s interesting to know that I am changing based on [the cast and characters of *Critical Role*].” She had more confidence and courage to take risks with her own character, which spread to other areas of life. As she put it, “I have courage now in my real life that I did not have before, and that’s directly connected.”

Another aspect of personal growth Megan noticed was intellectual. A couple years ago, feelings dominated Megan’s thinking, but *Critical Role* helped stimulate her intellect. She saw complex levels of interaction in *Critical Role* and identified how characters and players were blending together with a deeper understanding of social dynamics. It was like watching two levels of interaction between the characters and the players simultaneously. Megan could tell they were working through personal stuff sometimes as they poured themselves into their characters, situations, and moments on camera.

9.1.4 Salient characteristics

Megan connected strongly with Liam as a player in this way. Liam was always fully present as both himself and the character he plays, Vax, without seeming like he was just performing a part. He got into his character without losing awareness of all the layers of a tabletop role-playing game (character, player, person). Megan described this as “he can get into his character without losing his awareness.” This is something Megan said she was learning to do better “I can see it happening, I can see that it exists . . . maybe I can get there too.” She saw from watching Liam playing Vax how it was possible to have strong feelings while still having self-control.

To Megan, the best parts of *Critical Role* stem from seeing the personalities of both characters and players, which typically happened while the group was heavily engaged in role-play, outside of combat. She described this as the ability to “get in there and access your feelings and still be connected to the present.” Getting character insights, player thought patterns, and a rich story was the source of meaning for her. Megan saw the general level of tolerance, acceptance, and empathy related to gaming and the characters as the most meaningful parts of *Critical Role*. Teaching empathy is hard, Megan saw this as a good way to do it: “They have an empathy that is admirable. I think that’s directly related to their gaming.”

In addition to helping Megan think and feel with more complexity and inspiring her to be a better person, she also learned about relationships. Watching Ashley play the character Pike let Megan know that taking a break from friends isn’t necessarily an ending but that she can come back and pick up where she left off. Ashley missed many episodes for her other work. Megan noticed Ashley returning after missing several episodes: “When she comes onto the scene and is just right back in there she’s in her character, she’s in there full speed, making herself [emotionally] available to her group mates the same way she did the last time.” Pike was the character that made Megan feel the most comfortable in this way. Ashley playing as Pike made herself available to the group when she was there because she trusted them. Megan found this inspired her to trust the people in her life more.

Role-playing games have been a significant part of Megan’s life from an early age. Her experience with *Critical Role* served as a catalyst for resolving parts of her past and stimulating growth as she looked to the future for herself, her games, her friends, and her family. She continued to watch

Critical Role; play with friends both online and around her table; and strive to be the best she can be despite life's obstacles.

9.2 Understanding Megan's story in the context of the other cases

While each of the cases in this study has its own unique qualities, the cases also display consistency. Comparing notes from all seven interviews demonstrates that Megan's story is both to some degree typical of the other research participants' experiences and also somewhat unique. There are four types of learning elements in Megan's story that, after conducting both thematic and narrative analysis, represent the participant's perceptions of attributing positive impact to the experience of watching *Critical Role*. These elements offer meaningful contributions to an inquiry about TRPG live stream experiences for these participants:

1. *Parasocial Transference*. Experiencing a personally transformative moment while watching *Critical Role* such as Megan's flood of repressed memories from childhood.
2. *Critical Reflection*. Reflecting on the show leads to noticing what makes the show/game appealing and impactful so that it can be learned and transferred to other contexts.
3. *Social Learning*. Application of concepts learned from watching the show into personal gameplay, which provides additional opportunities for learning and growth.
4. *Self Determination*. Seeing growth and impact in other areas of life, including autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

These elements were identified while reviewing this narrative analysis along with the themes that had been identified from reviewing all interview recordings. This perception of benefits was reported to be connected to the experience of watching *Critical Role* and could have involved a range of andragogical mechanisms from self-determination to social learning to parasocial transference. Additionally, many factors may contribute to the context for learning in these cases. The contextual experiences of these participants are further represented by examining the following themes, which were identified throughout the analysis, exhibiting both similarity and difference across cases.

9.2.1 Interest in fantasy games

All participants shared a common interest in fantasy and games. Participants varied in their personal experiences with role-playing games, however. Some, like Megan, had played various forms of role-playing games, both tabletop and computer versions, for most of their lives. Others started playing tabletop role-playing games around the same time they began watching *Critical Role*. One participant had never played role-playing games herself, but has watched other players on a few occasions.

Despite the differences in their past experiences, all the participants described *Critical Role* as exhibiting a unique style of story focused role-playing compared to other experiences with role-playing games they had had, a sentiment that is reiterated in Friedman (2021), who describes how an affective parasocial narrative frame is cannon in *Critical Role*. This point was strongly emphasized by Megan and suggests the narrative focused style of role-playing in *Critical Role*, as it was emphasized by these participants, may be a characteristic that they attributed to these kinds of experiences for them as observers. In addition, previous experience with role-playing games seems to have been connected to benefits that were credited to parasocial gaming but may not have been necessary for experiencing such benefits in other cases.

9.2.2 Inspiration and reflection

Regardless of participants' previous experience with tabletop role-playing games, the six other participants, like Megan, described feeling inspired by *Critical Role*. Watching the show, for example, was reported to have helped motivate all but one of the study's participants to begin playing or return to playing *Dungeons & Dragons*. Some also shared they had motivations, like Megan's, to change their own playstyles; a number of participants besides Megan, in fact, reported being inspired by the show's focus on creative role-playing and storytelling and vowed to express their creative sides and passions when playing *D&D* in the future. Layne (2021) similarly posits a potential instructional aspect of actual play videos through the display of speech, behavior, subculture, and gaming conventions to be adopted by viewers. *Critical Role* was described as having impacted participants by not only inspiring them to play a game with potential benefits, but also by modeling a way to play in which those games can become more meaningful from the perspective of the participants.

In addition, Megan was not alone in reporting being motivated to engage in transformational learning by seeing examples in *Critical Role*, reflecting, and acting differently. Critical reflection (debriefing) is a necessary factor for promoting transformational learning from tabletop role-playing game experiences (Bowman & Hugaas 2019; Daniau 2016). In this way, the show reportedly provided stimuli that served as the initial subject of reflection by participants and was a catalyst for critical reflection on participants' life experiences similar to experiential learning (Kolb 2015). Participants regarded the particular play styles exhibited in *Critical Role* as role modeling for their own critical reflection on both game and life experiences: as one participant put it, "Seeing all these dorky friends and being able to sort of imagine myself in that kind of situation with the friends I've made on the internet." Megan's narrative also demonstrated how the impact of watching *Critical Role* is thought to go beyond being motivated to play by providing opportunities for her and the other participants to learn from observations and enhance how they learned. In some cases, participants also reported reflecting on playing games directly as a result of their reflection on *Critical Role*.

9.2.3 Mental resilience

Megan's story illustrates that, while watching episodes of *Critical Role*, she both found a safe, albeit temporary escape from the world and her problems in it and developed coping skills to use when she returned to the reality that was not virtual. Other participants claimed similar experiences related to their own mental health. One participant reported depending on a safe temporary escape and developing coping skills to recover from attempted suicide and depression, stating:

Seeing [the characters] fight to [save another character from death] was like, 'that's what I need to do. I need to keep fighting. I'm gonna get my head right and I'm gonna get myself sorted.' It's the episodes like that that remind[] me that I can do it.

Another participant mentioned how watching *Critical Role* contributed to developing resilience through social connection: "Learning how to connect to people by connecting to these characters has helped me sort of learn again how to connect to people in real life." This was one example of how participants described vicarious experiences of role-playing, a shared imagination, and social interaction that they linked to parasocial relationships and narrative immersion.

While all participants explained that *Critical Role* helped them during a difficult period in their lives, four participants reported a direct connection between *Critical Role* and helping deal with specific mental health challenges including depression and anxiety, adding to Megan's description. In the more

serious cases, participants also credited professional mental health counseling and medication with helping them, but they also noted that, even while in therapy and while taking medication, “there was still something missing.” *Critical Role*, in fact, was described by several participants as providing the something that was missing and contributed to them feeling complete: “It just filled that void that was there.”

9.2.4 Immersion

Not all participants suffered from depression or other emotional difficulties, but all the participants expressed some form of feeling connected to something larger than themselves. This feeling was reportedly so real for Megan that she triggered previously lost memories, which, she explained, propelled her therapeutic progress. Even those who did not utilize therapeutic care reported feeling connected to the players that they watched in the episodes of *Critical Role* as if they were part of a shared experience.

Participants identified specific players and characters with which they could personally relate, contributing to a sense of immersion. For example, Megan related specifically to Ashley (player) playing as Pike (character). Sometimes the aspects of identity that participants identified with were ones that social norms prohibited expressing, a factor which influences identity immersion in role-playing (Bowman 2010; Williams, Kennedy, & Moore 2011). For example, one participant reported this type of identity immersion being outside social norms while discussing how they felt inspired by watching *Critical Role* to incorporate gender identity into their play: “[My character] is very out there with their gender . . . Having [my character] be that way has helped me to come out to people.”¹ The specific players and characters from *Critical Role* with which each participant resonated varied, but the way they described their experience of finding personal meaning in their connections with the plot, players, and characters was consistent across the seven study participants.

The plot of the show involved “real world” types of issues and character development which were reported as feeling real to participants. One participant explained how this happened for him because of his relationship with his son, having to be away (in the military) for the first few years of his son’s life: “When I got to see the episode where Scanlan met his daughter Kaylie for the first time, I lost it . . . to me that was the most human, beautiful, thing . . . I could understand everything that Scanlan was feeling.” All participants described deriving personal meaning from connections they made with topics in the show that represented real life issues. Most participants, including Megan, commented on how this feeling was increased when the cast was role-playing and connected it to a sense of personal meaning that they constructed about watching *Critical Role*.

10. SUMMARY

Comparing these cases helps to contextualize the meaning that participants reported in their experiences watching *Critical Role*. These findings serve one aspect of the purpose of this study: to explore the potential transformational impact of tabletop role-playing games in new forms of media -- in particular, seeking to understand the individual experiences of watchers that attribute positive impact on their well-being to watching *Critical Role*. This impact was characterized, for these participants, by both the direct impact of watching the show and how watching the show enhanced other activities. Both forms of impact are apparent in the detailed narrative analysis of Megan’s experience. Understanding the perceived impacts reported in Megan’s case and considering the ways in which her case was consistent with others in this study provides us an opportunity to begin identifying particular features of *Critical*

1 **Editors’ note:** For similar experiences, see Josephine Baird’s “Role-playing the Self: Trans Self-Expression, Exploration, and Embodiment in (Live Action) Role-playing Games” in this issue.

Role that are claimed to have contributed to impacting the participants. This serves another aspect of the purpose of this study: to begin to associate any impact that is reported with particular features of specific games. In the following discussion, I outline the characteristics of *Critical Role* that I believe, based in my expertise with adult learning, development, and role-playing games, to have contributed to the impact reported by the participants after analyzing these cases. This discussion is intended to form a subject for debate and stimulate further inquiry.

10.1 Discussion of particular features of *Critical Role* and types of impact

Three features of *Critical Role* appear to be particularly relevant to the impact reported by Megan and the other participants in this study: storytelling, role-playing, and parasocial interaction. Storytelling and role-playing are characteristics of role-playing games and Parasocial Interaction is a characteristic of relationships between media users and media figures. Together, these are all potential features of parasocial gaming.

Additionally, three main themes appear to be particularly relevant to the types of impact reported by participants: Social Connection, Identity Immersion, and Complex Interaction. Together, these themes and features of *Critical Role* illustrate that parasocial gaming is a complex set of phenomena. The following discussion relates the impact of *Critical Role* reported in this study with the features of *Critical Role* that were reportedly most relevant to these particular cases. This serves to connect the perceived benefits associated with *Critical Role*, particular features of these phenomena, and previously reported aspects of tabletop role-playing games in traditional mediums in an effort to stimulate further inquiry. These connections may apply differently (or not at all) to other individuals, games, streams, or media, begging questions for future research about how we can better understand a range of possible experiences involving parasocial interaction and gaming beyond these cases.

10.2 Social Connection

The Social Connection theme in this study refers to the relationships present and the impact that having various kinds of social connections has on individuals. Relatedness is a key component of Self-Determination Theory linked to wellness (Ryan and Deci 2017), which can be described as feeling connected to and caring for others. Being part of and emotionally engaged with a community brings a sense of belonging that is associated with psychological, social, and emotional well-being even when that sense is experienced through parasocial means (Kowert and Daniel 2021). Recent research explored how Twitch offers distraction and relatedness, finding that users going through difficult periods in life indicated that Twitch helped them cope (Wit, Kraan, and Theeuwes 2020). Social Connection reported in this study ranges from caring about others to interaction with media figures to friendships among players and how this experience was believed to affect other personal relationships.

Critical Role is, at its most basic level, a social gathering of friends playing a game. There is a social purpose in *Dungeons & Dragons* to connect socially and create meaning together (Cover 2010). The friendships between the cast of *Critical Role* were regarded as obvious to participants. These perceived friendships were highlighted by participants and were credited with providing a sense of connection that was experienced vicariously, as described in Megan's experience. Feeling like part of the process in live streamed gaming blurs the lines between parasocial and social relationships; in streaming, the effects are described more like friendship than fandom (Kowert and Daniel 2021). A feeling of social connection is important for resilience and is a natural attribute of games (McGonigal 2015). In parasocial gaming, observers may theoretically experience the social connection attributes of games, even without directly playing themselves. Megan's story of feeling the friendships in *Critical*

Role as a catalyst for her own therapy and resilience is a possible example of the impact games sometimes have through a sense of social connection, which was also recounted in the other cases in this study.

Critical Role is not just an example of a tabletop role-playing game. It is a new phenomenon presented in a new medium, set apart from traditional *Dungeons & Dragons* games by the fact that it is also a show involving media figures with some degree of celebrity fame. In some ways, this fame is a result of the popularity of *Critical Role* as much as pre-existing celebrity status from other projects. This introduces a new type of interaction to the tabletop role-playing game genre: parasocial interaction (PSI).

PSI had an impact, for the participants of this study, even in situations in which the cast did not communicate directly to individuals. This may be because fans can experience PSI similar to a typical social relationship with role models even without the experience being reciprocal (Giles 2002). Even the perceived option for reciprocity afforded in live streaming and social media fandom creates increased feelings of being “up close” and more intimate in a parasocial relationship (Kowert & Daniel 2021). This was prevalent in the way all the participants in this study described their admiration for and perceived relationships with the cast and characters in *Critical Role* as role models.

Megan, for example, described feeling like part of the social interaction in *Critical Role* and regarding certain characters or players as role models for her own gaming and life. This was in addition to Megan explaining that she felt she was part of a group of friends at some points. She reported learning from those experiences and applying what she learned to other relationships in her life. Experiencing immersive storytelling and role-playing while feeling social connection from parasocial interaction was a common trifecta of themes in the stories told by participants of this study. This could explain how the cast of *Critical Role* can have a social influence on Critters, both as individuals and as a community, combining with the functions of role-playing games to a potentially transformative extent in some cases.

10.3 Identity Immersion

The Identity Immersion theme in this study combines the functions of identity in role-playing games and becoming immersed in the experience of playing or watching. Identity is a major function of role-playing games ranging from exploration to alteration, and character evolution in potentially therapeutic ways (Bowman 2010). Role-playing itself was a major factor that participants identified to become immersed in the experience of watching *Critical Role* as the players fully committed to playing complex characters.

Online gaming has been described as a way for players to negotiate complex identities in a virtual context while simultaneously escaping or reshaping their identities in the real world, which are sometimes difficult identities for players to express and were met with social exclusion (Williams, Kennedy, & Moore 2011). The function of escapism was mentioned by participants in this study as a positive factor sometimes associated with therapeutic benefits. Feeling a sense of immersion can create emotionally resonant experiences called the *immersive ideal* by Torner and White (2012). In the case of *Critical Role*, watchers in this study reported connecting with character identities that were perceived to be thoroughly developed and related to the watchers’ real-life identities, particularly if a watcher felt some level of social isolation associated with that part of their identity.

Another driving factor for experiencing immersion is communal storytelling. Shared perception of narrative is observable throughout episodes of *Critical Role*, which is generally regarded as superb storytelling in the *D&D* community (Franklin 2021). Social immersion and shared emotional responses build bonds between players and provide psychological agency to shape the game experience (Cover 2010). Games, especially TRPGs, are symbolic social constructions that can be characterized as intersubjective meaning making activities (Montola 2012). The participants in this study, described

their experience as a vicarious one in which they felt emotionally involved but knew they were not directly experiencing the game but rather were experiencing the game through watching the players.

Nonetheless, they reported feeling immersed in a shared storytelling experience. “As gameplay is necessarily symbolic, games are intersubjective phenomena whenever more than one person is involved. Every player has subjective, unique, unverifiable, unpredictable, and uncontrollable perceptions of the game state” (Montola 2010 p.303). As such, participants reported their unique perceptions of -- and personal identity within -- the game state through their subjective experience of shared storytelling. Immersing oneself in the narrative of an actual play TRPG show, including a significant cognitive load with many complex frames involved and discussed later, may also be fertile grounds for *flow* (Hope 2021). The combination of immersive storytelling and exploring identity through role-playing was linked to personal meaning reported by most participants in this study. They reported experiencing emotional responses mirroring the cast of *Critical Role* and being drawn into narratives with dramatic role-playing.

Role-playing and storytelling are two creative aspects of *Critical Role* that were heavily linked by participants to what drew them into their experiences watching the show. This is consistent with previous research on other forms of role-playing games (Bowman 2010; Cover 2010). Further research is needed in order to gain a more representative impression of *Critical Role* beyond the reports of seven Critters in this study.

10.4 Complex Interaction

The Complex Interaction theme in this study refers to the integration of multiple levels of analysis and social interactions happening within an experience. Multiple levels of interaction -- character, player, person -- add complexity to group dynamics in tabletop role-playing games (Lasley 2020) and could provide insight for some observers who vicariously experience this complexity and transfer this awareness to lived experiences as Megan has described. Experiencing and observing these kinds of complex interactions can be applied to afford individuals an opportunity to critically reflect and report complex ways of understanding the social dynamics in their own gaming experiences.

Distinct frames of experience in tabletop role-playing games -- character, player, person, human -- have been documented and linked to multiple dimensions of learning driven by the immersive potential of the experience when combined with debriefing (Bowman and Hugaas 2019; Daniau 2016). Gaming frames have been discussed in different ways by RPG scholars, such as a method for analyzing player interactions by Fine (1983). Vorobyeva (2015) classified levels of interactions in larp, which indicated that switching between in-game/in-character and off-game/out-of-character frames can enrich the gaming experience.

Players’ experiences navigating frames when role-playing involve immersion, bleed, and steering, concepts that help describe the non-discrete nature of role-play experiences (Bowman 2015). Adding frames for the experience of a Critter immersed in watching gameplay being both played and performed on several levels adds tremendous complexity to understanding emotional experiences like bleed. As Kjell Hedgard Hugaas (2019) explains, “For now, we will content ourselves with saying that the act of categorizing bleed might be useful, but it is important to remember that it is just a framework imposed upon a chaotic reality.” These realizations about role-play phenomena are open to possibilities for transfer and learning from game experiences that now overlap with RPG fandom in new ways.

Critical Role is rich with examples of how Cover (2010) described multiple frames existing between players as they meld storylines together. The cast of *Critical Role* are adhering to a system of game rules and social cues while occupying several roles, namely their character, a social role within their group of friends, and a performing celebrity role based on their reputation as professional actors.

Actual play streaming adds complexity to these interactional frames with the addition of a new level in a performance frame (Hope 2021). Additional frames of experience can be examined for the observers who perceived several frames of their own experience and regarded the players as celebrities. Observing the complexity of these interactions provided participants with opportunities for immediate reflection, since an observer could be less distracted by the immediate experience of playing the game while also having a vicarious experience. Megan's experience provides an example of how learning from the complex interactions involved in *Critical Role* enhanced her (and other participants') own understanding and learning from both watching *Critical Role* and playing games directly. The experience of parasocial gaming -- in particular, vicariously experiencing the integration of complex frames of experience and roles -- may provide opportunities for reflection and intellectual development.

11. LIMITATIONS, DELIMITATIONS, AND SIGNIFICANCE

This study focused on unexplored phenomena experienced by seven participants that reported claims of how watching *Critical Role* positively affected them. Live streaming TRPGs are a new and unique combination of phenomena involving fandom, media, and role-playing games. These participants' perceptions of experiencing these phenomena were investigated in an effort to deepen understanding and explore what may be possible in a new medium of tabletop role-playing games. These findings can provide insight into how new tabletop role-playing game phenomena could have an impact other than sheer entertainment, at least in some cases. While this study investigated 7 reports of positive impact attributed to watching *Critical Role*, other similar reports do exist. More research is needed to help understand the broader population of *Critters*, include TRPG live streams other than *Critical Role*, and compare positive experiences with other forms of media, which may contribute to what Fine (1983) called a *geek subculture*.

This study was exploratory and focused intensely on one individual narrative, using six others to provide some context. This was a convenience sample where participants were proactive in volunteering to participate. There is no way to know to what degree the individuals interviewed in this study may be representative of any population without further research. The decision to focus on one individual's experience favors an openness to new ways of knowing and a deeper understanding of this case over broader generalizations. Acknowledging subjectivity is also needed to avoid a false sense of objectivity in this research. In fact, working explicitly with subjectivity was essential for accessing the intersubjective meaning of experiencing gaming phenomena sought in this research. My knowledge of *Dungeons & Dragons*, understanding of TRPG research, familiarity with *Critical Role* as a fan, and professional career helping people with personal growth was necessary and enabled me to conduct this study. Without this knowledge, a researcher would be inundated with unfamiliar information and distracted from the purpose of this study. My positionality also enabled me to develop rapport with participants and enabled them to tell me their personal stories. Future research should consider addressing other perspectives and methodologies when examining these phenomena.

The significance of this study is best considered in a nontraditional sense described by Donmoyer (1990) as allowing us to vicariously experience narratives that expand our construction of knowledge. Understanding the impact *Critical Role* has in different contexts will serve as an asset. This study identified particular aspects of *Critical Role* that were especially salient influences according to participants, beginning the process of describing what people consider transferable benefits from tabletop role-playing game internet streams and how they are attributed to particular features of specific games, such as emphasizing storytelling and role-play. Through this process, the analysis of these cases presented evidence that parasocial gaming may be an unexplored new combination of phenomena and that further exploration is worth consideration.

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