The Audiences of *The Adventure Zone*: Analysing Actual Play as Inclusive Gaming Media

Ryan Stanton
The University of Sydney
Camperdown, NSW, 2006
Australia
rsta0386@uni.sydney.edu.au

Mark Johnson
The University of Sydney
Camperdown, NSW, 2006
Australia
mark.r.johnson@sydney.edu.au

Keywords

Actual Play, diversity, Tabletop-Roleplaying-Games, Dungeons and Dragons, Audience Studies

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen the emergence of Actual Play, a new type of media which involves the performance, recording and broadcast of Tabletop-Roleplay-Game (TTRPG) sessions to audiences (White, 2019, para 33). Actual Play shows have become immensely successful and are cited by academics and media alike as making TTRPGs more accessible to and inclusive for those previously uninvolved with these games (DeVille, 2017; Diana Jones Award Committee, 2018; Sidhu and Carter, 2020). However, there is relatively little hard data assessing the validity of this claim, or how audiences perceive their involvement with Actual Play. As such, this presentation discusses the results from a survey of 1,500 fans of popular Actual Play *The Adventure Zone* (*TAZ*) dedicated to finding out the ways the audience responds to these texts, and the role(s) of inclusivity in their responses.

The accessibility of these shows is often cited as one of their greatest strengths. Fine (2019) claims that The McElroy family (creators of *TAZ*) are successful and notable for 'queering… white nerd masculinity'. While TTRPG communities, like many nerd or gaming communities, have often excluded minorities who do not conform to the traditional gamer stereotype (Blodgett, 2020; Shaw, 2012) or failed to provide positive representations of those who do not fit this mould (Henry, 2015; Stenros and Shinoven, 2015; Trammell, 2014), The McElroy family instead use deliberately inclusive language and represent minorities often underrepresented or misrepresented in nerd culture to construct a nerd masculinity that does "not pine for hegemonic masculinity as nerd media of the past" does (Fine, 2019, p. 131). This is one of the often cited reasons *TAZ* and other similar Actual Play are viewed as accessible and inclusive.

However, despite the medium being more inclusive, there is a gap in the scholarly work discussing the ways the audience engage with these texts and the ways these

texts attempt to challenge the traditions of geek masculinity. As a result, the survey of *TAZ* fans was intended to be an exemplary case study of the way the inclusive nature of the show is viewed by the community, and how this compares to the often-exclusionary nature of the broader TTRPG or gaming culture. Drawing on a survey of 1,500 fans from the r/theadventurezone subreddit and The Adventure Zone FanZone Facebook group, this research validated claims that Actual Plays like *TAZ* are accessible to many who were previously uninvolved with TTRPGs, with the audience being made up of roughly 50% TTRPG players and 50% those who had not played them prior to listening. Similarly, the demographic data presented in the diagram below shows that the shows are partially successful at attracting a diverse fandom, specifically in regards to gender identity. Many fans supported the idea that Actual Play like *TAZ* made TTRPGs accessible by blending TTRPG rules with a compelling narrative. Fans appreciated the balance between the two, with some noting that "It's [*TAZ*] very friendly to people who don't know the rules..." while others noted "they [The McElroy Family] adjust [the narrative] for what would be more entertaining than the rules..." The ability to simplify or deviate from the rules of TTRPGs help make Actual Play like *TAZ* accessible to newcomers.

Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Continent of Residence
Male – 44.8%	18-24 - 33.5%	White – 91.6%	North America – 89.1%
Female – 42.3%	25-29 – 33.3%	Asian – 1.20%	South America – 0.1%
Transgender – 2.20%	30-34 – 20.0%	Hispanic 3.0%	Europe – 8.4%
Non-Binary – 9.0%	35-39 – 8.0%	Black – 0.5%	Africa – 0.1%
Prefer Not To Say – 0.7%	40-44 – 2.4%	Prefer not to say – 0.6%	Asia – 0.3%
Other – 0.9%	45+ - 2.0%	Other – 3.0%	Oceania 2.0%

Diagram 1

As stated previously, the way these shows represent and welcome diverse individuals also plays a role in their success. When discussing *TAZ*'s attempts at crafting an inclusive narrative and community, most fans were positive in their assessment. The way the creators crafted *TAZ*'s characters were cited as a key reason behind this, with comments citing "a diverse world… [which] made me want to keep listening." Fans noted that the show occasionally stumbles in its positive representations of diversity, falling into harmful tropes like the 'Noble Savage or 'Bury Your Gays', but praised the willingness of The McElroys to listen to feedback and change the narrative to rectify this. In this way, The McElroys consistently reemphasise their dedication to including positive representation of all types of listeners.

This is perhaps the most interesting aspect of Actual Play; shows like *TAZ* highlight the way many Actual Plays challenge the culture of TTRPG communities, attempting to actively court those who are traditionally excluded from these cultures. This is done both by creating a show which does not require knowledge of TTRPGs, and by including positive representations of those who are often misrepresented. Actual Play highlights the interest in these games from those who are traditionally ignored by them. As such, Actual Play podcasts appear to complicate our understandings of the

inclusivity or exclusivity of gaming spaces, and raise improtant questions about the role of gaming podcasts within the wider system of gaming content creation (YouTube, streaming, cosplay, etc). This presentation presents a first look at some of the entanglements of the Actual Play phenomenon, and points also towards future research directions in this area.

BIO
Ryan Stanton is a Media and Communications Graduate from The University of Sydney who completed their First-Class Honours thesis analysing the audiences of Actual Play Podcast *The Adventure Zone*. He is new to the field of academia and is currently working on a PhD proposal analysing the ways podcasts about games fit into the field of gaming content creation under the supervision of Mark Johnson. Ryan is particularly interested in the cultures and communities which are cultivated around games, both digital and analog. This is his first DiGRA.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blodgett, Bridget M. "Media in the Post #GamerGate Era: Coverage of Reactionary Fan Anger and the Terrorism of the Privileged." *Television & New Media* 21, no. 2 (February 2020): 184–200. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419879918.

DeVille, Chris. "The rise of D&D liveplay is changing how fans approach roleplaying." *The Verge.* November 16, 2017. https://www.theverge.com/2017/11/16/16666344/dungeons-and-dragons-twitch-roleplay-rpgs-critical-role-streaming-gaming

Diana Jones Award Committee. "The 2018 Award. The Diana Jones Award for Excellence in Gaming." Accessed October 26, 2020. https://www.dianajonesaward.org/the-2018-award/

Hall, Charlie. "Critical Role Kickstarter success is starting interesting conversations." *Polygon.* March 11, 2019. https://www.polygon.com/2019/3/11/18256668/critical-role-kickstarter-animated

Henry, Elsa S. "Reimagining Disability in Roleplaying Games." *Analog Game Studies* 2, no 2. (February 2015). http://analoggamestudies.org/2015/02/reimagining-disability-in-role-playing-games/

McMillian, Graham. "'Adventure Zone' Graphic Novel Tops New York Times' Trade Fiction Best-Seller List." July 26, 2019. *The Hollywood Reporter.* https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/adventure-zone-graphic-novel-tops-new-york-times-trade-fiction-bestseller-list-1130198

Shaw, Adrienne. "Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity." *New Media & Society* 14, no. 1 (February 2012): 28–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811410394.

Sidhu, Preemet and Carter, Marcus. "The Critical Role of Media Representations, Reduced Stigma and Increased Access in D&D's Resurgence". *Proceedings of DiGRA 2020.* Accessed October 26, 2020

Stenros, Jaako. and Shinoven, Tanja. "Out of the Dungeons: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Sourcebooks". *Analog Game Studies* 2, no. 5 (July 2015). http://analoggamestudies.org/2015/07/out-of-the-dungeons-representations-of-queer-sexuality-in-rpg-source-books/

Trammell, Aaron. "Misogyny and the Female Body in Dungeons and Dragons." *Analog Game Studies* 1, no. 3 (October 2014). http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/10/constructing-the-female-body-in-role-playing-games/

White, William J. "Actual Play and the Laws of Media." In Aaron Trammell, Evan Torner, Shelly Jones, & Emma Leigh Waldron (Eds.). *Role Playing Game Summit.* (December 2019). http://analoggamestudies.org/2019/12/actual-play-and-the-laws-of-media/

Yeates, Robert. "Serial Fiction Podcasting and Participatory Culture: Fan Influence and Representation in The Adventure Zone." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 2 (April 2020): 223–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549418786420.