

The *Critical Role of YouTube and Twitch in D&D's Resurgence*

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last five years *Dungeons and Dragons [D&D]* (Arneson & Gygax, 1974) has risen in prominence and popularity, with a broadening of its player demographic. Though there are many factors motivating renewed and engaged play of *D&D*, in this presentation we draw on our study of *D&D* players in 2019 to discuss the impact that representation of *D&D* play on YouTube, Twitch, and in podcasts, has on the game's play, experience, and resurgence. We argue that our results stress the impact of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006) in understanding *D&D* play.

METHODOLOGY

This presentation draws on a qualitative study of 20 *D&D* (7F, 13M, aged 18 – 34) players across 4 player groups, involving pre-play interviews, observations of play sessions, and follow-up post-play interviews. Interviews interrogated player histories, motivations to play *D&D*, experiences playing, and engagement with *D&D* paratexts.

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF CONVERGENCE CULTURE

In alignment with Gerbner's (1969) media cultivation theory, Duck et al. (2000) argue that media representations "have the potential to play an active part in shaping and framing our perceptions" (p. 11), which has similarly been applied in the study of game paratexts (Consalvo, 2007). The participants in our study were very cognisant of how media representation of *D&D* has changed over time; from overt stigmatisation to more positively skewed portrayals. All participants discussed in some way, the positive impact this changing discourse had on their play (reducing stigma, introducing more players), and desire to play.

17 of our 20 participants mentioned the impact of various new media platforms on their play of *D&D*, including Twitch, YouTube, podcasts, and websites such as reddit. One participant iterated that *D&D* was "being swept up in this greater cultural trend of things becoming more accessible." This reflected both a sense of

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accessibility in learning how to play the game, but also the reduction of barriers when engaging with *D&D* culture more broadly.

Most prominently discussed though was the Twitch stream (also watched on YouTube) *Critical Role*: a long-form, actual-play *D&D* show that has been live-streaming weekly since 2015 to hundreds of thousands of viewers. The playing group consists of “a bunch of nerdy-ass voice actors that sit around and play *Dungeons & Dragons*” (Geek and Sundry, 2015), navigating archetypal fantasy obstacles such as defeating dragons and journeying across vast unexplored lands. In 2019, *Critical Role* raised USD\$11.3 million on the crowdfunding site Kickstarter to create an animated show situated in the *Critical Role* player universe. The criticality of *Critical Role* was exemplified in participant responses. One participant expressed excitement towards *Critical Role* saying it was “just amazing. The amount of culture and following fandom is growing exponentially because it’s just so fun.” The show’s high-quality production value and depiction of social fun and fantasy tropes has cultivated a burgeoning interest in *D&D* play. However, this has also resulted in the wider “Mercer-Effect.” This term, derived from the name of *Critical Role*’s Dungeon Master Matthew Mercer, is used within the community to describe the “unrealistic expectations of new *D&D* players who believe their games will be similar to *Critical Role*” (Girdwood, 2019).

Beyond accessibility to the play of the game, and representation of what *D&D* play should, could or might look like, we also found that our participants negotiated their identity as *D&D* players in an oppositional stance (Kruse, 1993, p. 34) to digital gaming culture and practice. One participant framed *D&D* as an accessible digital game alternative, “It’s videogames for people who can’t play videogames,” and another commented that guilt and addiction narratives commonly associated with digital practices did not apply to *D&D*:

[*D&D* is] a huge stress relief. You can spend 4 hours just doing the stupidest shit and there’s no guilty feeling that you get after binging 4 hours of Netflix, or playing a videogame for 4 hours, or ... even just sitting on the couch on your phone for 4 hours.

It is also worth mentioning that *D&D*’s publishers *Wizards of the Coast* have made a considered effort to reduce the barriers of entry into *D&D* by releasing financially and technologically accessible game materials that promote greater inclusivity in player demographics.

As iterated by Booth (2018), “there’s a piece missing from media scholarship: the board game...a remarkably understudied phenomenon within media studies” (p. 57). What these findings demonstrate is the significant relevance of Jenkin’s (2006) convergence culture theory, which highlights “the flow of content across multiple media platforms” (p. 2) where old and new media collide. The popularity of live-play shows like *Critical Role*, and the impact that these paratexts have on accessing and experiencing *D&D*, highlight that the relationship between digital and non-digital cannot be extricated when engaging in wider discourses of media. More importantly though, this gives resonance to the idea that research into non-digital games and digital games cannot be separated.

BIO

Premeet Sidhu is an honours graduate from the University of Sydney. Her honours dissertation was focused on understanding the modern resurgence and popularity of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Her research interests include investigating how meaningful

player experiences in both digital and non-digital games can be applied and considered in wider areas of education, media, psychology, and English literature.

Marcus Carter is a Senior Lecturer in Digital Cultures at The University of Sydney, where he conducts research into player experience at the intersection of Human-Computer Interaction and Game Studies research.

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