

The Subculture of the Lurker: participatory non-participation in digital subculture

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Abstract

This thesis develops a new theorisation of subculture in digital gaming culture. I propose that online streaming services and online interaction about games have created an under-theorized subculture of those who engage in the gaming subculture without playing games themselves.

Existing theorisations of subculture in relation to online gaming tend to limit their accounts to those who are actively engaged in online gaming. However, based on a grounded analysis of ethnographic observation, surveys, and interviews with the fans for web series *Critical Role*, where famous voice actors play Dungeons & Dragons, I found that reasons for and forms of engagement, include what I have called participatory non-participation. This form of engagement, while not incorporated into current theorisations of digital subculture, clearly shares key elements of subculture activity that include a sense of belonging, requirements for group membership, shared history and symbols. As existing theories are based solely on active game playing that excludes the crucial element of digital participatory non-participation, it is appropriate to extend current theorisations to resolve this lacunae and is offered here as a distinctly new theory of digital subculture: the subculture of the lurker.

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Glossary

D&D = Dungeons & Dragons

DM = Dungeon Master

RPG = Role Playing Game

TTRPG = Table Top Role Playing Game

SI = Symbolic Interactionist

Chapter 1: The study of participatory non-participation

Introduction

This chapter introduces the thesis question and outlines how it is approached. This thesis focuses on an under-studied yet significant dimension of online gaming; participatory non-participation, and uses this as a means to interrogate existing theories of online gaming as subculture.

The thesis draws upon fan/consumer engagement with *Critical Role* (a series that livestreams famous voice actors playing *Dungeon and Dragons*) as an example of participatory non-participation, and analyses their engagement in relation to existing theories of subculture.

Based on this analysis, the thesis proposes an updated theory of subculture, the subculture of the lurker, that incorporates the currently ignored aspect of participatory non-participation as a significant form of sub-cultural engagement.

This chapter then briefly outlines the steps that this thesis will take in order to analyse and argue for participatory non-participation.

Starting the thesis

If I tell you that this thesis involves studying the game *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*, you would typically think that I would study the *players* of the games. After all, a focus on *D&D* players involving a small group meeting around a table rolling dice for some arcane reason, which somehow leads to grand adventures, killing monsters and casting spells has been the focus of other extensive studies (Fine, 1983; Williams *et al.*, 2018; Sidhu and Carter, 2020, Schules, Peterson and Picard, 2018; MacCallum-Stewart and Trammell, 2018; Sidhu and Carter, 2020). However, the playing of *D&D* is not what this thesis investigates. Instead, it seeks to understand those who *watch the playing* of *D&D* as a case study for a new form of gaming subculture.

With the spread of the internet has come the origin of streamers, those who perform an activity (often, but not always, playing video games) while being recorded and broadcast live on the internet, called live streams (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019; Johnson and Woodcock, 2019; Jodén and Strandell, 2021). This is a new form of entertainment, anyone with an internet connection can start streaming to viewers as long as they have either the skills to make

whatever task they are live streaming interesting, or the charisma to engage a large audience for hours on end. It is much like the internet's version of a live television show, with direct live interaction with viewers.

One series to become popular using this format has been *Critical Role*, a web series where famous voice actors play *D&D*. In the seven years that the series has been running, an explosion of popularity swept the series, culminating in their own company, *Critical Role Productions LLC*, the generation of millions of dollars of profit (Silberling, 2021), and recently an Amazon animated series which adapts the first campaign¹ of *Critical Role*, called *The Legend of Vox Machina* (2022).

Due to the cast's work as voice actors, part of the attraction for fans is the aural quality of the storytelling performance over directly seeing the actors perform. Whereas playing *D&D* normally is a participatory association with other players to experience an adventure, viewing and listening to *Critical Role* provides a more passive enjoyment of this adventure.

I want to investigate the large following of *Critical Role* as an example of what I call participatory non-participation and see if it functions as a subculture. Participatory non-participation is a new term I apply to those who do not directly engage in a gaming subculture (for various reasons described below), but instead consume it at the periphery while still learning the original gaming subculture's signs and symbols. Participatory non-participation, as this thesis approaches it, is akin to a podcast on headphones, where it can be done in public without obviously presenting oneself as a fan. One can then talk about the subculture online, further shielding directly showing one's engagement and identification (Fine and Kleinman, 1979) with subculture.

Online gaming as a subculture

Traditional scholarship of subculture has centred on deviance or music subcultures, and especially the way youth engage in these subcultures (Gelder, 2005; McArthur, 2008). However, with the advance of technologies that facilitate new, digital ways of enacting subculture, one does not just engage in a subculture by dressing a certain way or going to certain events, but engagement with digital subculture happens even through talking with a group online (Greener and Hollands, 2006).

¹ In *D&D*, a campaign refers to a coherent adventure performed, often with an overarching goal.

Subculture has been defined by the notion of active participation, and this includes online participation (Greener and Hollands, 2006). What is important for this thesis is that even if participation is not active and direct, it is not completely lacking in sociability, for there is still often interaction and engagement between those who are not participating in the game. The argument that individuals who do not directly engage with others are still bound together even without interaction with a larger group is the focus of this thesis, and underpins the thesis claim that the concept of a subculture needs to also include participatory non-participation alongside active and direct participation.

What is participatory non-participation?

As the focus of this inquiry, it is important to explain and understand just what is meant by participatory non-participation. For instance, participatory non-participation is a term for not directly participating in a gaming subculture by directly playing the game, instead participating in that subculture by consuming the game at the periphery through websites such as YouTube and Twitch, while still learning the original subculture's signs and symbols as one would with direct participation. For this thesis, direct participation is considered playing the game directly without watching someone else do it. This is a term that refers to those not directly engaging with a game but still being involved in it; to play a game without playing a game.

Participatory non-participation extends to various forms of gaming, including video games and tabletop games, as long as it is streamed. The ability to be a participatory non-participant comes as a result of services such as YouTube and Twitch.tv that broadcast gameplay live, while also featuring recorded videos in an archive. For some, these livestreams are just entertainment. However, participatory non-participation further allows some who would not be able to play the games, to vicariously experience the playing of games. The reasons given for participatory non-participation are varied and are analytically explored in this thesis in relation to sub-culture.

This study asks the question: is participatory non-participation a form of subculture in contemporary digital society? To answer this, I investigate the large following of fans watching *Critical Role* play *D&D*, finding out how and why they watch the series. Based on this investigation, this thesis proposes that participatory non-participation is a dimension of subculture because the ways fans engage with *Critical Role*, when examined closely, display the key elements of subcultural practice (Fine and Kleinman, 1979).

Given that the substantive investigation supports this claim, it becomes necessary to propose a broader theorisation of subculture, one that can account for participatory non-participation. This new theorisation of subculture is developed at the end of the thesis through a discussion of the concept of what I call the Subculture of the Lurker.

Outline of the thesis

Chapter two focuses on the history of role-playing games generally, investigating the early history in wargames to contemporary role-playing games. Next, it investigates the history of *Critical Role*, understanding what the series is and how it works. This serves to introduce the thesis topic more broadly, and discuss how these games have been studied.

As examined in chapter three, a key point identified in the literature is that research on subcultures focuses on matters of engagement; how members of a subculture interact with one another. However, this focus does not ask the question of if a subculture can be constructed out of a lack of direct, traditional engagement, moving to a more individual interaction, but still be considered a subculture. This is the question that drives this thesis.

The thesis question is examined substantively and chapter four outlines the methodological approach, data gathering methods and analytical strategies used to generate an in-depth account of participatory non-participation with the focus on *Critical Role* and *D&D*. I use ethnographic, survey, and interview methods to generate the data used to examine the thesis question, as I found this would allow me to get a larger picture of participatory non-participation. While the ethnographic method had mixed success, there was a large interest in the surveys and interviews. From these, 244 respondents answered the survey, while 4 interviews were conducted. Using the grounded approach of Glaser and Strauss (1999) to analyse the data, I used a symbolic interactionist perspective in the analysis of the findings which are discussed in subsequent chapters.

Chapter five concentrates on what elements of non-participatory participation show signs of subcultural practice in *Critical Role* fans, and how fans display the markers for subcultural membership. Chapter six identifies the differing ways that *Critical Role* fans consume the series, and how that impacts their interaction, or lack of interaction, with other fans and the *Critical Role* series, arguing that passive consumption is still consumption. Chapter seven delves into what unique *pleasures* participatory non-participation offers fans of *Critical Role* compared to playing the game of *D&D* itself, understanding this in relation to the pleasurable aspect of being

in a subculture. Chapters eight and nine deal with what unique meanings participatory non-participation offers fans, in this case the learning of the game and managing the stigma that can come with playing *D&D*, analysing what they offer as a form of subcultural induction and a form of identity management, respectively. Finally, chapter ten presents an issue with participatory non-participation, looking into how it can be plagued by toxic fans and parasociality, analysing this within the bounds of the internal monitoring of a subculture.

Chapter eleven draws together the conclusions of chapters five through ten and develops a new theorisation for gaming subculture, that I call the subculture of the lurker, Here I offer an account of the ways people engage in what I call lurking, a term specifically used here to describe members of a gaming community who do not engage either with the game itself or with others, but still take part. I develop a specific use of the term that does not follow its conventional use in the literature, to denote lurking within a gaming subculture, not by directly playing the game itself but by lurking in the larger gaming subculture. This results in a subculture that seems fragmented but is unified in its focus.

My response to the thesis question is that being a participatory non-participant for *Critical Role* fulfills several functions. Firstly, *Critical Role* is significantly engrossing to many of those who watch it, with regular fans every week watching episodes that go from two to four-hours long. For them, watching the series is just a fun experience that brings them joy. This regularly scheduled joy was described as a religious experience for some, tuning in every week with devotion.

Participatory non-participation doesn't just apply to the game itself. It also extends to fans, and how they interact with others. For some fans, finishing a new episode of *Critical Role* meant that they immediately went to interact with others online about the series. Others chose to discuss it with their friends. And finally, others chose not to discuss it all, simply reading the discussion online without interacting.

Another pleasure existed for participating non-participants who wanted to play *D&D* themselves, but who felt that they did not have the time or the ability to do so. *D&D* is, traditionally, a game played with a group of other people (ranging in size from 2 to 12), with one person taking the role of Dungeon Master (DM), the one who runs the game. However, if one cannot make these group connections, then the ability to play *D&D*, no matter how much they wish to play the game will be cut off. *Critical Role*, despite having a visual element, derives

much of its content from the aural performances of the players. Therefore participants who lack the social ability or time to play *D&D* themselves can experience the adventure through listening.

For those who can play, participatory non-participation in *Critical Role* can serve as a means of induction into *D&D*. As noted by Fine (1983), TTRPGs are often notoriously complex systems for a new player to learn due to their commonly large number of pages and the complexity of the systems within, especially *D&D*. Unlike computer games, where the game itself automates the rules, new players to *D&D* must know what to roll and when, and understand what terms like *advantage* and *grappled* mean in the context of the game, and then what numbers to add or subtract to these rolls when they are made.

Critical Role, being played by someone else, both explicitly and implicitly explains the basics of the game, which allows new players to enjoy the game. In sociological terms, this is the players identifying the game's signs and symbols. By learning the game's signs and symbols, I demonstrate that participatory non-participation in *Critical Role* serves as an induction to *D&D*, in the same manner as Goffman (1956) identified how a neophyte learns of demeanor in social situations, and how Becker (1953) identified the ways a marijuana smoker must learn how to act in the subculture.

Another aspect of non-participatory participation is the management of stigma relating to both the game itself and being a player of the game. In *Stigma* (1963), Goffman noted that individuals who were able to hide stigma often did so to present as normal in modern society. To participate without participating can also be understood as the management of stigma. If there is an element of stigma to a game such as the stigma attached to *D&D* for much of its history (Laycock, 2015b), then it would be a form of stigma management to be a lurker. However, identified in this study was the potential for participatory non-participants to gain a new stigma, in this case as fans of *Critical Role*. This was due to new players of *D&D*, introduced by *Critical Role*, develop inflated expectations and disrupted regular gaming. Therefore, for some participants, there was the management of a new type of stigma and hence their identity, through being a fan.

A further aspect to participatory non-participation is the possibility of parasociality, where individuals feel a friendly connection to individuals they see in media. Fans of *Critical Role* were identified by other fans and in the analysis as having a parasocial relationship with the

cast. This parasocial relationship had significant impact on the formation of group interaction, as members of the *Critical Role* fandom found it hard to engage with others when parasocial elements were evident in the fandom. Many participants discussed how they retreated from the larger fandom into smaller groups, where they expressed greater comfort. This discussion of parasociality signals the internal policing or monitoring and managing members' behaviour towards each other which is also a crucial aspect of subcultural practice.

The pleasure, induction, stigma management and parasociality demonstrated by those who engage in non-participatory participation of *Critical Role* fulfil the requirements of being a subculture. Bringing these aspects together, this thesis concludes that yes, participatory non-participation *is* subcultural, and it presents several unique factors which contribute new insights to our understanding of digital subculture. For instance, subcultures can be engaged indirectly and subtly, rather than only directly and physically. Therefore, being a part of a gathered community of lurkers still constitutes the elements to be considered a subculture.

Conclusion

This thesis argues that the understanding of modern digital subculture needs to be expanded, in order to incorporate the various ways that individuals can participate in a contemporary subculture, especially those who subvert or defy existing understandings of digital subculture. For example, McArthur (2008) in his argument for the expansion of subcultures shows how internet groups operate subculturally, distancing the term from music and deviance, and expanding sociological analysis to the digital realm. However, for McArthur and other current theorists, there is still the insistence that subculture is about resistance and style and therefore, direct engagement. This thesis argues that those theories are limiting because they are blind to other reasons and strategies an individual might use and so are blind to alternative, non-participatory versions of subculture made possible by the digital age.

This chapter introduced the topic and aim of the thesis, outlined briefly how the question is approached and the progression of the thesis argument in a summary of the chapters. The next chapter explains the background of fantasy games and their relevance to social theories of leisure, before outlining the way people watch and listen to fantasy games being played.

Chapter 2: Definitions and History

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to situate and explain the background of fantasy games, both historically and socioculturally, before understanding the way people watch fantasy games being played. By doing so, this chapter shows how the *Critical Role* series is rooted in a long history of games, and therefore opens an avenue of inquiry for this thesis.

First, the chapter outlines the history of wargaming, as wargames would be what *D&D* is built on. Next, it looks into the history and literature on *D&D*, to understand how it has been understood academically. Finally, it discusses what *Critical Role* is and how it works, along with reviewing the limited literature on the series.

It is important to understand this context for the purposes of this thesis, which is to understand how *Critical Role* operates in the wider *D&D* tradition, and within wider debates about the role of streaming in the study of games in general.

The History of Dungeons & Dragons

War Gaming

The focus of this section is on wargames, which seek to emulate a real-world battlefield, with the player in the position of a general giving orders. The importance to this study is that wargames preconfigure and inform the emergence of *D&D*, as it is out of early wargames that *D&D* would be developed (Fine, 1983). Not only did the origin in wargames configure how *D&D* would run mechanically, it is also the source and a contributor to the social issues that have plagued *D&D* for much of its history, and which *Critical Role* must also navigate. Therefore, to truly understand the history of *D&D* and *Critical Role*, it is important to understand the history of wargames.

Laycock (2015) considers wargames as old as war itself. Chess has existed since the 6th century, its predecessor Xiangqi has existed since 300BC, and the predecessor to Xiangqi, Chaturanga, developed in India and spread along the Silk Road for even longer (O'Donnell, 2014; Laycock, 2015). The origin of *contemporary* wargames came about as a result of the rationality and scientisation of the Enlightenment. Believing that war itself could be

mathematically modelled, the Prussian military used War Games for training their officers. The original two wargames, *Koenigspiel* (The King's Game) written by Christopher Weikmann in 1664 and *Kriegspiel* (War Game) written by Johann Christian Ludwig Hellwig in 1780, were designed to give all those playing them an understanding of useful military tactics. Later, *New Kriegspiel* was developed by George Vinturinus of Schleswig, giving the game a 60-page rulebook. These early wargames were played on a grid, originally 1666 squares before expanding to 3600 squares for *New Kriegspiel* (Hilgers and Benjamin, 2012; Laycock, 2015). These squares represented differing terrain that each unit could fight on.

An updated version of wargames would become developed in 1811 and 1876, during and following the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) respectively. Rather than a grid pattern, a board of initially sand, and later a full map was used. Ceramic figures, representing units of soldiers, were given individual speeds to move across this board. When the Prussian militia beat the French army, wargames were given credit for this victory (Laycock, 2015). As such, wargames would soon find themselves used in a variety of army training scenarios.

It was science fiction writer H.G. Wells who developed the first wargame to be played as a game rather than a training tool. It was titled *Little Boy*, or full title, *Little Wars: a game for boys from twelve years of age to one hundred and fifty and for that more intelligent sort of girl who likes boys' games and books*. As a pacifist, Wells designed the game to be fun, not accurate to war.

H. G. Wells' development led to the first commercially successful wargame, *Tactics* (1953) by Charles Robinson, who would later develop another wargame called *Gettysburg* (1958). The success of *Gettysburg* is located by Laycock (2015) in the sacred nature of the historical Battle of Gettysburg from the American Civil War, considered an important part of American cultural myth. They conclude:

The popular appeal of wargames, then, did not lie simply in models and calculations but in revisiting and reenacting moments of historical and cultural significance. Gettysburg was commercially viable because it allowed Americans to experience and participate in a moment of sacred history while sitting at their kitchen tables. (Laycock, 2015, p. 35)

This popularity would cause the emergence of a subculture around wargames. In the 1960s, wargames gained their own amateur press and university clubs, forming the lines of communication which allow a subculture to spread (Fine and Kleinman, 1979). Through the

popularity of *Gettysburg*, wargaming turned to emulating historical conflict. But it was also strict and competitive, leading gameplay sessions to devolve into bickering (Laycock, 2015). With Cold War anxiety becoming part of life, an interest in more cooperative and social games began to appear. Some of these early co-operative games were played by *D&D* creators, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson.

The Game of *Dungeons & Dragons*

Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) is a Table Top Role Playing Game (TTRPG)² created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, both avid players of wargames (Fine, 1983), and originally published by Gygax's company Tactical Studio Rules Incorporated (TSR). While wargames seek to emulate real, historical battles, TTRPGs can be defined as:

[G]ames played by telling stories together, each player responsible for the actions of a character of their own design, while simulating the challenge of the narrated actions and the effects of chance through a flexible system of rules and the rolling of dice. TTRPGs produce unrehearsed and unrepeatable narratives through collaborative, improvisational, oral storytelling – narratives that are distinguished by their participatory quality, not only in the imaginative buy-in of an audience or in an auxiliary fan-fictional apparatus, but in their very existence, being generated primarily for the benefit of those who are taking part. (Hollander, 2021, p. 317)

Gygax and Anderson made *D&D* based on wargames, but with a different focus on individual characters going on adventures with magical abilities. Despite a slow start, *D&D* soon grew to be one of the most popular fantasy games of the 1970s and 1980s, with a future of controversy ahead (Fine, 1983; Laycock, 2015). Eventually, in 1997, TSR would be acquired by games publisher Wizards of the Coast, who continue to publish *D&D* to this day.

As a game, *D&D* arose at a specific point in time, 1974, a decade after the books by J.R.R Tolkien *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) had an increase in popularity among the counterculture groups of the time due to their reactionary and anti-industrialist message. Laycock (2015) considers *D&D* to be the marriage between these cultural trends of the 1960s and wargaming, as a combination of “mechanistic and romantic thinking” (Laycock, 2015, p.

² The name comes from that these games are often played on a table or a flat surface, therefore table top. Role Playing Games (RPG's) are games where a player plays the role of a character within the game, entering a role.

31). That is, it combines the mathematical and mechanical rules of wargaming with the cultural trends of the 1960s a “fascination with history, myth, and fantasy as well as a renewed appreciation for values such as cooperation and imagination” (Laycock 2015 p. 31-32).

This combination of mechanistic and romantic thinking is observed during gameplay and character creation. A typical session of *D&D* involves a group of players, ranging from 1 player to an infinite number³. These players hear a description of events from a separate player, commonly called the Dungeon Master (DM), Game Master (GM), or referee. The DM describes events, characters, and monsters to the players, with players then deciding what to do with their characters. These characters, who can be of a variety of different species, are termed races⁴, (Humans, Elves, Dwarves, Half-Orcs etc.) and classes (Rogues, Warlocks, Wizards, Fighters, Rangers etc.). These characters are acted by the player themselves, who takes on the role of the character. The player draws from a detailed character sheet, which includes information such as descriptions of the character’s skills and proficiencies.

When a player makes a new character, they roll their statistics using 4 six-sided dice, taking the three highest numbers rolled as the total value. This is repeated six times, and then these values are slotted into six boxes corresponding to Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma based on player choice and what class they play, with some values modified by their chosen race. These six attributes are given numerical values ranging from 1, the lowest value, to 20, the highest value.

Skills in areas such as ability in pickpocketing, persuasiveness, athletic ability, or investigative ability to name a few are also chosen and entered on the sheet, which further define the character. These statistics on the sheet, combined with the rules and the outcome of dice rolls are then formed into a character in the mind of the player.

The rules for playing these characters are heavily formalized yet flexible. These rules come out of a series of published rulebooks, including the *Players Handbook* (containing the rules that players must learn to play the game) and the *Dungeon Master’s Guide* (containing the rules the

³ Often around 5 or 6 (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014).

⁴ It should be noted that the term race in *D&D* is used in a simplified fashion. A more apt term would be species, as very few races (save, half-orcs and half-elves, which are half-human) share any genetic lineage. However, for congruence with other studies as well as the rulebooks themselves, race will be used here.

DM must learn in order to run the game). Each version of these books has undergone their own editions with each release of the game, with the current being the 5th edition, published in 2014 by *Wizards of the Coast*. Much as with board games, these rules have to be learned by the players and the DMs before they can be applied, with the DM learning specific rules for running the game. Fine (1983) mentions further that the rules of the game are heavily mutable and open to change based on discussions between those playing the game. These house rules are designed based on the content of the discussion.

While the official rules feature heavily ruled-based combat that must be learned, it is possible also to play *D&D* as an entirely social game in a fantasy setting. The percentage of combat to role play (RP) is entirely up to both players and DMs and what they desire out of the game. This mix of fantasy combat and social play spawned academic interest in the game during its early years, with the earliest literature shaping the future of *D&D* studies, especially the literature on the nature of participation in *D&D*.

The academic literature on *D&D*

During the game's early history, one of the first sociological studies of *D&D* was conducted by Gary Alan Fine (1983), 9 years after the game was originally released, and has been considered to have deeply influenced further RPG studies in both method and what researchers look for in their own analysis (Williams *et al.*, 2018). His symbolic interactionist approach involved a participation-observation study, playing in various TTRPGs in the San Francisco area over the course of a year. During this time, he observed the nature of this new form of play, the various formal and informal rules, and the ways that the game engrosses players.⁵ He also considered how multiple people, both the DM and the players, construct a shared world in which they inhabit. Fine used this to argue that this "shared culture" (Fine, 1983, p. 2) soon becomes important to all those who play. Through voluntary association and shared participation, the players construct a shared fantasy in which they engage in.

At the time Fine was studying *D&D*, it was gaining notoriety at the centre of a Satanic Panic, a large-scale moral panic that spread across the world. Part of this panic was the claim that *D&D* was a dangerous cult masquerading as an entertainment product (Laycock, 2015). An

⁵ Players can become significantly engrossed in the game, Sidhu and Carter (2021) writes how this engrossment can lead to the death of a character having a profound impact on a player, similar to grief.

American organisation calling itself *Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons* (BADD) went on to claim that if players of *D&D* assumed that the gods, demons, and magic existed inside the game world then they *must* assume that these aspects apply to the real world as well. The engrossing nature of the games identified by Fine (1983) was interpreted as either religious fanaticism of New Age cults or a method of Cold War mind control, and some religious leaders of the time saw *D&D* as a tool of Satan and the Anti-Christ (Laycock, 2015)⁶.

Outside of the moral panic, the series has long been plagued by issues of race and gender that it has only recently started to engage with as it has become more popular⁷. As noted previously in this thesis, the term race, which is used to describe the different and unique species that are available to players, calls back to 19th-century understandings of race, where individuals were determined by their physical presentation and claims of genetic difference, which justified oppression (Williams *et al.*, 2018). However, Poor (2012) would argue that, given that the descriptions of the varied races in *D&D* still rely on physical traits⁸, the term race is still applicable when talking about the game.

In his study, Fine (1983, p. 65) noted that the majority of *D&D* players were young white men, with female characters in these games being presented “as property and not as human beings.” Many of the players studied engaged in a “locker room” atmosphere (Fine, 1983, p. 69) that encouraged acts of sexual assault on female Non-Player Characters in games. The games themselves promoted male domination by the players. Fine analysed one game, *Chivalry & Sorcery*, and found that rules gave “human characters a 75% chance of being male, and elves,

⁶ One example of this is Jack Chick’s religiously charged tract “*Dark Dungeon*”, where two girls are drawn into a game similar to *D&D*. When one girl’s character dies in game, they find themselves unable to continue living and commit suicide. The other girl eventually realises the Satanic nature of the game, and saves herself through Christ (Sidhu and Carter 2021).

⁷ The recent rulebook *Tasha’s Cauldron of Everything* (2020) includes rules for “Custom Lineage,” which allowed one to essentially create their own playable race outside of the systemised, strict approach to race common to the game. While it was always possible for experienced players and DM’s to do this, *Tasha’s Cauldron of Everything* gave players a quick way to design their own. The rulebook further encouraged players to create diverse characters that better reflected a more fluid understanding of one’s own culture. Furthermore, the recently released *Strixhaven: A Curriculum of Chaos* (2021) features openly transgender and non-binary characters for players to interact with (Nelson, 2022).

⁸ Such as dwarves being short and hardy, while orcs are tall, brutish and monstrous.

dwarves and hobbits an 85% chance of being male” (Fine, 1983, p. 65) based on dice rolls during character creation.

The women who did show up to play in Fine’s study were often romantically associated with other male players, and if they are not, they were treated as objects of sexual desire.

Furthermore, despite claims of egalitarianism, some male players commented that with women players present they would not be able to enjoy the games as much, as a female player would change the previously all-male group dynamic.

Fine connects this attitude to contemporaneous fantasy literature. Such a genre, already noted to be male-dominated in readership, also extends to the male-domination of wargaming, how many of the early players of *D&D* were introduced to the game. This male-centred focus can be traced to the series inspiration in J.R.R. Tolkien, which would inspire Gyax. Hall (2017, in Poor, 2012, p. 377–378) traces the elves of Tolkien to medieval descriptions of elves, which differ greatly from the contemporary concept:

A pre-Linnaean world: we implicitly think of elves now as basically being a different species from homo sapiens, but medieval people don’t seem to have seen it like that; elves are more like an ethnic other. Elves are distinct from normal people because of their supernatural powers, distinct from supernaturally powerful normal people (like the neighbourhood witch) because of their separate ethnicity, and distinct from most other supernatural beings (trolls, giants, what have you) in being otherwise more or less like people.

Hollander (2021) writes that *D&D*, taken as it exists in the rulebooks reproduces a colonial power fantasy, where lighter-skinned races are overwhelming portrayed as good or pure, while races of darker skin are often portrayed as evil or savage. Comparing different types of elves, he shows that high Elves, which are fair-skinned and lacking any body are often portrayed as good and moral, while darker-skinned variants of elves such as the forest-dwelling Wood Elves and the charcoal skinned Dark Elves⁹ are portrayed as uncivilised/evil. As Tolkien’s Middle Earth lacks non-white characters, elves and orcs are the stand-ins for other races. Coded for being the “other”, elves (and by extension other races) are the stand-in for

⁹ Also known as Drow, who live underground.

exploring racial issues. And for players, acts of racial violence against the “monstrous other” (Hollander 2021, p. 7).

Garcia (2017) further focuses on the issue of gender and race in *D&D*, finding the source of the game’s misogyny in the rulebooks of the games themselves. Arguing that the systems and writings of the games themselves promote racist and sexist values, they use a cultural-historical approach as an analytic focus for a close reading of all *D&D* rulebooks, from Original Dungeons & Dragons (1974) to the current 5th Edition (2014). They argue from this that *D&D* reinforces racism and sexism through writing and depictions of women and other races in these books. They found in earlier editions of *D&D* that race and gender put a cap on what certain characters could do. Women had a lower maximum strength score, while it was only humans (i.e. white men) who were unlimited in their potential in terms of character class, every other race had a cap on their level.

Garcia further argues that Gygax himself was informed of these values through his listed inspirations in the 1979 edition of the *Dungeon Master’s Guide*, with all authors being white, and only 3 writers out of 30 being women. Similarly, Stang and Trammell (2020) extend accusations of misogyny against Gygax. Through an analysis of the feminine monster known as the Hag, they argue that his inclusions and descriptions of certain monsters as feminine reinforces societal misogyny.

Less critical, Mussett (2014) claims that *D&D* allows one to analyse and play with the construction of gender in (post-modern) society. When one constructs their *D&D* characters, they are not limited to creating characters that are like the player. Charting their own evolution as a child playing as a Druid¹⁰ to an adult playing Barbarian¹¹, they argue that the actual playing of *D&D* is one of gender-neutrality and openness, where gender does not matter, and calls for more players to play characters that explore other gender identities. They highlight the emancipatory nature of playing *D&D*, the act of possible being anyone, or anything.

¹⁰ A class typically associated with nature, mythical beasts, and healing.

¹¹ A class that relies on pure physical strength and doing as much damage as possible with reckless disregard.

Recent years

This emancipatory nature may contribute to how, in recent years, *D&D* has exploded into a hugely successful game. Bloomberg journalist Mary Pilon (2019) interviewed “Professional Dungeon & Dragons Master” Devon Chulick, who provides “an individual beginner campaign, which will set you back \$300 and last up to four hours; for \$500, he’ll come to your office and run a *D&D* team-building activity” (Pilon, 2019 para. 5), as well as streaming these games weekly on Twitch, where 150 viewers pay \$4.99 a month to watch the stream. Chulick also provides consulting work on gaming purchases and draws up fantasy maps, also for a cost. Pilon briefly locates the popularity and possibility of being a professional DM with the rise of gig culture¹² and shows such as the enormously popular Netflix series *Stranger Things* (2016-2019), where the play of *D&D* is a narrative element of the series, which gave the game mainstream appeal¹³.

However, it would not be fair to cite *Stranger Things* as the only reason for the surge in popularity. Hollander (2021, p. 326) locates the popularity of TTRPGs in general in that they offer:

a refuge and rectification for young people who have been over-digitized and isolated, who have been trained to believe that their value is in their productivity and earning potential. That TTRPGs can be played endlessly without needing to spend additional money and without being penalized for not doing so sits out of joint with the capitalist logics and urges that have cannibalized most leisure pastimes.

These findings are congruent with that of Sidhu and Carter (2020), who also find that the liberating nature of play is what has given rise to the revival of *D&D*. But there is one notable exception. They found that the web series *Critical Role*, the focus of this thesis, has also

¹² Gig culture, or the gig economy, is term that refers to working on full-time or part-time jobs in which one is not considered an employee, and is paid a certain amount of money for completing the work, or the *gig*. The gig economy isn’t a new phenomenon, but has become popular with the prevalence of apps and computers in society, through which one can work *gig* jobs in addition to other work (Heing, 2020).

¹³ It should be noted that this rise in popularity due to *Stranger Things* has also led to the existence of a *Stranger Things* starter set for *D&D* itself, with characters and adventures themed around the events of the show.

produced considerable public interest in the game of *D&D*, through its popularity, ease of access, and inclusivity.

Critical Role

Critical Role can be broadly defined as a group of friends who meet every week to play *D&D*, like most groups that play the game. The difference comes in that all the players are professional and well-known (and self-described *nerdy-assed*) voiced actors for anime¹⁴ and video games, and that their weekly sessions are a televised event that thousands of people watch live from their own homes or consumed after the fact through archived recordings. From the small, private affair from 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).



Figure 1: How *Critical Role* looks to the average viewer. Source: *Critical Role* Series 1 Episode 90: The Voice of the Tempest. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yr3tvzSqTDQ>

¹⁴ Japanese animation.

Critical Role initially began as a private group of friends playing the game *Pathfinder*,¹⁵. The series DM is Matt Mercer, and he is, therefore, the driving force behind the game and the show, as well as its writer. It started when Mercer, a player of *D&D* since his childhood, held a one-shot¹⁶ of *D&D* 4th edition for friend, fellow voice actor, and *Critical Role* star Liam O'Brien's birthday (Shea, 2016). The game proved popular among the group, and they continued to play regularly, expanding the one-shot into a full-length campaign. Eventually, the private game was scouted out by website *Geek & Sundry* after rumours floated around about a private game starring popular voice actors (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 (Shea, 2016).

When the private game became a series, the game moved to the *D&D* 5th Edition as it allowed for streamlined 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. 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 launching, the series has run for two completed seasons, with each season corresponding to a campaign. Season 1 ran from 2015-2017 and totalled 115 episodes and Season 2 from 2018-2021 and totalled 141 episodes, with each episode running up to four hours in length. In between the end of Season 2 and the start of Season 3, a mini-campaign was run called *Exandria Unlimited* and ran for six episodes from the 24th of June to the 12th of August, and featured a different cast from the main series with a new DM.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Pathfinder* is a TTRPG similar to *D&D*, published by the company Paizo since 2009. The rules are based on the 3rd Revised Edition of *D&D*, also known as the 3.5th edition, and was developed in reaction to the 4th Edition of *D&D*, which polarised fans. The rules are greater in scope of what is possible for players to do, but also more complex.

¹⁶ A one-off game consisting of a single session of play that typically will not continue.

¹⁷ This is in addition to the large array of one-shots featuring alternative games to *D&D*, such as *Call of Cthulhu* (a H.P. Lovecraft-inspired TTRPG with horror, investigation, and survival elements), and sometimes performed in collaboration with other companies as a form of advertisement. A recent example being a one-shot based on the video game *Elden Ring* (2022), which has recently released.

Journalist Chris DeVille (2017) at website *The Verge* calls the genre of streamed *D&D* that *Critical Role* falls into liveplay, with the first episode of the campaign having 5 million views on YouTube, and featuring only “pals sitting around a table and acting out whimsical characters” (DeVille, 2017, para. 11) with Mercer’s “colorful *D&D* narration” (DeVille, 2017, para. 10). 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” (DeVille, 2017, para. 5).

The term theatre of the mind can be used to describe how the player visualises the characters of *Critical Role* and what they do in the game. The term comes from radio dramas and was used to suggest why radio dramas remained popular despite the existence of television: what listeners could imagine from these dramas was better than what they were shown on the TV (Verma, 2012).

Critical Role and *D&D* players use the theatre of the mind in play to do what the term says, create a theatre in their mind, where the rolls of the dice and the performances form this mental theatre. While what is seen visually is people sitting around a table rolling dice and moving models around, inside the heads of players and viewers these rolls can be slaying a monster, haggling for an item, or attempting to persuade a guard to let the party pass. Players are free to act out these rolls, and what they do, or have the DM describe it for them. As Figure 1 denotes, it is played around a table. Matthew Mercer (top left) sits at the head, while the other two panels show the other two sides of the table. The block of text in the bottom left is the useful statistics of the character Grog, played by Travis Willingham (top right) who is currently engaging in an encounter where his statistics would be needed. It shows a small image of Grog (the character), his level, his statistics, his max HP (health points, a metric of how much damage the character can take before falling unconscious), his max AC (armour Class, anyone wanting to attack Grog would need to roll on a 20-sided dice to damage Grog’s health points), and his class, which is both a Barbarian and a Fighter.

Statistically, the popularity of the show as of March 2022 is 1.63 million subscribers on YouTube, and 1.1 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 on October 6th, 2021 revealed that the *Critical Role* channel was the top-earning channel on the platform, generating \$9,626,712.16 in gross revenue between August 2019 and October 2021 (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 sites¹⁸.

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 it was *Critical Role* which caused an increased interest in *D&D*, calling it "The criticality of *Critical Role*" (Sidhu and Carter, 2020, p. 12). In their 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 of 19 years involvement found that the sudden increase in attention to the game bought about by *Critical Role* was something new and exciting for them. Therefore, *Critical Role* is the focus of inquiry for this thesis on participatory non-participation because of its popularity.

All the research reviewed in this chapter on wargames, *D&D* and *Critical Role* is the study of the active player, the people who get involved in the game through a large array of motivators. Missing is any study of how people *do not* participate directly in *D&D* but are still involved and engaged with the game. While other analyses have looked into the underlying themes of the game itself, this thesis investigates individuals who might not play *D&D* but are interested, or want to participate but are unable to do so directly. This gap in the literature is investigated using *Critical Role* as a source, looking at the fans of *Critical Role* as players who play the game without playing the game themselves. This focus on those who follow *Critical Role* forms the basis of this thesis' investigation of participatory non-participation.

Conclusion

This history and scholarship of *Dungeons and Dragons* provided above offers social and historical context for *Critical Role*, which began as a live-streamed show and is now a creator-owned multi-platform entertainment franchise entering its seventh year of operation. Through understanding the history of the series, and the way the series has navigated the issues with

¹⁸ While the money may seem excessive, participants throughout this project continually reminded that *Critical Role* is an independent company, with their own employees to pay.

D&D, this thesis can now more effectively examine participatory non-participation as a subculture.

This chapter has introduced the sociocultural context that has led, ultimately, to *Critical Role*, and showed that the series is the result of the long history of *D&D*. By investigating the history and literature of wargames and *D&D*, this chapter has advanced the thesis argument by showing how *Critical Role* draws on a history of games and play in society for the series' popularity. Having outlined these contexts, the following chapter investigates the literature on participatory non-participation, and its relation to gaming.

Chapter 3: The place of non-participation in the academic literature

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the literature relevant to this thesis question on participatory non-participation which includes: subculture, online groups, and streaming, to identify areas where previous research on subculture is lacking in relation to the thesis question.

Starting with a review of the various theoretical perspectives and approaches that have been used to theorise and study subculture, this chapter then moves on to outline post-subcultural theory debates. Next, it reviews the academic literature on gaming groups and why people take part, as well as how online groups have previously been studied. Finally, this chapter looks into how the new phenomena of streaming has been understood academically, and what angles of research are being done to understand it.

Surveying this literature it is clear that one point is missing from subculture research: being attentive to those who do not engage in an active, participatory sense but still find their lack of direct engagement with the subculture as a positive. Furthermore, while the social theory of streaming is well developed, it does not closely examine different reasons individuals engage, and the differing levels of commitment. This review also highlights another limitation in the existing literature on being able to explain why individuals would engage with streams for long periods of time: what individual motivations do they have to take part, especially in comparison to other activities or other streams?

The interpretation of (sub)cultures and their history

Subcultures can be defined as “groups of people that are in some way represented as non-normative and/or marginal through their particular interests and practices, through what they are, what they are and where they do it” (Gelder, 2005, p. 1) or that “[s]ubcultures typically operate in opposition to the dominant culture, or as a rejection of its values” (O’Malley, Holt and Holt, 2020, p. 4) and “a sub-division of a national culture, composed of a combination of factorable social situations... *but forming in the combination a functioning unity which has an integrated impact on the participating individual*” (Gordon, 2004, p. 46, italics in original).

Furthermore, subcultures are often self-regulating, coming up with their own rules for how to manage themselves without the larger society intervening (A. K. Cohen, 2005). Gary Alan Fine (2012, p. 169) claims that these subcultures are held together by “patterns of communication”, and various websites allow one to access wider groups that recognise these patterns. Similarly, Thornton (1995, p. 160) would argue that in Britain, it was the “subcultural consumer press” that allowed subculture to spread:

The subcultural consumer press compile what subculturalists turn around and interpret as revealing homologies. But, while not random, the distinct combination of rituals that came to be acid house was certainly not an unmediated reflection of the social structure. Magazines like *i-D* produced acid house subculture as much as the participating dancers and drug-takers. Like genres, subcultures are constructed in the process of being ‘discovered’. Journalists and photographers do not invent subcultures, but shape them, mark their core and reify their borders. Media and other culture industries are integral to the processes by which we create groups through their representation. Just as national media like the BBC have been crucial to the construction of modern national culture (cf. Scannell 1989), so niche media like the music and style press have been instrumental in the development of youth subcultures. (Thornton, 1995, p. 160)

There have been several theorists whose work has been either directly or indirectly influential in the study of subculture. The roots of subcultural theory can be traced to Durkheim, notably his 19th-century structural functionalist theories of social cohesion, anomie, and deviance. To Durkheim, deviance should not be seen as evil, and instead its various “symbols, rituals and meanings promote social cohesion” (Blackman, 2014, p. 498). Being a part of a subculture was to fight off anomie.

While Durkheim’s work focused more on developing a grand theory about the functioning of modern society as a whole, the earliest form of focused analysis of subculture was the Chicago School studying youth and deviant subcultures, and with a primarily ethnographic focus (Gelder, 2005, p. 10). The symbolic interactionist Howard S. Becker contributed much work under the Chicago school to the study of deviant subcultures, especially musicians (Blackman, 2014). Harold Garfinkel’s theory of ethnomethodology has also contributed to the study of subculture, and more recently, Manzo (2010) used an ethnomethodological approach to study the subculture of coffee online. The Chicago School perspective, like that of Durkheim, did not

argue that these deviant cultures were bad, instead they offered legitimation of the self. For instance, Howard Becker in *Outsiders* (1963) theorised that “subcultures possess distinctive shared values and cultural practices that are different from the mainstream” (Blackman, 2014, p. 496).

While the focus of the Chicago School’s work was not on theory, but on providing empirical observation of social life (Thornton, 1995), the post-Marxist University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), which developed after the Chicago School theorists, played a central role in defining subcultural theories for many years. Unlike the Chicago School’s ethnographic focus, CCCS wanted to position a post-Marxist understanding of subculture which focused on class as a prime factor, especially the young working-class subcultural movements by looking into disempowered youth turning to subculture to adopt meaning into their lives and expressing this through music and shared symbols (Gelder 2005). Groups such as teddy boys, mods and skinheads were about at this time. Notably, the focus of CCCS analysis was often on young men, with women being largely ignored. Furthermore, they often banished the media from definitions of “authentic culture” (Thornton, 1995, p. 9).

While early versions of CCCS theorised subculture as a locally generated “culture of the people” (Cohen 1991, in Thornton 1995, pp. 120) and tended to exclude media, Thornton (1995) draws on Becker (1973) in his analysis of clubbing cultures and argues that media is central to the formation of subcultures because it is the media’s labelling of subcultural groups that itself defines a subculture. Thornton (1995) asks that we pay close attention to how subcultures are defined by the media.

A break would come from the domination of CCCS in subcultural theory with the rise of post-subcultural understandings in the 1990s and 2000s, where subculture was analysed with a postmodern lens of:

individual young consumers reflexively combining and moving between ephemeral, loosely bounded groupings in the context of an increasingly uncertain, individualised consumer society where the fixed and stable categories of the past were being replaced by more shifting, fluid identities. (Hodkinson, 2016, p. 531)

While post-subculture was explicitly theorised in opposition to CCCS, viewing their theorisation as “outdated for the 21st century” (Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003, p. 4), Gelder (2005) notes that many of their new theories and ideas tend to just be re-presentations of

CCCS theories. However, this ignores that many post-subcultural theories did attempt to spread their theoretical analysis to groups that are not hegemonically white, such as Latino gang members and female subcultures, which were seemingly ignored by CCCS theorists (Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003).

Outside of the three fields outlined above, there has been research which combines theories of both CCCS theorists and post-subculture studies, where contemporary subculture occupies a space where globalised tightly-bound groups can exist over the internet without the depthlessness and transitory nature theorised by post-subculture. Greener and Hollands (2006) attempt such a theoretical crossover with an analysis of the Psytrance subculture, a community of people who enjoy psychedelic trance music, who meet up in person but also discuss online. Sandberg (2012) found a similar correlation in Norwegian marijuana smokers, that they exhibited traits identifiable with both subculture and post-subculture: there is stable symbolic unity among cannabis users and a shared history, while also being too widespread and user-diverse. Therefore, current theoretical approaches to subculture are combining both elements in their analyses.

For instance, in their study on why non-marginalised groups partake in cage fighting, Abramson and Modzelewski (2011, p. 146–147) devised their general theory of subculture (*Italics in original*):

1. *Subcultures are fundamentally bounded status systems, separate though not autonomous from the status systems of society proper, which are based upon a shared and recognized moral world.*
2. *A subculture's status system, cultural underpinnings, and boundaries must be recognized by those in the subculture.*
3. *Membership in a subculture is said to be comparatively volitional, when participation cannot be reduced to birth or material necessity.*

This thesis takes the post-subculture work of Abramson and Modzelewski (2011) as a basis, because this approach is able to engage with the digital context of D&D and *Critical Role*. This thesis expands upon this base with the use of Fine and Kleinman (1979) and their symbolic interactionist take on subculture, because their interpretation relies on the subculture interacting with other subcultures through the use of interlocking channels of communication. What is core to this symbolic interactionist approach is that it identifies subcultures as open,

fluid systems which change based on interactions with other groups and the wider society they live in. Through these channels, information is exchanged and knowledge is spread. In this symbolic interactionist approach, subcultures are always in a relationship between individuals in the group and the subculture, the subculture and the media, and the subculture with other subcultures. The symbolic interactionist perspective is also core to the notion of participatory non-participation and the notion of playing a game without playing a game because it can pay keen attention to the notion of the interaction between the individual fan and the streamer they watch, how that allows a fan to play a game vicariously, and their interactions with other members of the fan community.

Rather than relying on class or resistance, combining a post-subculture and symbolic interactionist approach can offer conceptually robust ways to understand how and why individuals engage in subculture for pleasure. The following section now turns to consider the ways of induction into the group, to gain these pleasures.

Neophytes and Initiates

Howard S. Becker (1973), provides a useful insight into how individuals enter and engage in a subculture. In *Outsiders* (1973) he goes into detail on this by discussing the way cannabis users learn and become regular users of the drug. Cannabis is an illegal but socially accepted drug (Becker, 1973) and can be used both recreational and medicinally. But to intentionally start becoming a smoker, one first needs know of its existence, to get in contact with channels to acquire the drug, and learn how to smoke it correctly. If they do not learn the correct method, cannabis will “will produce no effects, and the user will be unable to get high” (Becker, 1973, p. 47). Similarly, they must learn to interpret the effects that come as positive. Both the method and learning to enjoy the experience must be taught to the neophyte, otherwise they may not perceive the act as pleasurable and cease smoking.

This is similar to what Goffman (1956) identified as deference and demeanor in his aptly-named paper, *The Nature of Deference and Demeanor*. Based on a study Goffman did in an asylum ward, both are ways in which an individual presents themselves to others and a group, with deference showing appropriate respect and appreciation to the other in an interaction, knowing what is to be said and what not to say. Demeanor is:

that element of the individual’s ceremonial behavior typically conveyed through deportment, dress, and bearing, which serves to express to those in his immediate

presence that he is a person of certain desirable or undesirable qualities. In our society, the “well” or “properly” demeaned individual displays such attributes as: discretion and sincerity; modesty in claims regarding self; sportsmanship; command of speech and physical movements; self-control over his emotions, his appetites, and his desires; poise under pressure; and so forth. (Goffman, 1967, p. 77)

Applying this approach to *D&D* would be that the well-demeaned player would know the social rules of the game, the way to communicate a desire to have their character perform a certain action, and how and when it is their turn. Goffman continues that the properly demeaned individual presents themselves as one who is reliable and open to communication. However, one has to be properly interpreted by others to have the appropriate demeanor through their actions, they cannot simply state they have it.

Both Becker’s writing on learning to smoke marijuana and Goffman’s writings on demeanor present ideas on how individuals learn and are adapted to the functioning of a group. Both theories contribute an additional step, not just learning how to be introduced to the group but also being introduced to how to play the game. Through observation and interaction, one learns the ways to play and enjoy a game, and the ways to become molded to a gaming group, through the theory of demeanor.

A member of the group cannot simply state verbally that they have the appropriate demeanor, that they understand the way to present and act in a group, they must demonstrate it. Another way that a member of the group can begin to show the appropriate demeanor is through the use of subcultural capital, which the next section discusses.

Subcultural Capital & The Media

There is also the need to understand subcultural capital in the conception of participatory non-participation, due to the commodified way that fans obtain and show off their merchandise to one another. The term comes from Thornton’s book, *Club Cultures* (1995), and is conceived from Thornton’s readings of Pierre Bourdieu and cultural capital, and defines it as (emphasis in original):

Subcultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder. In many ways it affects the standing of the young like its adult equivalent. Subcultural capital can be *objectified* or *embodied*. Just as books and paintings display cultural

capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections (full of well-chosen, limited edition 'white label' twelve-inches and the like). Just as cultural capital is personified in 'good' manners and urbane conversation, so subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being 'in the know', using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance styles. Both cultural and subcultural capital put a premium on the 'second nature' of their knowledges. Nothing depletes capital more than the sight of someone trying too hard. (Thornton, 1995, p. 11–12)

What separates subcultural capital from cultural capital is that subcultural capital is not easily transferred into economic capital in the same way cultural capital can. Rather, it is the ownership of subcultural capital that allows some (in Thornton's case, DJ's, club organisers, fashion designers, and journalists) to gain economic capital. Furthermore, the ownership of this subcultural capital allows one to gain respect within their circles.

Subcultural capital also extends to fan-made media. Fanzines, pirate radio, and the earliest forms of online community offered lines of communication that allowed individuals already entered into the subculture the ability to find new venues for raves, as well as reviews of past raves. The early internet allowed geographically-independent communication about raves and allowed these channels to spread beyond their locales, to the other groups.

Subcultural capital is the in-group knowledge of the subculture, one gains it through authentic knowledge of the group and the way it operates, what is cool for the group. This is further expanded by knowledge and collection of the appropriate types of fan-made media, and how one collects it. This approach, of collecting both the knowledge and the items to present oneself as a member of a subculture, provides the basis for the next section's analysis of gaming subculture.

Tabletop Gaming as a Subculture

Trying to apply subcultural theory to gaming, it could very easily be said outright that gaming is a subculture and start the analysis with that assumption. However, especially when it comes to *D&D*, it might still need to be argued that it occupies a subculture at all. MacCallum-Stewart and Trammell (2018) theorise to the extent that *D&D* can no longer be subcultural due to its

broad reach and renown in current times. However, this limits further subcultural analysis on tabletop gaming.

Gary Alan Fine (1983) proposed in his ethnographic analysis of *D&D* that three conditions must be met to be a valid subculture: networks of communication for information to travel, self-identification of the group as sharing a subculture, and outside identification of the group as a subculture. On this basis and using these criteria, online games do operate as a subculture, even with their broad appeal. For example, many of these subcultures quickly develop their own rules and sayings that can only operate within the group. Williams (2018) details how subcultures quickly learn the meanings to specific phrases that can only be known by others who play the game. However, this in turn highlights the need for the expansion of subcultural theorisation to include participatory non-participation, to show that there are those who understand the subcultural meanings, without participating directly in the subculture.

Stigma management & Geek Culture

As was discussed in chapter 2, *D&D* itself faced stigma both to the game itself and in the way players were stigmatised, linking back to the Satanic Panic (Laycock, 2015). In *Stigma* (1963) Goffman defines stigma as a matter of social information. There are the “normals” (Goffman 1963 p. 5) and the “stigmatized” (Goffman 1963 p. 4). For the stigmatized, there is the need and desire to control the information the normals know about their stigma. Likely, those who have an easily hidden stigma (such as, in Goffman’s time, an ex-asylum patient) will hide it.

As Peeples, Yen and Weigle (2018, p. 251) concisely put it, “geek interests carry social stigma” due to a long history of geek culture being seen as introverted and solitary. To be seen as a geek is to be different, to be a part of “nonhegemonic, or ‘uncool’, white masculinity” (McCarthy, 2019, p. 664), and furthermore:

The term “geek” is fraught with both negative and positive connotations and can be used disparagingly or complementary depending on the user, recipient, and context. Therefore, an important distinction must be made between “geek” as an archetype in the media and “geek” as related to geek culture in practice. The geek in media, who is often a white, straight male, exhibits primarily three qualities: (i) propensity for science and technology; (ii) social awkwardness; and (iii) near-obsessive interest in science fiction and fantasy genres. (McCarthy, 2019, p. 664)

These stereotypes fuel and reinforce participation in *D&D*. As was shown in the previous chapter, *D&D* has historically been considered a game for white men, based on the game's origin in wargames. Furthermore, these stereotypes have often excluded individuals who are women, queer, and people of colour from playing the game.

The game of *D&D* itself was also heavily stigmatised due to the context of the game being seen as either evil and satanic, or a number game for nerds. Therefore, players of *D&D* who care about this stigma in relation to their identity need to either figure out a way to manage the stigma put on both themselves and the game, either by hiding their involvement or rejecting being stigmatised. It is how individuals manage this stigma that is of interest to this study, especially considering one can now listen to *D&D* without actually playing it. This, therefore, allows one to be a member of a group without presenting as one, allowing for status as a hidden member of the group.

Internal Group Management

Subcultural groups perform internal group management, performing what is known as subcultural identity work (Buyukozturk 2022). Here, new initiates to the subculture are initiated into the group, learning the values and practices of the subculture, and upholding these values defines who is a member of the subculture, and who is outside the group (Kolb 2014). This identity management is expressed through presenting one as the authentic self, in the case of the investigation by Dupont (2020) into skateboarding culture. As Buyukozturk (2022) demonstrates, subcultures perform internal monitoring of their members to ensure that they are keeping in line with the values of the group, by reprimanding and discouraging individuals who display values outside the group. By internally monitoring a group to ensure all members share these values, solidarity is maintained among members.

These analyses rely on active groups, where individuals are actively participating in the group through physical presence and involvement. This thesis extends this idea of subcultural identity work to participatory non-participation, to look at the identity work fans who might not necessarily interact with each other manage their identity as a fan, and how that impacts their relationships with other fans.

The Rise of Streaming

One way to experience *D&D* without playing the game is through the expanding entertainment market called streaming. A growing body of scholarship in recent years has analysed streamers, those who perform an activity (often, but not exclusively, playing video games) while talking, called livestreams, while the act of doing a livestream is called streaming (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019; Johnson and Woodcock, 2019; Jodén and Strandell, 2021). As a new leisure activity, understanding of streaming and the interaction between streamer and fans, involves theories of play and groups that have been adapted to an online environment.

People engage with livestreams for a variety of reasons. On the topic of neophytes and demeanor mentioned above, Hamilton, Garretson and Kerne (2014) stated that the learning of a new behaviour was both the researcher's own motivation for starting to watch streamers, and they found this reflected in other viewers. For individual streamers, reasons for participation and how they engage with fans vary to a large degree. Jodén and Strandell (2021, p. 15) analysed not only the streamers, but also their fans and how they engaged with each other and found that streamers can engage fans through "synchronized expectations/behavior (e.g., extensive, rapid and collective hype train and raid -responses), shared symbolic objects (e.g., emojis, memes and inside jokes), and barriers to outsiders (e.g., shared experiences/knowledge of stream/gameplay)."

Most of these livestreams happen on websites such as Twitch, which prioritises live content, with this content often later uploaded to YouTube for a wider audience. Furthermore, livestreams can be influenced by direct engagement with the viewers through text chat features, as well as donations to the streamer they are watching (Jodén and Strandell, 2021). Streamers will often ask questions of their viewers, who respond by typing in the text chat, and that may impact what the streamer does in-game. An example of this is present in Jodén and Strandell, (2021), where the streamer Mithzan, playing *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020), asked his viewers for input on skipping time in the game, normally considered an act of cheating. Through debate with his viewers, he eventually does skip time ahead to make both the game and the stream more enjoyable. These interactions create a community around the streamer, and they enjoy both the game and the commentary.

Hamilton, Garretson and Kerne (2014) consider popular streams open communities, where this interaction is participatory communication "characterised by openness as well as the

means for and encouragement for members to engage in shared activities” (Hamilton, Garretson and Kerne, 2014, p. 1315).

Eventually, as an individual streamer gets more and more popular, they will reach a point where they cannot easily interact with their community live, as the text chat goes from a slow discussion to a fast-moving wall of text. Hamilton, Garretson and Kerne (2014) found that above 100-150 regular members who wrote in the Twitch chat¹⁹, it becomes harder for streamers to directly interact with members of their community, and the group itself begins to break down. However, is possible for a second community element to appear in the form of other sites such as Reddit and Facebook.

D&D has also been streamed online for longer than *Critical Role*. MacCallum-Stewart (2014) analysed *Acquisitions Incorporated*, another show in a similar format to *Critical Role*, and suggests that this series may be designed to teach new players how to play. Through its funding from current *D&D* owner *Wizards of the Coast* and heavy use of outside cultural artefacts popular among geeks such as the online video game *World of Warcraft*, this gives a viewer, presumed to be a geek already, cultural frames to become comfortable watching the show. Furthermore, actions taken in game are explained to the audience, which allows them to understand how the actions work in the context of the rules. Rather than having to read through the rulebooks to understand how to play *D&D*, one can simply watch the show and get a basic understanding.

MacCallum-Stewart (2014) studies streaming of *D&D* through Pierre Levy’s theory of collective intelligence. According to Levy, in the 21st-century the internet will allow knowledge to be formed by the sum of many many voices, known as collective intelligence. Individuals within this collective have expertise in selective areas, which they then combine with others in an online group to form a flexible body of knowledge that changes as individuals join and leave the group. Furthermore, this knowledge is generated according to individual needs, not official constraints.

When applied to online *D&D*, groups streaming their games online form this body of knowledge. They show new players how to play with reference to existing forms of media,

¹⁹ The Twitch chat is a scrolling list of messages which viewers are able to write in under their username. Streamers are able to see messages in the chat, and respond accordingly.

providing an easier entrance to the game compared to reading the rulebooks, as well as social norms and rules for playing.

This thesis uses the understanding of streaming in the construction of how participatory non-participation forms, the way one plays a game without playing a game is through watching others play and get the experience that way. An emerging element of this fan interaction with streamers is the element of parasociality.

Parasociality

As this thesis studies a group that engages with famous or semi-famous figures, the study of parasociality becomes a topic to be addressed to fully understand the way the group operates. The term originates from Horton and Wohl (1956) in their studies of fans of radio, television, and movie stars. Best summed up by their abstract:

One of the more striking characteristics of the new mass media - radio, television, and the movies - that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer. The conditions of response to the performer are analogous to those in the primary group. The most remote and illustrious men are met *as if* they were in the circle of one's peers; the same is true of a character in a story who comes to life in these media in an especially vivid and arresting way. We propose to call this seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer a *para-social relationship*. (Horton and Wohl, 1956, p. 215)

Furthermore, a parasocial bond "characteristically, is one-sided, non-dialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible [to] mutual development" (Horton and Wohl, 1956, p. 215). Effectively, one feels a sense of intimacy to those seen in media, despite having no real social connection. There then exists the possibility for these bonds to feel like a close, intimate relationship (Boyns and Loprieno, 2013).

While they stated that the development of parasocial bonds was uncommon for shows at the time, and in most cases complimented social life, they also focused on the extreme of parasocial bonds. Certain shows, such as the radio drama *The Lonesome Girl* (1947) and television show *The Continental* (1952) intentionally created strong parasocial bonds for men and women respectively. Both attempted to strengthen the parasocial role by talking directly to markets, which further increased ratings. This thesis considers parasociality in relation to *Critical Role*.

Giles (2002, in Stenros and Montola (2011)) states that parasocial bonds need three conditions to be constructed: perceived authenticity and realism of the figure, representation of the figure across different media outlets (such as an actress in various forms of media), and user contexts where parasocial bonds would intensify in co-viewing television. Leith (2021) found that Twitch users directly talking to streamers in the Twitch chat will use more familiar language when talking to the streamer, the type that is more common with close friends and family.

The nature of parasocial relationships has not changed with online media and social interactions. Rihl and Wegener (2019) found that parasocial relationships among German teenagers remained somewhat the same as in more traditional forms of media and that the option to comment or Tweet directly at online celebrities did not change the types of parasocial relationships. Those with a stronger parasocial relationship will comment more, and those with weaker relationships will not comment. Tolbert and Drogos (2019) found a similar effect among tweens, those in the ages of 9-12. They experienced a similar relationship between themselves and YouTubers they enjoyed. From their survey results, they found that $\frac{1}{4}$ of children considered the people they watch online, who they had never met, to be their friends.

Understanding parasociality is key to the understanding the way people engage with celebrities, and as this section has shown, has not changed with the emergence of streaming. Taking into account parasociality is important for a group based around a streamer, as they may develop a parasocial connection.

Through this reading of the literature, a key limitation can be identified: the theories of subculture and streaming all rely on the notion of *active* participation. Subcultural studies have looked at how highly visible groups presented themselves and the meanings generated, with post-subculture often doing the same. Similarly, subcultural capital is presented physical, by showing one's cool factor through in-group knowledge and the collection of items that are appropriate for the group.

Additionally, streaming has looked at both the active streamer and the active fan engage with both the game and one another. It has looked at the active fan, who types and regularly communicates with their favourite streamer, and the one who takes part in all the streams and constantly writes messages in the Twitch Chat to them.

All of these involve the ways people conduct their engagement with the group and not their *lack* of it. But there are several points in this literature which have shown the threads of participatory non-participation. It is out of the weaknesses and strengths that participatory non-participation is developed, investigating the way one can be a part of all these areas *passively*, and still get the same enjoyment as someone who engages actively.

The next step is to substantively investigate the ways individuals engage in non-participatory participation in gaming to see if this form of engagement should also be considered as part of subculture activity. If it does prove to be the case, then existing theories of subculture, with their restrictive focus on *active* participation should be reconsidered and reworked.

Conclusion

Having reviewed the literature on the topic of subcultures, gaming groups, and Twitch it is clear that participatory non-participation is missing from academic debate. It is important to include them due to their growing number and presence in online gaming. As I have not been able to find any published research that focuses on these participants before, in this thesis I set out to find out what they do in a way that engages with current (and as argued limited) theorisations of digital subculture. Exploring this aspect of contemporary gaming culture can only be done through undertaking original research on participatory non-participants. How this was done is covered in the following chapter on the thesis's methodological approach, methods, and ethics.

Chapter 4: Methods and Ethical Considerations

Introduction

This thesis explores the concept of participatory non-participation and investigates its use as an analysis of contemporary gaming subculture. As an understudied form of interaction online, original qualitative data had to be collected to answer this question. This chapter explains why a symbolic interactionist methodological approach was taken, and then outlines the data gathering and analysis methods used to facilitate analysis. This created data that this thesis can use to answer the thesis question.

Methodological approach

This thesis analyses the presence of subcultural activity in non-participatory participation from the symbolic interactionist (SI) perspective, specifically the interactionist approach to subculture developed by Fine and Kleinman (1979). This approach argues that subcultures are bound together not only through shared history and symbols but also by the channels of communication. These channels of communication are not only *within* the subculture but also the channels of communication that enter into the subculture through its other members. They place importance on these channels as the way to figure out a subculture, as the subculture itself evolves by symbolic interaction. Specifically, this methodology enables an understanding of how *Critical Role* fans operate in the larger *D&D* subculture.

A qualitative approach to subcultures opens this thesis up to several qualitative methodologies other than symbolic interactionism, all of which were considered. They included a post-Marxist approach which focused on the ideological role of subcultures in capitalist society (S. Cohen, 2005), a Durkheimian approach with a focus on social cohesion as a way to fight anomie among deviant groups (Blackman, 2014), and an ethnomethodological approach focusing on how subcultures create order and meaning (Manzo, 2010). However, each of these approaches were rejected in favour of the strengths the symbolic interactionist position offers. A post-Marxist approach was found wanting because a focus on class struggle and resistance does not take into account the individual subculturalists feelings about the subculture (Sweetman, 2013). A Durkheimian approach based on social cohesion that underpins deviance would not be able to take into account the individual pleasures that participants can gain outside of social cohesion and anomie (Blackman, 2014)

Ethnomethodology was considered as another possible methodology for this thesis, due to its focus on how individuals experience what they are doing, and how they make sense of their social experiences (Manzo, 2010). However, this emphasis does not take into account multiple-group membership, and studies on what people do while interacting with the subculture. All these points are found in a symbolic interactionist approach, with its focus on subcultures linked through channels of communication and how individuals can be part of multiple groups at the same time (Fine and Kleinman, 1979), which are central to an examination of participatory non-participation in online gaming.

It was SI that was assessed as the most relevant and productive perspective to take to approach the thesis question. Its strength is the ability of SI to study how meaning is formed in groups, even when the meaning involves fantasy games (Fine, 1983). As a thesis analysing group interaction, a methodological approach needed to be able to understand people's desires to engage in a group, their motivations to interact with one another, how they manage their identity in groups, and how that involves a game.

Methods that are closely associated with SI were chosen for the collection and analysis of data. An ethnographic approach would show the channels as they interact naturally, with fans talking to one another without the interaction of the researcher. Surveys would allow greater depth and direct questions about the signs and symbols that are important to the community. Finally, interviews allowed a deeper examination of individual's meanings and reflections of being in the group than could be detailed in the surveys.

Methods

Multiple methods of data collection were adopted due to the perceived possibility that members in this subculture may not want to interact with the researcher in a direct way (interviews), and instead could submit correspondence without these pressures. This was based on a preliminary observation of the community, indicating that it may be difficult to get them to engage directly with a stranger to the fandom. Furthermore, the attempt was to get to fans who might not directly comment online. The goal was to provide a low barrier of entry for those who found the posting on social media sites, and therefore not take too much time.

This study involved three different stages, an ethnographic analysis of online content, surveys of participants, and interviews of those who selected interest based on the interview. These methods are suggested by Fine & Kleinman (1979) as methods for analysis of subculture using

symbolic interactionism, with observation being supplemented by surveys and interviews. These three separate methods of gathering data attempt to provide an overall view of *Critical Role* fans and their interactions; the ethnographic analysis to see how members naturally interact with each other, a survey to gather demographic information and the personal understandings of members of the group, and personal interviews to further this personal understanding.

As a basis to guide this project, Robert Kozinets' *Netnography, Third Edition* (2020) was used, due to its flexible and step-by-step instructions for ethnography on the internet. *Netnography* provides details on how to perform ethnography, surveys, and interviews, and the ways to do them ethically and without compromising participants' privacy.

Each one of these methods informed the approaches of the others. The ethnography ran over the course of the project, and the findings from it are reflected in questions asked during the survey. The survey then informed the interview, where the questions asked related to what was missing from the survey. These findings from both the survey and the interview then influenced how the ethnographic data was analysed. For example, from survey responses and interviews, it was stated that a strong parasocial relationship existed in the fandom. This influenced my investigation in the ethnography, where I more closely examined what was being said for elements of parasociality.

Fortunately, and coincidentally, for this thesis, the third season of *Critical Role* started just as data collection began. 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 analysis I would undertake.

Ethnographic Analysis

Kozinets identifies three separate methods to choose from when studying an internet community ethnographically: investigative, interactive, and immersive (Kozinets, 2020, p. 193). Investigative data can be defined as that gathered by simple passive observation, simply

collecting publicly available data around a topic from websites and then analysing that. Because of the wide range of data posted online, some research can be answered without direct interaction. Interactive data is how it sounds, it is gained from the researcher acting as a researcher and interacting with the community in ways, such as sending an email, asking a question, posting a link, etc. Immersive data is closer to classic ethnography, where one gets among the group and engages as a member, taking field notes and gathering the data in the context. This thesis used investigative data as the approach to the ethnography, not interacting with the online community and merely observing it from the outside, while still gaining an understanding of the group dynamics.

At the time this thesis was being written, the third season of *Critical Role* began streaming on most major platforms. This entered another aspect of the ethnographic phase: to better understand the data being collected, I consumed the series and read online discussion as if I was a fan, gaining investigative data.

Putting the above into action, I watched the first eight episodes of Campaign 3, (21st of October 2021-16th of December 2021), reading comments and trying to be an active consumer of content in the community as much as I could. I didn't comment publicly, not trying to alter the data in any way, but mostly observed fan interactions. I watched new episodes on YouTube, these were released after the initial Twitch livestream, but had the benefit of being able to be paused at any time. I was unable to watch the livestreams due to scheduling conflicts.

My consumption was akin to a podcast, where I would watch/listen to the show while conducting another, more menial task. Based on preliminary observation, this was suspected to be the way that some fans consume the show, and the slight distraction by other tasks wasn't seen as a hindrance, as the show itself is not the focus of analysis. On the 1st of January, 2022, I stopped watching the show and collecting ethnographic data in order to focus on analysing and writing.

In order to find the sites used in this analysis, the keyword "*Critical Role* #CriticalRole" was put into various sites, including Reddit, Facebook, Tumblr and Twitter. From these, several communities were found to be suitable for analysis. It should be noted that all of these websites are operated on large social media platforms. Lacking in this study were any individual and independent websites or forums run by fans: all were located in larger centralised sources.

For the entirety of this stage, an immersion journal was written as a separate file on the computer and based on Kozinets' guidelines, based on an ethnographer's field notes. The journal is a reflective journal that is written while investigating online, and represents a running dialogue of the researcher's thoughts. Written in real-time, the idea is to get the raw thoughts of a researcher while investigating the data. It serves as both a narrative charting the paths the researcher chose in their investigations, and also to understand and reflect on why some data was explored over others (in terms of immersive data).

My use of this journal was limited, due to difficulty in collecting and analysing ethnographic data that developed the thesis argument, and therefore my journaling the way Kozinets suggests did not happen. In my use, a link was posted to something useful, often with some commentary on what I felt about the link at the time. If it was deemed useful, it was often put immediately into analysis rather than kept in the journal to develop. A more productive site of data acquisition was the following method, surveys.

Surveys

Surveys were chosen to provide a low barrier for the participants to contribute to this study, lacking the requirements on the participants for an interview. Furthermore, the surveys were designed to generate interest in the topic itself, which would then lead to interviews. These lowered requirements would especially be helpful for individuals who may be uncomfortable talking to a stranger over the internet as identified above. It would also help alleviate the issue that many people may not be willing to engage in a long discussion with a researcher at a university they may have never heard of, but a quick survey in the privacy of their own home was easier.

The SI perspective informed the way the questions were crafted. This perspective created questions asking how members of the community engage with one another, important moments in the group history, shared signs and symbols, and what their personal connection to the series is. However, due to an error in the survey, a question was not included:

Can you tell me if you participate in other online groups? What other online groups do you participate in? What kinds of connections do you see, such as seeing similar people/fanart or ideas? Are there other connections?

This question was considered crucial to the analysis of subcultures, as the approach of this thesis argues that subcultures are made up of the cultural interlocks between other groups, so to exclude investigation into interlocking groups would be to ignore a central part. To make up for this error, the question was asked in the interview.

The final question of this survey led to the next step, interviews, by asking the participants if they would be willing to undergo an open-ended interview with the researcher at a later date. This would lead to those interested in the topic and wish to discuss their engagement with the series and the community further.

This survey was created in Qualtrics, the official survey software used for survey research at the University of Canterbury. The questions were refined over the course of several weeks, and the final version sent out is located in the appendix chapter, under the heading Survey Questions.

Interviews

The final phase of data collection involved an open-ended interview with the researcher over a digital service of their choosing. As most participants were likely international, it was decided to host this interview over the internet. Therefore, in the nature of making the interviewee comfortable it was decided to give them the choice of what service to undertake the interview. Twelve questions were asked to further understand the relationship the interviewees have in relation to *D&D* and *Critical Role*. These questions are located in the appendix, under Interview Questions. These questions were generated based on what was felt to be missing from answers in the survey, as well as suggestions from the survey.

While there was a wider interest in the interviews than expected, more than twenty participants had to be cut out of the interview process as they did not give available contact information. Due to a lack of communication, many assumed I had access to their emails from the previous section and could contact them through that. Several others provided American phone numbers, which, as a scholar located in New Zealand, I was unable to contact.

Interviews took place over a variety of services, including Zoom, and Discord²⁰, the latter of which is a popular chat application. Overall, there were a total of 4 interviews done, ranging in length from 27 to 42 minutes. Two of these interviewees were students, while the other two had day jobs where they listened to *Critical Role* during their commute.

Once all interviews were completed, they were transcribed by myself, with the transcripts stored on the servers of the University of Canterbury, as per ethical procedures. All interviewees were given a pseudonym in order to anonymise the data. These pseudonyms are Lisa, Saul, Mark, and Stuart.

Analysis of the data

For analysis of the data, a grounded approach as outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1999) was applied. Grounded theory emerged from SI perspective (Milliken and Schreiber, 2012) as an analytical method that is most useful when applied to contexts that are undertheorized. Given that participatory non-participation is an under-theorized area, it was decided that a grounded theory approach with its capacity to build theoretical accounts out of the analysis of the data would be the most appropriate (Jeon, 2004).

From Qualtrics, the survey was exported as a spreadsheet file. Reading across, the rows of this survey showed the contents of an individual respondent's contribution, giving me an idea of the type of person who gave certain responses. Reading down, individual columns showed us the collection of every answer to an individual question. For initial thematic analysis, the columns (which contained every answer to individual questions) were copy and pasted into a separate document, and then the contents coded. For more detailed answers, such as richly described interaction or what the show means, the analysis was conducted *across* to figure out what kind of respondents gave certain answers.

Through the generation of these codes, memos were kept that traced my thoughts and linkages between the data which allowed for a more reflexive analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1999; Milliken and Schreiber, 2012). These memos related to the emergence of new ideas throughout the coding, such as "Learned about social play", "A religious element to the way some engage",

²⁰ I explicitly put Discord as a recommended place to have this meeting, as I assumed that a portion of the *Critical Role* fanbase would have a Discord, and it would allow an easier way to get in contact. Several people even asked to be contacted for the interview through Discord to start with, giving me their Discord ID's to contact them.

“Queer representation is a big plus for some.” These were developed into six overarching themes: subcultural indicators, the ways of consumption, the pleasures of being a participatory non-participant, the learning of the game, managing stigma, and parasocial connections. These six categories are analysed in the following chapters.

Data wants to be free, but does it want to be public?

One major ethical consideration for this type of research is the nature of consent for data posted in a public place, and to whom this data belongs. Is it the site itself, such as YouTube, or Facebook? Or does the content of the platforms belong to the individual who posts it, therefore needing to seek the consent of every user who posts on websites?

However, what could be coined the digital has various effects on the analysis of this study. For one, looking into chat reactions on a Twitch stream, comments on a YouTube video, or a Reddit thread one cannot possibly get consent from the hundreds of people watching a video when analysing their content. Ideally, researchers would get informed consent from these people before using their comments in research. However, this data is public, open to anyone, and therefore we shouldn't need to get consent or hide the names/places we got this information.

There are also issues in archiving the ethnographic data collected here. For example, the University of Canterbury (where this research is archived) insists that data collected must be stored securely, with only those included in the original research ethics application. The ethnographic data specifically²¹ faces ethical issues, with the use of storage and quoting. As *publicly available* data, is this project beholden to store this data as securely, even if said data can (technically) be found by anyone? And is it ethical to directly quote this data in this work, given that it is easily traceable back through merely entering the quote into a search engine²²?

Furthermore, there is the issue of perception of platforms, and what privacy the data has there. For example, we need to ask if online public spaces still operate as public spaces, sociologically. The American Sociological Association Code of Ethics states that:

Confidentiality is not required with respect to observations in public places, activities conducted in public, or in other settings where no rules of privacy are provided by

²¹ This excludes the survey and interview data, both of which are stored separately on University servers

²² What Kozinets (2020, p. 184) calls “Uncloaked Data.”

law or custom. Similarly, assurances of confidentiality is not required in the case of information available from public records or unrestricted internet sites. (Association, 2018, p. 11)

Kozinets (2020), developer of the Netnographic method this thesis adopts, devotes a whole chapter of his book to the discussion of ethics on the internet. He details that there is a “consent gap” (Kozinets, 2020, p. 172) in academic research concerning social media. Academics insist that data posted online is public, and therefore is free to use in research. However, the general public instead prefers that their publicly-available data is not used in research, despite knowing that what they post online is public. This raises issues for the ethically-minded researcher.

Taking the above into account, this project faced these ethical issues in the following ways. Notably, the consent gap, while understood, needs to be ignored for the ethnographic stage to progress at all. While it is acknowledged that individuals might own the comment they place online, it would be impossible to ask consent for every user analysed during this study. As many users on these sites post using a pseudonym, it wasn't gauged to be important to not directly quote during the ethnographic analysis, unless there was evidence of identifying or personal information in the quote.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the methodological approach that this thesis takes, as well as the methods used in data acquisition and analysis. Outlining the benefits of a symbolic interactionist perspective of subcultures, this chapter describes how ethnography, survey, and interview methods were used in the collection of data, using websites related to *Critical Role* as data sites. Finally, it has detailed the six areas of analysis for the next six chapters: subcultural indicators or elements of subculture, the ways of consumption, the pleasures of being a participatory non-participant, the learning of the game, managing stigma, and parasocial connections. The following chapter begins the analysis of the data, starting with the signs of subculture in participatory non-participation.

Chapter 5: Subcultural indicators in participatory non-participation

Introduction

This thesis proposes a theory of participatory non-participation as an understudied form of contemporary gaming subculture. In the last chapter the methodological approach, methods of data collection and analysis were discussed. The following six chapters develop the analysis, looking into how fans participate and what individuals get out of participatory non-participation. Starting with the subcultural indicators in this chapter, this thesis then moves to how fans consume the series, the pleasures of participatory non-participation, the learning of a game, stigma management, and finally the creation of a parasocial connection.

The focus of this thesis is to make the claim that a new form of online engagement, participatory non-participation, is a contemporary form of subculture. Therefore, this thesis needs to *demonstrate* that participatory non-participation operates as a subculture, rather than assuming simply that it does so. To begin this, the next section examines the demographic section of the survey and shows how and where fans of the series are located. This indicates the demographic profile of group membership. Next, taking the data collected from all phases of the project, this chapter demonstrates that *Critical Role* fandom display key indicators of being a subculture. First, group identity, or its fluctuation, is examined. Secondly, gate-keeping, or the high barrier of entry to partake in the group, is examined. Third the diverse shared history of the group is outlined. Fourth and finally the signs and symbols particular to this group, as well as how those signs and symbols help identify other fans is outlined.

These four ways of engaging are all characteristics of sub-cultural activity, as they delineate who is in the group and who isn't.

Results and Analysis of Demographics

From the survey posted online, a total of 244 respondents replied to the main survey, 172 enrolled for the raffle, and 75 applied for an interview. Out of the 244 respondents, 243 completed the secondary section on demographics, showing that entering this information was not as uncomfortable as I initially thought. The summary of the data is collected in the tables in the appendix, under *Survey Results*.

Given the scope of a Master's thesis, it was not feasible to interview every participant who applied for an interview in the timeframe (1 year). Instead, a selection strategy of simple random sampling was chosen because the separation of survey results from any identifying demographic details, made other methods of sampling that rely on demographic factors unusable. For the selection strategy, the first step was to remove applications for an interview that could not be answered either because of incomplete information given or information given that the researcher was not able to use, such as international phone numbers. This left the total count at 51 eligible for interviewing. From these, the selection strategy was to randomly choose 10, the maximum interview number that was granted HEC permission to conduct. They were then contacted with information sheets to take the interview further. Five of the selected 10 emailed back with confirmation for an interview, with four being conducted due to the fifth not coming to the arranged interview.

Inferences from the demographic data

Several of the researcher's own biases were both challenged and confirmed in the analysis of the demographic data. For instance, given the stereotypes surrounding *D&D* as a white male game, it would not be surprising if a majority of people interested in the series would be male (Paaßen, Morgenroth and Stratemeyer, 2016). However, it was surprising that according to the survey results, only 60% of viewership is male, with the other 40% being made up of 30% female viewers and the remaining 10% being neither of these.

Furthermore, it was expected that the majority of the viewership would be in the 18-25 range due to, I presumed, having more free time to watch long videos, however the majority of viewers were in the 26-35 range, which challenged my expectations around the age of participants. One explanation of this may be that as players of *D&D* get older, they have less time to play the game but still have the desire to experience playing *D&D*, and *Critical Role* provides this. This older age range also challenges theories of subculture as being youth-oriented, which people will inevitably grow out of as they get older and conform to the dominant culture (Gelder, 2005). An explanation for the older age range may be that partaking in *Critical Role* fandom helps delay "social ageing" (Thornton, 1995, p. 102). Work and marriage anchor people in their social place, and adjust their life around such conditions. Leisure cultures allow one to buffer against social ageing, "not against the dread of getting older, but of resigning oneself to one's position in a highly stratified society" (Thornton, 1995, p. 102). Enabling older individuals to take part may be one of the highlights of both this series

and participatory non-participation. Another factor may be that the cast of *Critical Role* is older than 30, which may help draw viewers in.

Geographically, the fandom that responded to the survey is mostly located in America (136 respondents), with over half of participants putting their location there. The United Kingdom is the next largest (29 respondents), followed by Canada (12 respondents) two smaller clumps in Australia (8 respondents) and New Zealand (7 respondents).

In terms of living status, the high rate of participants who selected living at home for their accommodation status may indicate a flaw in the question asked rather than suggesting anything about the characteristics of participatory non-participation. The question could be interpreted as either living with their parents (in the case of younger respondents) or living with one's immediate family (such as one's partner or spouse and children) and does not give an accurate account of this group.

Evidence of subcultural practice

This section of the thesis analyses the results of the survey qualitatively. This section investigates the various elements of subculture that are present within the *Critical Role* fandom, such as the group identification, the barriers for entry, and a shared history/signs/symbols. These elements are key points to the focus on what makes a subculture (Abramson and Modzelewski, 2011).

Group Identity & Levels of Engagement in the Community

Firstly, this section identifies the group identity that forms around watching the series, and the differing levels of fandom engagement this offers members of the community. The key finding from this section is that it identifies the differing levels of fandom engagement individuals can have within the community, and how they interpret their place within the fandom. What comes from this is that the group identity, as a fan of the series, can still be constructed even in small groups/isolation. This distinction is critical to understanding how participatory non-participation operates, and if it is a form of subculture.

Individual involvement with the *Critical Role* series and fandom varied and can be divided into what I categorise as three different levels of fans relating to how they interact with the wider community. At the top level there are the hardcore fans, those who actively discuss the series online. At the middle level, there are the fans who still actively discuss the series, but among

friends or in a curated group. And finally, at the bottom level, there are the fans who do not discuss the series at all.

The top level and most engaged of fans are the hardcore. From the survey, 49% of survey participants identified as hardcore, talking about how they loved the show and how actively they engaged with the community. These fans label themselves as Critters²³, and voraciously consume every bit of official content they can find, even down to buying official merchandise. Fans who live in America can attend live shows, and Critters outside express a longing to attend these shows²⁴. They regularly and happily communicate and discuss the show in online spaces, and have stated that the show has helped them in their personal lives, as several responses point out:

I would define myself as a supporter and avid viewer of their content, who takes delight and pleasure in watching eight nerdy-ass voice actors do crazy, serious, comedic, and heartwarming things online. What this means to me is that *Critical Role* has become such a huge part of my life, lifting up my spirits from when I was not in a good place, and that has made me want to support the casts' efforts in what they are endeavoring to do, with, of course, criticism if necessary.²⁵

Beyond entertainment, *Critical Role* has had a massive positive effect on my emotional and mental well-being. I take a lot of personal and creative inspiration from the characters and even the cast themselves. It has made me braver to be more true to who I am and what my real life passions are.

It means I enjoy watching a group of nerdy-ass voice actors sit around and play D&D, for one. I think though that it also means more. It means that I'm willing to be invested in these characters that, despite being fictional, embody so much of what it means to be human.

²³ Obviously a play on words, on one hand it refers to a shortened term for *Critical Role*, on the other, a reference to the plural form of cute animals.

²⁴ They are, however, often still recorded and live-streamed

²⁵ Survey responses are presented as submitted and are not amended for grammar.

In the next level of fandom engagement, the middle level (17% of survey participants), are the Critters who solely have discussions about the show in their personal lives, either with their partners or friends. A lot of these individuals reject the notion of interacting online, either due to a lack of interest in online groups, or having experienced hostility in the online community. One response sums it up as:

I've come to believe that fandom is best spent with 10 or 20 like minded souls who can share your joy without dragging you into the mud of popular discourse. I often regret getting more active on twitter due to CR. The fan art is fantastic to look at but the toxicity of the bird app [Twitter] is too much to make it worth it. Texting along with some friends live is much saner.

Within this middle level, fans also chose to simply browse online discussion in order to validate their opinion, but direct interaction with one another was low in this instance, preferring again to stick to the discussion with their friends. In this instance the issue was often the *fear* of online discussion, having issues of control and what was said in a semi-public space. Online discussion tended to be reserved for people who were already friends.

Some (34% of survey participants) simply perform the purest form of engagement: watching the videos online and silently consuming the content of both the show and sometimes fan content. For these types of fans, *Critical Role* is just a show to be enjoyed, not something with a large community to get into. As one participant said, it was like being in a theatre box:

JW: Do you have any thoughts on the fandom itself? Some people say they really like it and some people are really against it because of the toxicity.

Saul: Well I... I do like the general energy. If you remove, if you do like, I've seen through the little interaction I've seen and what I've heard people say about the fandom, I've heard people say that "Oh it's one of the best. It's a lot more positive than anything else you'll see" and then there's that some people that just, like me, just watch the show and don't really interact that much. I like when, I like the general positivity. I've heard so many great stories that people have met other people through *Critical Role* and such, but that doesn't really seem like the path I want to go I just want to enjoy the story.

JW: Right you don't really care about the community aspect, but you like the idea that's there's a positive community basically.

Saul: Yeah, I'm... I feel like the best comparison to my situation is that we're all, everyone's in the theatre and I'm like in a little box in the front, and I'm not paying, like I can't see anyone, and I can't really see anyone that often. I'm just watching actors and maybe once in a while I'll interact with one of the cast or something like that.

At this bottom level of engagement there were fans who didn't want to interact with members of the fandom due to the perceived toxic attitudes of some members, or the perceived parasocial relationships some members of the community create (this is discussed further in Chapter 10). For these fans, they still loved the show, and also loved the idea of a community to interact with. But the realities of online interaction sometimes proved to be too much:

The most off-putting thing about the *Critical Role* 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 DnD community due to those fans.

Therefore, it was not the participation in the community that mattered to be a participatory non-participant in *Critical Role*, as no matter at what level they engaged in, participants in both the survey and interviews considered themselves fans. What matters more is how they interact with the series.

Barriers for Entry

The analysis also highlighted barriers for entry, which differentiates those in the group from those outside it, a key point in the definition of subcultures (Fine and Kleinman, 1979). The barriers for entry for the *Critical Role* group were consumption-based, being built on how one consumes the *Critical Role* series, and the dedication it requires. For instance, what unified all levels of the fans was that they watched the series. This highlights a major barrier to entry for newer members: the high time investment the series requires. As of Episode 8 of Season 3, to watch the entire series would take 43 days and 4 hours of continuous viewing to fully enjoy the series (CriticalRoleStats, 2022). Even were one to jump just into the current campaign, it would

still take 31-and-a-half hours (CriticalRoleStats, 2022). This was identified by fans as one of the major obstacles for getting new fans into the series:

Saul: Yeah. I think length is a big contender. Like, if, because there's been so much that's happened through Campaign 1 and Campaign 2, and now we have Campaign 3 just rush out. There's a lot. So, it's kind of hard. Do you want, like it's hard to tell people do you want, you can start fresh, but there's like a whole bunch of stuff right here that you can do also.

However, those who do consume entire series will be the ones who experience the strongest emotional connection to both the series, and the subculture. Jodén and Strandell (2021) found that intentionally causing viewers to engage with the archive of streams allows them to build up an attachment to the series, rather than simply being told what was happening. Such an experience is true of *Critical Role* as well, due to the events of each stream following a narrative progression.

Shared History

Watching the series provided a shared history in itself, but fans could easily highlight key moments for them, what Fine (1983) refers to as a shared culture. A shared history helps bind the subculture together, and combined with barriers for entry creates solidarity among the group by showing who is in the group (Fine, 1983).

Question 4 of the survey asked about shared moments, and the collective responses totals 12710 words. The most shared moments were ones of either heightened emotional, symbolic, or comedic value. Some examples of these moments include the death of character Mollymauk, the ending of campaign 1 where the party defeated the evil god Vecna²⁶, Nott's character arc²⁷, and the romantic relationship between the characters Vex'ahlia and Percy.

One moment in the shared history that came up frequently in the survey was how the character of Jester out-manuevered a monster known as a hag during a deal, using their

²⁶ The major antagonist for the first campaign.

²⁷ A character who initially appears as a goblin, before being revealed to be a cursed halfling who took the form of a goblin for two years.

creativity and a magical item that they had for many episodes. While this moment took creativity on the part of Jester and luck in that the hag failed to defeat the spell, this moment gained an extra symbolic layer through the connection this had to for the character's backstory. However, this symbolic layer can only be appreciated by fans who have watched the series and deeply understand the character:

It's hard to convey how important certain moments are to non-fans. They can think Jester's trick on the hag was cool, but they wouldn't understand how important that moment was to Jester's relationship to the Traveller²⁸.

The language used to discuss this moment highlighted the creativity of the play, with one response calling it "peak *D&D*", most responses highlighted how this moment was important to them, citing that not only was it technically impressive, it's symbolic component elevated the moment.

This provides one example of how the group experiences and references a shared history together. To *Critical Role* fans, these shared moments, which can only be understood by other fans, provide the building blocks for a shared culture. These moments, experienced by many and which become important to the group, contribute to the shared culture and values of the group (Fine and Kleinman, 1979; Abramson and Modzelewski, 2011). Further solidarity can be obtained through understanding the groups shared signs and symbols, and contributing to them.

Shared Signs and Symbols

Shared signs and symbols help in the identification of other fans, and certain members of the community said these signs helped them feel closer to certain members of the community, especially if they were observed out in public.

Fans of *Critical Role* are able to identify one another through the use of two subcultural tools: Shibboleths and merchandise. Throughout the show's run, certain moments have become ingrained more than just a regular shared history. They have become memes to the fans, in

²⁸ As a Cleric, the character of Jester drew their power from their worship of the Traveller. Therefore, Jester's relationship to the Traveller formed an important part of their character.

both senses of the term²⁹, and in-jokes. These terms include “You Spice”³⁰, Bidet³¹, and Captain Tusktooth³².

Contributing to this, many of the participants labelled the subcultural capital of the series as a way to identify fans physically. Here, departing from Thornton (1995), capital refers solely to physical items, T-shirts, stickers, and books, that gain worth within the subculture. Three of the items most commonly mentioned were T-shirts, pins, and *The Explorer’s Guide to Wildemont* (2020), a *D&D* rulebook which is set in the world of *Critical Role*, with an adventure which can be played at home. It provides a setting, adventures, and items for fans of *Critical Role* and new players.. Buying these seemed to be a marker to individuals that they were more interested fans, wanting to support and experience the world further³³ These objects function as identifiers, allowing one to subtly broadcast to others that they are members of the fandom, and hopefully allow new friendships to bloom:

In the before times [Likely before COVID-19] I would also interact with other Critters at cons and I have pin badges that I wear to subtly broadcast my fandom.

And another respondent:

So, I see plenty of people at my job and notice things that they have on them (tattoos, pins etc.) so I always ask, “CR fan? Who’s your favorite character and why?” just to see their opinion.

Another item of subcultural capital is how many of the other *Critical Role* media one consumes. These are the various extra series that are produced, such as the podcast Talks Machina, a web

²⁹ In internet slang, the term is used to refer to images that are shared and modified, often with comedic text.

³⁰ This a reference to campaign 1, when the character of Scanlan, played by Sam Riegel, was looking for a substance called suude, which he assumed was a drug, and when asking around for it he asked people “You spice” to try and find it. Suude was not a drug.

³¹ Bidet is a mispronunciation of “Good Day” by the character Grog, who is physically strong but lacks intelligence, and which caught on as a greeting.

³² Tusktooth is a name that turned up for Fjord, who is a captain on a ship. The name comes the fact that Fjord is a half-orc, and has tusks.

³³ Of course, the *Explorers Guide to Wildemont* (2020) rulebook may counter this finding, as some may buy it to play the adventures in the book itself, not simply as something to display.

series produced during the COVID-19 lockdown called Narrative Telephone by the *Critical Role* cast, and *Between the Sheets*, where the cast members were interviewed personally. Through the viewing and experience of these shows, fans were able to show their commitment to the series.

Subcultural capital can also be accrued by performing important actions within the community. One member of note is fan Flando Maltrizian, who has the important role of his comments always being at the top of a *Critical Role* YouTube video: the comments provide timestamps for important or humorous events in an episode. While his subcultural capital is YouTube specific, in one interview conducted for this thesis, Flando Maltrizian was identified as someone praised by the community for the service he provides.

There is a final element to one's reputation as a Critter: attending the live shows. Despite these shows still being recorded live and put on the internet, many express a desire to travel just to attend and physically see the group play. As these live shows are primarily centred in America, it would take considerable effort from international fans to travel to see the shows, however certain members of the community said that they would be willing to in order to see the show live if possible, even travelling to America in order to see it.

These more active fans are a minority of the thesis's participants, (1% of participants) but appear to be the most enthusiastic members of the fandom. Therefore, it may be possible at the top level identified, there is another form, where the consumption practices of the group go beyond simply participatory non-participation, watching people play a game, and may lean closer to understandings of fandom (Peeples, Yen and Weigle, 2018). For these fans consumption of the series and engagement with other fans is central rather than passive. Unfortunately, the data collected did not fully account for these participants, as they were in the minority of the data collected.

Conclusion

This chapter has advanced the thesis argument by showing that participatory non-participation does qualify as a subculture. First, this chapter analysed the results of the demographic section of the survey, to get an idea of who was a member of the community. Next, this chapter began the analysis of the survey data, as well as the interviews. Through this analysis, the claim that participatory non-participation is a subculture was presented. In the participatory non-participation fandom of *Critical Role*, the group has a distinct identity, has a

barrier for entry, and shares a common history and signs and symbols. These are all ways of demarcating *membership* of a subculture and contributes the aspect of group membership to the argument that participatory non-participation is an example of subculture in contemporary digital society.

The following chapter now turns to the ways that *Critical Role* fans consume the series, and how that affects their engagement with both the game and the larger group.

Chapter 6: Ways to consume *Critical Role*

Introduction

The previous chapter set out the argument that fans of *Critical Role*, as participatory non-participants, display the key markers for membership in a subculture. The next step in the discussion is to understand the participatory and non-participatory nature of these fans, how and why people watch the show in the first place. To come to watch four hours of a weekly *D&D* stream consistently requires both a want and a preferred way to consume it, with many coming to the series through a variety of different platforms.

This chapter analyses the differing ways that fans of *Critical Role* can consume the series, how that impacts how they enjoy the series, and how they interpret their way of consumption in relation to others. It examines the different ways individuals experience the series, through listening, watching, and watching while performing other activities, in relation multitasking in contemporary society, and the identification within the subcultural theory of Fine and Kleinman (1979). Continuing the argument from the previous chapter, this chapter argues that even passive consumption is still consumption, and in that way, can still be considered a *D&D* subculture.

Consumption practices

This thesis now needs to consider just how and why people watch the show in the first place. To come to watch four hours of a weekly *D&D* podcast consistently requires both a want to consume it and a preferred way to consume it, and many came to the series for and through a variety of different platforms.

As an entertainment product, many consume the series in a variety of different ways. *Critical Role* is available across a variety of platforms, including Twitch, YouTube, and Spotify to name a few. Each platform offers a different way to experience the series, and therefore different ways to engage with the show and the game of *D&D*. Watching the series live on Twitch has several benefits, the major one being that by being broadcast live, according to one interviewee Saul, it offered a sense of immediacy, to watch it while it's being made. This, they felt, gave them a greater sense of connection to the series. They liked to watch the series on the screen,

to physically see the players and their interactions. They further stated by watching this way, they got more out of it:

JW: Do you feel like you miss something if you don't watch it physically... Watch the video I should say.

Saul: Kind of. One of the funny things about *Critical Role* is that the cast is extremely invested of course, so they also put like facial emotions and stuff like that. For instance with Campaign 2, Liam's character Caleb was just, very very emotional [sic] and while you couldn't pick up the emotion with the dialogue you could pick up emotion more with, with facial expressions. Like the mannerisms that Liam had.

This acting is likely assisted by the high level of visual production of the show. High quality cameras capture the faces and expressions of the cast, and when combat begins detailed structures and figurines are brought out, with the camera focusing then on the models. The set's background, as of Season 3, is detailed, with a lighting system that changes based on what lighting conveys the atmosphere of the characters.

However, for Lisa, another interviewee, they had issues with watching the series live, as it was *too* immediate for them:

Lisa: I think definitely watching it live um, I've actually found that watching it live is actually a little bit harder for me as of late. Because while it's interesting and good because you know I get everything fresh right then and there, no spoilers and everything's surprising. Um, sometimes I miss something, and then I can't rewind or pause it or go back and that's why I prefer watching it non-live.

One way explain how extreme live-viewing is, is in the dedication required to watch it. For the fans who give complete focus (such as one participant who turns their phone off) then watching the livestream may be their preferred form of consumption. However if one is not the top level fan identified in Chapter 5, then the immediacy and focus of live *Critical Role* requires listeners to split their focus between the show and other activities.

Multitasking

Despite the apparent importance of this visual element, some fans perform other tasks while listening to the show in the background. Saul, mentioned above, likes to make art, painting and making sculptures while listening in the background. Another interviewee, Lisa, likes to study and browse Twitter while watching, especially in less active moments. The other two members interviewed, Mark and Stuart, preferred to listen to the show while on their daily commute. For some in the survey, daily chores or repetitive work was done while listening:

I became a fan at the end of 2017/campaign 1. At the time I was undertaking research that required a lot of mundane repetitive work, and listening to CR was a great way to pass that time.

This act of watching while performing another activity is called multitasking (Wang and Tchernev, 2012), and the act of media multitasking is an increasing habit in online society (Yoon, Duff and Bunker, 2021). Multitasking can be done either stationary, such as browsing the internet while watching a movie, or while doing something more active, like the above-mentioned act of listening to the series while performing repetitive work (Kenyon, 2008). This act of performing an important task while enjoying media is considered a key component of multitasking in contemporary society.

Critical Role watching seems to be firmly placed within multitasking, being the preferred way for individuals to consume the show. In the survey, eight participants said that they multitasked while consuming *Critical Role*. However, this response was unprompted, and caused a question about multitasking to be asked directly in the interview. All four participants in the interview stated that they nearly always multitasked while enjoying *Critical Role*, showing that it is a common practice.

In communications research, multitasking is known to decrease focus but increase enjoyment of activities (Wang and Tchernev, 2012), and is considered a way to make the most of one's time (Kenyon, 2008). Such a notion would continue here as well, with enjoyment of *Critical Role* being seemingly enhanced with doing another activity. It would therefore seem that the downtime of *Critical Role* allows for one's focus to switch easily, and anything missed can easily be re-watched.

This act of being in the subculture while performing another task aligns with one element of the interactionist view on subcultures: identification (Fine and Kleinman, 1979). Members of a subculture will often identify with both their chosen subculture and the larger society which they live in, switching how latent or activated each identity is. By listening to *Critical Role* while performing another task, it is possible that their identities can be both activated and latent at the same time, presenting while being active in the subculture through the act of listening.

After watching the most recent episode in whatever form, many turned to the weekly online threads created on websites such as Reddit and Tumblr. In them, fans would speculate on topics such as new characters, theories on what events during the episode will lead to, and how they felt the episode was in general. Reading these threads was a common occurrence for those interviewed, as Lisa stated:

Usually I'll go to Reddit and there's usually some, the *Critical Role* sub[Reddit] on Reddit, and they have pinned the discussion of the latest episode. And I like to go there and watch what other people think. And just kind of get an idea and see what other people are thinking or theorising or reactions you know, I like to interact with the community that way.

In reading these threads they felt a connection to the wider community through the building of collective intelligence (Jenkins, 2008). However, the way *Critical Role* community is run is different from the *Survivor* communities Jenkins analysed, for unlike *Survivor* there is no way to try and figure out where the show is taking place, who is voted off, or who wins, and of course, the dice could permanently change the course of the game. What they have in common is the fan community who share information and thoughts about how they feel the show will go on, based on factors others might have missed.

There seems to be one recurring reason as to why people stop watching: the high level of time the show requires. Lack of interest in the show never seems to come up, simply that the time required to adequately consume the show cannot be given in a busy life. This seems to counter many other sentiments expressed by participants during the survey, where watching the show was a substitute for a lack of time to play *D&D*.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the differing ways that members of the *Critical Role* community enjoy the series, and the various ways to enjoy it changes their involvement as a fan. There is passively listening while enjoying another task, watching live, and listening to the series solely as a podcast while conducting other activities. By analysing these in identification and multitasking, this chapter shows that consumption of *Critical Role* can be engaged in passively, without obviously presenting as a member. Another way to say this is that fans consume *Critical Role* in ways that are non-participatory.

The next chapter begins identifying the distinctive aspects of participatory non-participation, especially the unique pleasures involved.

Chapter 7: The Pleasures of Participatory Non-participation

Introduction

One area of analysis this thesis sought to investigate was why one would watch someone else play a game rather than play a game itself. Initial hypotheses involved a lack of money to purchase the game or a lack of time to play with the game³⁴. However if both of these two basic reasons are also ruled out, what other reasons would one be a participatory non-participant.

To put it another way, what *pleasures* are there to be found in participatory non-participation?

This chapter investigates the pleasures of participatory non-participation, namely enjoying the series as an entertainment product, a religious connection, and how fans can experience the playing of a game without playing a game. Providing an example of *Critical Role* fans, this chapter looks into the experience of being able to play *D&D* when their personal lives may not allow it. This contributes to our understanding of participatory non-participation looking into the way one can engage and not at the same time, and still find this engagement pleasurable.

The series as fun

Several responses noted that watching *Critical Role* was just fun for them. While this thesis seeks to explore the group identity and solidarity created around the game, it could also be said that lurking is just a form of entertainment and that it's enjoyable.

One question asked during the interview phase was "What is it that keeps you watching when there is so much other stuff?" and the four answers all trended towards the same thing: that the show is a source of great enjoyment, the cast is funny and clever, and it makes them smile.

Goffman (1961) seriously considered fun a topic of sociological analysis in his aptly-titled paper, *Fun in Games*. Particularly, Goffman pays notice to engrossment, to the way that multiple people can become engaged in a task. *Critical Role* seems to have some of that, with hundreds of people watching a bunch of voice actors play *Dungeons & Dragons*.

³⁴ Especially prevalent for a game such as *D&D*, where multiple people must co-ordinate their schedules in order to play.

While the most baseline reason to enter the series is the enjoyment, there is also a therapeutic aspect to participatory non-participation, watching a series that allows people to get through hard times:

When I was lonely or depressed, Crit Role were surrogate friends and family. Something very comforting to relax to after a long day. Something to look forward every week.

This show quite literally saved my life. It's the only thing that kept me going for over a year when I was at my worst and most suicidal. Only wanting to know how the story ended kept me alive for another week. Eventually I had my own stories I wanted to tell and I started getting help and now I'm in a much better place. CR will always have a place in my heart.

This form of entertainment is helped by the spontaneous narrative and the reactions of the cast were credited as what made this entertainment so unique: to see the cast react with surprise just as the audience do. The only one who is aware of what *might* happen is Mercer. For fans, their emotional engagement was assisted by the fact that the emotions presented on screen, be it surprise, shock, or sadness, are felt to be genuine. Unlike a TV series what is shown isn't staged or scripted, and the fans experience the emotions in sync with the cast members:

I became a fan in start of campaign 2, earlier I had watched some other online rpgs a bit, and tried the start of campaign 1, but the production values were too bad in the beginning of it for it to be enjoyable. The reason I have been keeping watching is multifaceted. For one it offers enjoyment in very different rythm from normal books, movies or series, where books are slow, but not so in the social side, which crit role excels on, movies are very fast paced with no time for slower enjoyment and tv series are in between, but without the possibility use too much imagination. So it gave something no other form of media could give, it also gave possibility to go back to own roleplaying years, while it is now much harder to get group together because of age and family situations, in earlier years I used to play once in a week and watching *Critical Role* gives me the same feeling of being in a land of imagination, wonder and friendship once a week, like back in the old golden days of my roleplaying youth.

This thought of *Critical Role* as a new, exciting form of media could be found in "re-enchantment" (Berkers and Ejick, 2017, p. 410) or "disenchanted enchantment" (Williams *et al.*,

2018, p. 235). The term, borrowed from Weber and his writings on disenchantment in modernity, that in our secularised society there is a lack of magic in the world (Williams *et al.*, 2018). Berkers and Ejick (2017) write how disenchantment has seeped into everyday life, that in modernity many forms of culture have been “McDonalized”, where entertainment becomes efficient, replicable, easy to produce and automated. They then compared to this process to the work of Adorno and Horkheimer, who in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment (1947)* state that a film’s “outcome can be invariably predicted from the start - who will be punished, rewarded, forgotten - and in light music the prepared ear can always guess the continuation after the first bars of a hit song and is gratified when it actually occurs” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1947, cited in Berkers and Ejick (2017, p. 409).

Critical Role rejects this notion of reproducibility, for while their’s is the notion of who is right, who is wrong, the spontaneity of the game in how dice rolls change the narrative. For example, Mercer often sets up seemingly dramatic moments that replicate the death of a previous character, only for the comedic payoff to be that everyone is fine. Both delving into *D&D* and rejecting this standardisation of narrative, *Critical Role* has the chance to re-enchant the lives of those who consume it.

This notion is not new to *D&D* players, where many aspects of the narrative can be changed by how a player rolls their dice. However, considering *Critical Role* as a media product, this theory of enchantment can do something to explain why the fans enjoy the series so much.

Certain respondents noted that for them, *Critical Role* is close to a religious event. From a sociological perspective, this would speak to disenchanted re-enchantment. Fantastical literature such as the works of J.R.R Tolkien, H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe allow one to experience enchantment in a world dominated by science (MacCallum-Stewart and Trammell, 2018). So the series, offering an experience in which for four hours one steps into a fantasy world, at the same time every week, comes close to an enchanted event:

I have played but don’t currently. I couldn’t pinpoint one thing the cast or show provides. I am not religious and do not attend worship services of any kind as weird as it is to say CR on Thursday night is the most devoted I’ve ever been to something. It is my Sunday morning and it marks the week and renews me. The weeks were CR takes breaks can be a monotonous drag of time at some point in my life. There was a time where CR each Thursday was the only thing I was making it through the week

for. It helped me through a long depression and a suicide attempt. I don't know why exactly. But it is very special to me. This is very hard to share with others and is part of why I eschew the larger community.

Further sentiments regarding how important *Critical Role* was included that it was one of the few nights where phones are turned off, that there was the feeling of reuniting with old friends (the cast), and absolute focus is given to the series. One respondent said they stayed up to 4am to watch the livestream, even if they had work that same day.

This religious element may be rooted in the structure *D&D* itself. The game is fundamentally collaborative (requiring multiple players to run) and durational (some games take years to complete with weekly sessions). The *Critical Role* game is no different, with their own campaigns taking years to complete. Throughout this time viewers see the characters played grow, and fans spend several hours every week hearing the same voices.

Their enjoyment was increased by the chemistry and charisma of the cast, they are perceived as funny and smart people who, due to their past as performers, know how to play their characters well. But it is how they play the interaction between these characters that is the hook for many people:

The sense of family that the cast shares. It's something that was certainly there, but probably didn't strike me until maybe thirty episodes into campaign one, and given that each episode is roughly 4 hours, that's 120 hours in. I don't think people make it that far without becoming a fan....

I started watching *Critical Role* at September 2019. At the start, with was hard to become engaged with this form of media. Four hour episodes watching 7 people at the table and actively using the theatre of the mind (most of the time) to picture the scenarios being portrayed can be gruelling. Yet, I fell in love mostly with the characters and the lore.

Several people noted that the show was something they are intensely emotionally invested in, to the point where it seemed hard to explain to outsiders what made it special. It can be easier to explain it to people who play *D&D*, to understand, somewhat, the emotions that the game puts one through. But to people who don't play even that? It was considered near impossible to convey the emotions that the series gives:

The specific plot points are an obvious one. Since people have never heard of the Laughing Hand³⁵ they won't really be interested in him being defeated. I think people that don't watch the show can't understand the added layer of interest that improvisation and chance adds. I've shown one or two people the cupcakes trick just because I was so hyped right after, and although they enjoy it enough it doesn't translate that Laura's doing all that on the fly and it really came down the dice as well, and that there was potential for a lot of different consequences. We really can't know how much that affected Matt's plan for the show, maybe the hag would have killed one of them? Maybe killing her would have set off a whole new plot thread. As an occasional DM myself that's the coolest and most frustrating aspect of D&D.

These moments in the series elevated what was shown from simple events and gave the viewers a greater feeling of connection. For viewers, there is the notion that being there, for a one-time event that wasn't scripted and planned on the fly, enhanced the connection many felt to this form of media.

This outlines one basic feature of being a participatory non-participant : it's simply just fun to consume a series and experience the community, regardless of other reasons one might suggest if one cannot directly play the game with them:

I live in a very rural area and I'm pretty shy socially. The community is a draw and the friendships between the cast. It's cozy and friendly and easy to get attached to

As will be discussed in the next chapter, lurking allows one to learn how to play the game. But it also provides another reason for some to watch the show: *vicariously* playing the game. As a social game, *D&D* can be intimidating to get into, you must not only learn and understand the rules, but you must also find a group with which to play the game. If these conditions are either undesirable or impossible, then an experience such as *Critical Role* offers a stand-in to playing the main game. Many responses to the survey echoed this:

I've been w CR for about 3 years now. I kept watching because I want to play D&D but just don't have time/access w friends (not interested in online play w strangers). It my itch. I love their chemistry, they seem like good people, they are funny, and they

³⁵ A significant antagonist who appears in season 2

are damned good at what they do. They become my friends who I enjoy playing with... I'm just sitting out this session is all :P

Gives me the payoff of playing without the work. Gives me friends to feel connected to when alone. I also learn and when I have time/access to play again I will be better. ... I don't play because I dislike playing w strangers, and at my current spot in life, all my good friends are busy w young kids and work, and I'm busy as hell. I know it'll be there someday when I have the bandwidth, and settle for CR, video games, and other D&D media.

For individuals who consume the series like this, it is more akin to a TV show, where it is to be watched and enjoyed, and possibly talked about with others online. This vicarious play allows one to keep playing *D&D* far past when their age may allow in terms of social life. As one gets older, they find that the freedom of youth is carried away to working a 9-5 job, owning a house, writing a Master's thesis, and having children. This is the "social ageing" of Thornton (1995), not necessarily the issue of growing older, but finding oneself in a stratified society.

I am a fifty-year-old, mentally stable, contributor to society. CR and simply knowing that other Critters are out there provides me with a very welcome escape from the pressures of the ordinary and ubiquitous parts of life. I have a "grown-up job" but find myself smiling at work thinking about a fun exchange or remember that it's Thursday.

Alternatively, there is the fact that some people come to the series due to one thing: a need for community. This sense of needing a community, whether through interacting with other members of the fandom or through the act of watching the cast of *Critical Role* play, feeling a sense of community through that watching³⁶. This community factor can cause one's relation to the show to change.

Taken together, one pleasure of the *Critical Role* community is that the series offers a unique form of media in which the participants can lose themselves in for a few hours a week. It was this uniqueness that for many was the initial draw to the series: trying to find out what was so engrossing about watching people play *D&D*.

Overall, this chapter has attempted to map the pleasures to participatory non-participation, trying to map the opening thoughts of why people watch a game being played. In the following

³⁶ The possible negative impacts of which will be discussed in a later chapter

chapters, certain ideas identified here will be explored in more detail and these are outside of pleasures, what other benefits does this participatory non-participation give to individuals? Two are identified, the learning of how to play *D&D*, and the management of stigma.

Conclusion

This chapter has investigated the pleasures of participatory non-participation, namely how one can enjoy *Critical Role* as an alternative to *D&D*, if they were unable to play, and the experience that comes from *Critical Role* as an entertainment product, which exists on the border of it being a new entertainment product, and its repetitive nature being a religious experience for some viewers. This chapter continues the thesis argument by showing how fans experience the series, and how they interpret their experience watching the series. By understanding this experience, this thesis can show that even without the direct participation of playing a game fans experience an attachment to the series that is often found with other gaming groups.

The next chapter deals with the other pleasure of participatory non-participation, the learning of the game. As a game, *D&D* is complex and has previously required one to read long rulebooks in order to begin to understand. *Critical Role* has presented an alternative way to learn this game, assisting in participatory non-participation.

Chapter 8: Learning and playing of the game

Introduction

D&D, as both a board game and pen-and-paper game, must have its rules read and understood by both players and Game Masters to play effectively. These rules are detailed and long, and sitting down to pour over an over 300-page rulebook is likely not what most first-time players want as their introduction. But it's not only the mechanical rules that new players need to learn, but also the social way to act at a *D&D* table, for instance how to call out rolls, what is an appropriate question to ask, and how a typical game runs.

This chapter investigates what I call the first mechanical pleasure of the participatory non-participation, a reason that people would come to watch *Critical Role* beyond entertainment. Focusing on the learning of *D&D*, this chapter investigates the ways that people watch and experience *Critical Role* as a form of learning to play the game themselves. Furthermore, it examines this learning as an induction into the subculture of *D&D*, using the theories of Goffman (1963) and Becker (1953) as a focus. Therefore, this process of learning contributes to understanding how participatory non-participation functions as a subculture.

Critical Role, learning, and *D&D*.

The most recent 5th edition of the official *D&D* rulebooks, which was published in 2014, is notoriously vague in attempting to provide an open and flexible ruleset, compared to the previous 4th edition, published in 2007, renowned for being overly strict (Williams *et al.*, 2018). A key problem is its definitions of certain terms, which can lead to arguments and discussions during gameplay about the best way to go proceed (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 (Fine, 1983).

Critical Role was utilised by some fans in order to learn the game of *D&D* itself. There is a clear focus on explaining what the players are rolling their D20's for and what they are adding to it based on their character sheet, being asked to explain 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!

Previously, MacCallum-Stewart (2014) theorised that this learning of a game through watching is similar to collective intelligence, especially as applied by Jenkins (2008). However, I will instead argue that a method to analyse the learning of *D&D* through observation is closer to theories of learning outlined by Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (Wells and Claxton, 2002), also known as CHAT, especially when analysed in a symbolic interactionist context. This theory of education suggests that learning is not done in isolation, but 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, and books.

Therefore, it is possible 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 playing *Critical Role* it is possible to get around the first experience of learning the game and the time investment involved.

One of the core features of CHAT is that it is *cultural* and not *social*, with Wells and Claxton (2002, p. 10) stating:

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'.

One of the key points that CHAT gives is the understanding that the learning can take place in isolation with a text, which can reflect 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. When one watches, they're engaging with a gaming culture that tells them how to play the game, and what to do.

CHAT extends to not just how to play the game, but how to run the game that some people watch the show. Matt Mercer is looked at as the ideal Dungeon Master for many, given his detailed descriptions of the setting and characters, providing a unique voice for every inhabitant that the cast comes across. 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 also for the ways to mechanically act as a DM, on how to handle events based on his judgments.

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 (Bowman, 2013). Watching how Mercer makes his judgement calls, even if one may disagree with them, shows how an experienced DM acts.

However, an over-reliance on Mercer's style 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:

Mark: 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* plays, with new players not understanding that there are different ways to play. However, there is more to learning *D&D* than just learning the formal, mechanical rules.

Social Play

It's not only the mathematical rules that people are learning when watching the cast or Mercer, but also the rules of social play. Social play here refers to the way that *D&D* can be played without violence and that the game is also played through role-playing and acting out one's character. For viewers who haven't played *D&D* before 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, p. 13) calls this "gameism," 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, was given as the preferred way to solve it. 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 in case they posed a later threat. The social element was pushed to the side, which potentially drove some people away. Killing was how the game was meant to be done.

Critical Role highlighted that there was also a collaborative and theatrical nature to the game, roleplaying a character and what they do, that may have previously been ignored by some groups or not advertised to prospective players. As was written by one of the first respondents:

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, dnd was a "dice game" with short roleplay moments. *Critical Role* has made dnd alot more interiactive, creative and, to be honest, important to my life.

Furthermore, it can help people who already know of the social element, but don't quite understand how to behave at a game, learn the correct social etiquette for a game:

When i started playing about a year ago, i was worried that i might not know how to behave at a dnd 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. - Social learning

This is similar to what Becker and Goffman identified as learning of a group. Becker, as noted in the literature review, studied how mari[j]uana smokers learn the way to correctly smoke. While the comparisons may seem extreme, a drug compared to a game³⁷, the underlying theories on learning how to behave in a subculture apply.

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 sub-heading, *learning the technique*, Becker writes:

³⁷ Some anecdotal connection could be that both have been stigmatised in the media, but accepted by certain individuals in a subculture.

The novice does not ordinarily get high the first time he smokes marijuana, 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 insures sufficient dosage to produce real symptoms of intoxication (Becker, 1973, p. 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 (Becker, 1973, p. 47).

In Becker’s conception of marijuana use, learning how to smoke it 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 perceive the effects as acting upon him, the act 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 them perceive the effects as positive. Without such guidance, it is unlikely that smoking will continue.

The contribution of Goffman to this theory of learning is “*The Nature of Deference and Demeanor*” (1967). Deference has little application here, being the ways one confirms their relationship to another³⁸. Demeanor is the focus here. The demeaned individual is one that presents themselves in regards to others within the group, showing that they understand the correct way to act in their environment. This can be both personality and dress-wise.

Consider these identified elements in response to this 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

³⁸ One example could be how the players listen to the Dungeon Master, confirming their status as players, but that isn’t the focus of this thesis

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).

Combining the works of both, this thesis arrives at the way participatory non-participants, such as the fandom of *Critical Role*, learn to play the game. 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 it. But if one wants to really learn how to play, they need to observe the play and be told what is happening.

CHAT comes into play in understanding both the mechanical dynamics of play, and 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 articulated to the (sub)culture of *D&D* and how to play it. When one watches, this functions similar to Becker and the learning to smoke marijuana, and the demeanor of Goffman, being shaped towards how a table runs.

Of course, one cannot learn all the rules for every table. One who comes to a game for a more social experience may be disheartened to learn that the group they are involved with 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 series, may find themselves disappointed in the variety of ways to play the game.

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, socialise 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.

If it was only for learning, then this subculture would be temporary and fleeting, as some people would learn how to play the game and then they would leave once they had generated sufficient knowledge. Therefore, simply putting participatory non-participation as about learning is disingenuous. Instead, this thesis now comes to the pleasures that might not be immediately evident. Or perhaps, one ones that those watching try the best to hide.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the first mechanical pleasure of participatory non-participation, the learning of a game. *D&D* is a complex system that must be learned by fans, which can hamper the way people get into the game. *Critical Role* presents an alternative to reading rulebooks, by watching they can begin to learn the basics of a *D&D* game. Analysing this learning through CHAT, this contributes to the thesis argument by showing how participatory non-participation can provide a practical benefit that it might not otherwise be able to. Secondly, it has shown that the series teaches new players how to play the game socially, how to behave at the table, how to ask questions, and how to roleplay.

The next chapter presents the second benefit of participatory non-participation, stigma management. Drawing on the works of Goffman (1963), it investigates the way that participatory non-participation can deal with the stigma relating to both the game, the players, and individuals who previously couldn't play the game themselves.

Chapter 9: Stigma

Introduction

Up to this point in the thesis, *Critical Role* fans play a game without really playing a game, and learn the signs and symbols without engaging directly with the game. Now the thesis turns to a crucial dimension of subculture- and that is the place of managing identity, particularly in relation to stigma. In terms of identity management, *Critical Role* has done two things: it has de-stigmatised the game of *D&D*, and it has also allowed those who were previously unable to play *D&D* due to stigma to enjoy the game.

This chapter investigates how participatory non-participation in the *Critical Role* community can be seen to work as a form of stigma management and a kind of identity management. *D&D*'s long history has involved both the game and the players being stigmatised. Therefore, individuals may have been put off by the negative, stigmatised association *D&D* has had. *Critical Role*, as an entertainment product, helps with stigma management of the series, firstly de-stigmatising the series. However, for individuals who felt excluded from playing the game (in the case presented here, because of their gender or sexuality), then *Critical Role* can be seen to provide a way to enjoy the adventure that they have been historically excluded from. Finally, the ends with the discussion of how being a fan of *Critical Role* itself presents a new type of stigma to be managed by fans, and how that impacts their enjoyment of both the series and *D&D* itself.

Stigma Management of *D&D* play.

Given the historical stigmatization of *D&D* and its players (Laycock, 2015), there has been the need to hide one's involvement with the game and any groups that played it. Goffman (1963) considered stigma a matter of information control, especially managing the information that others know about the stigmatised individual so that one fits into regular society. Therefore, if playing a game that carries a certain stigma, then players need to manage that stigma. Even a few years ago, *D&D* was a heavily stigmatised a dice game for nerds, not helped my complexity of the previous 4th Edition. One respondent noted that:

Though I had heard of the game beforehand as a generic nerdy activity, I didn't understand the details of the game until watching the show. Not only did CR

introduce me to D&D, but I learned the basics of how to play the game through watching. Now, Dungeons and Dragons is a regularly hobby of mine. I have met a majority of my current friend group through the game.

This stigmatisation of both the game, and those who have played it has been common throughout the history of *D&D*, with the only time players have felt comfortable telling others about it since *Critical Role* made the series popular:

D&D was heavily stigmatized even just a few years ago, so we actually played in secret to hide from my religious parents and assholes at school. Crit role made D&D cool, which helped my friends and I feel comfortable telling people about it, and we ended up introducing our high school to D&D.

This then translates to the larger public not knowing what the game is about, thinking it as a shallow game where nerds fight monsters:

Most things that come to mind are either D&D-specific, inside jokes such as “been a while”, or regarding the cast/character’s action throughout the show. Something I struggle with d&d in general is how parts of the public does not understand the game as something that can bring about deep, interesting stories, and the show has helped bring that closer to the foreground.

Such a stigmatisation of the game reflects the kinds of players who would often play the early editions of *D&D*, as well as the perceptions of these. Fine (1983) wrote heavily on the aggression that his overly white male players expressed, describing them as overly bloodthirsty. Furthermore, the Satanic Panic of the 1970s and 1980s would give the game a stigma among certain religions (Laycock, 2015). This still prevents people from taking part:

Critical Role introduced me to what D&D could really be, not like it had been presented on TV since I was a kid. I also grew up in a very religious environment so a lot of what I heard about D&D as a kid was fear mongering and satanic panic left over from the 80s. *Critical Role* showed me that D&D is really just math and improv, not devil worship.

However, even if *D&D* is cool now, there have been groups historically excluded from the game where participatory non-participation is the only method through which they can, and still, experience the game. Some older women (who would have been teenagers in the 1980s and

1990s) who answered the survey stated that during their teenage years they wanted to play *D&D*, however they were denied entry into the game itself due to their gender. This is a similar experience among many gaming cultures, which are perceived as hegemonically male, with women being marginalised (Paaßen, Morgenroth and Stratemeyer, 2016). This stigma associated with them has denied prospective players from trying the game:

I have been a fan of *Critical Role* since the beginning of campaign 2, after being a long time follower of Geek and Sundry's tabletop boardgame content. I had always wanted to play D&D, but as a teenager in the mid 90's I was excluded from groups I knew of because of my gender. *Critical Role* gave me a way to experience the fun of D&D in private without worrying about gatekeeping.

This is the core of participatory non-participation: the ability to play the game without playing the game. For those still concerned about gatekeeping, it was *Critical Role* that allowed them the possibility to play *D&D* for the first time in their life, even if playing the game meant experiencing others play it. *Critical Role* also features queer characters. This is notable and important because queerness has been stigmatized historically within D&D spaces, such as those studied by Fine (1983) and Stenros and Sihvonen (2022), which have emphasised traditional gender roles and heteronormative, masculine approach to the game.

Because of this stigma, some queer participants did not take part. However, *Critical Role* has two prominent queer characters³⁹, which showed that the game that they had been excluded from was now more open:

Tried to play D&D for years, was repeatedly told both directly and indirectly that queer people didn't belong in the game or at the table. *Critical Role* showed me the game had changed with 5e and queer people were now welcome.

And:

One thing i will say is that the CR community (and TT [This possibly in referencing to Table Top RPG's in general, but is not clear in the context] more generally) is one of the more accepting communities for LGBTQIA+ which makes a huge difference and is a large part of why i love it. Their efforts to be inclusive and spread the love is

³⁹ Vax'ildan, a half-elf and Mollymauk Tealeaf, a tiefling, who are both male and openly bisexual

wonderful. Also as a way of discovering new creators and games (ie. I backed something on Kickstarter after MM tweeted it and i thought it looked cool)

Participatory non-participation offers one the possibility to learn how the game has changed in a safe space. *D&D* for many years was a hegemonically white masculine space, where individuals of certain gender or sexual identity might not be comfortable. By watching *Critical Role*, one can learn that the game has changed, that *D&D* can be played by anyone.

This highlights another area of the participatory non-participation; given that it's not physically interacted with, those excluded from *D&D* are able vicariously play the games that may have been denied to them when they were younger. For individuals who are restricted from playing *D&D*, it may be possible that *Critical Role* is the only way they can ever interact with the game. Taking a Goffmanian take, being a participatory non-participant allows one to conceal the information that one is a fan of stigmatised game or subject, as they do not physically present.

However, there is another stigma attached, that of being a *Critical Role* fan. Due to this, certain respondents stated that they specifically avoided interacting with the larger community to avoid being perceived as a fan by other *D&D* players. While perceptions of older *D&D* players towards *Critical Role* fans vary (as has been shown) and is outside the scope of this thesis, 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 DnD community due to those fans.

Within the data generated by the survey doesn't 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 on 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) isn't the same as the show they watch.

Complaints that “That’s not how *Critical Role* does it” occurs, 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 DnD, it has also created a lot of harmful ideas about how a normal game should be played.

Furthermore, there was the comment of fans and their intense feelings towards the series. Christian Hoffer, writing at comicbook.com, provides an example. Following the early death of the character Mollymauk, 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, para. 6)

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 now, 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.

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 doesn’t, whether due to narrative progression or simply that the dice rolls gave a bad result, there is intense backlash.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed how participatory non-participation in the *Critical Role* community can work as both stigma and identity management. By showing the ways that one can use *Critical Role* to engage without engaging, this chapter has contributed to the thesis argument by showing the ways that participatory non-participation allows one to engage with a game where they previously might not be able to. However, it has also presented the possibility for there to be stigma from being a fan of *Critical Role* in the first place, fostering a belief with the stigma given being that fans of *Critical Role* are have preconceptions of *D&D* that most games do not match up to. In terms of subculture, the discussion of stigma management clearly demonstrates that engaging with *Critical Role* in terms of managing stigma, can be understood as identity management, another key component of subculture.

The next chapter investigates the presence of over-identification with the group or parasociality within the *Critical Role* community, especially how the existence of parasociality can effect the group for both good and bad.

Chapter 10: Toxicity and Parasociality in fandom

Introduction

Now the thesis turns to consider identification with the group in the more extreme form of those who feel an overly strong or inappropriate attachment to the series. This includes those who become toxic fans and decide how to dictate the series. And those who treat *Critical Role* like it is a sports team, not a group of performers putting on a show. This chapter analyses these two aspects: those who display toxicity within the community, and those who feel that the extent some connect to the series parasociality is ruining the community for them.

This chapter investigates elements of toxicity and parasociality in the *Critical Role* fandom as a potential result of participatory non-participation. Showing first elements of toxicity, of fans who react negatively, then parasociality, this thesis argues that *Critical Role* as an entertainment product is very prone to parasociality in the theory of participatory non-participation presented here. However, this chapter argues that toxicity and parasociality can be used as form of management for participatory non-participants, as they are able to monitor the group and see how they want interact with the wider community. This advances the thesis argument by showing how participatory non-participants manage themselves in the group.

Toxic Fans

This section investigates the creation of fans who feel such an identification with the series that they turn toxic, reacting negatively towards the series and lashing out whenever events don't go their way. The reaction of these fans can lead to a fracturing of the community, and push others away.

Toxicity in fandom, like in medicine, is positioned as an "invasive and poisonous force within otherwise progressive fan cultures and communities" (Scott, 2018, p. 143). These invasive elements can include homophobia, racism, sexism, and general elements that the progressive fan group doesn't enjoy or identify with. Notions of toxicity are bound within the ideas of being an *ideal fan*, and that one who complains isn't an ideal fan (Hills 2018). Most toxicity scholarship deals with political/social toxicity, and while an overt example of this wasn't present in the data collected, there is still the presentation of the ideal fan.

It is important, first, to state the methodological implications of labelling fans as toxic. I am, first of all, accepting that the toxicity reported by the participants is true. While Proctor and Kies (2018) and Hills (2018) asks researchers to consider if the people being studied are really fans, I have no grounds to base my analysis in the idea that I was lied to. None of these practices were identified by myself as toxic, rather here I am letting the fans speak for themselves and what toxicity they had identified in their own community.

For those who refused to interact, and viewed the series solely as an entertainment product, there was the notion that they *wanted* to interact with the community, but almost always regretted it due to the toxicity that they experienced. Saul for instance stated that he often turned on the Twitch chat during heightened moments in the series, such as when a character rolled a 20 on their dice⁴⁰ but stopped as he was seeing increasing moments of toxicity. These moments tended to be either about the amount of money *Critical Role* was reported to have (in the data breach of Twitch in October 2021), or issues with characters. A respondent to the survey echoed this, stating that:

Occasionally I'll comment on subReddit posts, but as with any fandom, other fans often end up being a drawback. All the hate that Taliesin got for Molly and that Marisha got for Beau and Marisha made me stop interacting with the fandom as much.

Saul noted that the toxicity was a “growing ball” as the series grew larger:

Saul: Well it's not, I don't think most of the fans are toxic. I'm just seeing a big, like I'm seeing a little bit of a growing ball. If that makes sense at all. That's just what I'm seeing. I'm just relaying what I am trying to observe with my monkey brain.

Toxicity was noticed and noted as something that had been slowly creeping into the fandom recently, turning into what Saul called a “growing ball.” This growing ball is similar to an echo chamber, a factor of the internet where voices repeating the same opinion echo off one another, creating a chamber of self-reinforcing ideas.

The growth of this chamber was attributed to the growing popularity of the series, as it became more mainstream, more people with more toxic mindsets began creeping into the series. This led to some fans wanting to stop interaction with others and move to a fan who simply consumes and doesn't interact. Much in the same way that Thornton (1995) identified clubbers

⁴⁰ Indicating, in most instances, an automatic success at whatever was being attempted.

as seeing the club scene dying once normal people got involved, the toxicity has led to some people to see this new attitude taking over the group, and killing part of the fun.

This growing ball has impacted others enjoyment of the fandom, questioning their engagement with the fandom and if they wanted to continue to do so. One participant in the survey questioned whether searching out for communities online, in their cases on Reddit and Instagram, had helped or hindered their enjoyment:

I'm always unsure about whether viewing Reddit or CR content on Instagram has improved my CR experience or hindered it. Since I don't really talk to anyone who watches the show, it's great to have a place where I can see what people thought of the latest episode, but at the same time Reddit is a place where people go to care too much about something, and some of the arguments and cynicism have dampened my enjoyment a bit.

And another:

Honestly, the issue of toxicity in the fanbase is a huge turn off for many people I know. I can't get them into the show because they despise the fans so much. The constant bickering and putting each other down is draining.

Unlike the political discussions that most toxicity research deals with, *Critical Role* toxicity centers on what is happening in the series. Saul noted that the toxicity he had seen was pointed to the lack of presence of a member of the cast, Travis Willingham, after his character died early in campaign 3. Missing for 5 episodes, the Twitch chat complained relentlessly about Willingham's lack of presence. Furthermore, there were issues with the aforementioned release of the amount of money *Critical Role* has earned, as this challenged fans conceptions of the *Critical Role* group as a small group. Another is the death of Mollymauk, discussed in the last chapter.

It is important to separate self-identified toxicity from criticism of the company and the brand. For example, after the cast did a Wendy's⁴¹ themed one-shot "Feasts of Legends", there was an outcry from fans due to issues with the Wendy's company itself, and the video is now removed from the official channels (Boykin, 2021). *Critical Role* as a company was willing to change their attitude due to the majority complaining against the one-shot. Boykin (2021) highlights that

⁴¹ An American-owned fast food restaurant.

this is an example of how *Critical Role* as a company is willing to change itself based on fan decisions.

If fans dislike Wendy's as a company due to ethical issues, then it makes sense that fans would complain about the inclusion of a one-shot into a company they generally see as progressive. It is possible that the outrage directed was not only because the one-shot *existed*, but because it took up a slot that has come to be an important time of the week for many in the community. This thesis has already looked into the religious feelings that the repetitious aspect of the show has created (Chapter 6), but now it turns to the parasocial feelings that both religiosity and toxicity can create.

The construction of parasocial intimacy

I argue that the parasocial intimacy of the series that the fandom expresses is the result of both the ability to play a game by watching, combined with the actions of the cast. This parasocial intimacy is not necessarily unique to *Critical Role*, however the way the cast treats their fans has exacerbated this parasocial connection many fans feel towards the series.

Many Critters identified that watching the show and being in the community was like being "At home." As one respondent to the survey noted:

Even when I didn't play, *Critical Role* provides me with four hours of reprieve from the stressful outside world where I can feel like I am spending time with a group of friends like a fly on the wall. I get very entranced with Matt's storytelling and how chaotic and unpredictable the narrative can be.

This notion, of being a "fly on the wall" of "being at the table" is commonly repeated throughout the survey. While the parasocial nature of this comment is clear, it also allows a construction of identity and relationships. Many responses highlighted that the show helped them during moments of depression and isolation. With the COVID-19 pandemic still ongoing (at time of writing) and countries of the world often going into lockdown, many have found themselves isolated from their friends. As *D&D* is a social game that requires others to play, watching another group play provides some of the friendship that they might need. One survey respondent said "There's a deep level of comfort and intimacy in *Critical Role*."

This isn't to say that *Critical Role* fostered this parasociality for negative means. Rather, it's possible that it was fostered simply due to the nature of how the series is constructed and presented. Fox (2021), writing on parasociality in *Critical Role*, states (italics in original):

Because after all, we must remember that even though the cast often bare a great deal of their selves on screen, they don't bare everything. Fans are still seeing only their public personas, albeit ones that are often quite vulnerable and real in regard to their own personal struggles with mental health, loss, and other situations. In essence, the cast are playing not only their D&D characters, but also carefully curated versions of *themselves* on screen—versions that are not false, but simply incomplete.

Despite its limited nature, this very vulnerability is what draws many fans to the show and creates for them the feeling of connectedness, and numerous fans have spoken or written about how *Critical Role* helped them deal with personal struggles, or even kept them from succumbing to suicide. In acknowledging their own struggles, and in playing characters whose diversity and complexity reflect the kind of inclusive world they want to live in, the cast strives to create a safe space for those who often feel like outsiders—a place where even Marisha Ray's current character, Laudna (whose uncanny Gothic mien results from a harrowing past), could find welcome and friendship. The upshot of this is that when Matt closes out the show every Thursday with the words, "We love you very much," fans often feel it quite viscerally (Fox, 2021, paras 5–6).

This feeling of "We love you very much" echoes one of the key points that Giles (2002, in Stenros and Montola 2011) highlights as needed for parasocial bonds: the authenticity of the figure. Given the strong intimacy and feelings of authenticity many fans reported, it isn't surprising that fans feel a deep sense of intimacy with the cast. By listening to the fans and removing the controversial Wendy's episode, the cast has shown themselves wanting to support progressive ideas. This is possibly reinforced by how every episode begins and runs.

Each episode opens with a message from the sponsors, as well as announcements about merchandise, and sometimes a skit. The episode then launches into a recap of what happened last episode with a close-up of Mercer staring directly into the camera. When it moves to the other players, the camera shows their body front-on, as if one is sitting around the table with them. The lighting is warm and the background is simple. I argue that this presentation is key

to the intimacy of *Critical Role* (see Fig 2 above). Horton and Wohl (1956, p. 223) writing on the construction of parasocial bonds, stating:

The existence of a marginal segment of the lonely in American society has been recognized by the mass media themselves, and from time to time specially designed offerings have been addressed to this minority. In these programs, the maximum illusion of a personal, intimate relationship has been attempted. They represent the extreme development of the para-social, appealing to the most isolated, and illustrate, in an exaggerated way, the principles we believe to apply through the whole range of “personality” programs. The programs which fall in this extreme category promise not only escape from an unsatisfactory and drab reality, but try to prop up the sagging self-esteem of their unhappy audience by the most blatant reassurances.

Horton and Wohl both suggest that these shows intentionally created parasocial bonds to draw in viewers. It does not seem that *Critical Role* creating parasocial bonds was intentional. Instead, the cast are likely nice people who have found success in being nice, and this creates parasocial bonds.

Their presentation itself would also contribute to the construction of intimacy. Figure 2 below shows a screenshot from the most recent episode as of writing, Season 3 Episode 8: *A Woodworker’s Quandary*. Consider the ways in which the shot is framed, along with previous comments on being a fly on the wall.



Figure 2: A shot of *Critical Role* from the episode “A Woodworker’s Quandary.” Source: *Critical Role* Series 3 Episode 8: A Woodworker’s Quandary. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwbLO_649Vg

Haag (1993), talking about the popular talk show *Oprah*, analyses how host Oprah Winfrey constructs intimacy with her audience through intimate language and visual cues. It is possible that *Critical Role* does the same, through Mercer looking directly at the camera face in full frame when he says “We love you very much”, and through the construction of the screen showing us a similar view to sitting around a table. The combination of these two events likely is what creates the parasocial bonds, the intense fan connection and the feeling of being really there, of being a fly on the wall.

However, the toxicity these parasocial bonds create is never addressed by the cast. As one respondent in the survey stated:

There have been elements of homophobia and misogyny in the CR fandom that the cast, while aware of, have been unwilling to disavow beyond generic recitations of “don’t forget to love each other.” Their unwillingness to actively stand against bigotry in their own fandom has driven out a lot of people who I enjoyed sharing my thoughts with.

This presents one element to consider in the study of participatory non-participation as a subculture. Given the one-sided relationship between cast and viewer, it seems possible for

participatory non-participants to turn toxic. However, fans themselves made their own ways of dealing with toxic fans. Throughout the survey and interviews, several participants suggested ways in which they can manage the toxicity and parasocial relationships in the community. However, this thesis argues that rather than these strategies being about dealing with people individuals dislike, both toxicity and parasociality work together for participatory non-participants to decide how they want to manage their identity in the group. For this thesis, this management of identity as involves the theory of identity work, where one molds their self-presentation in how they interact and present with a group (Buyukozturk 2022; Kolb 2014). Within participatory non-participation, I argue that the perceptions of toxicity and parasociality work as a way for individuals to decide how they want to interact with the group, and what kind of solidarity they feel with the wider group.

Buyukozturk (2022) writes that gaming groups perform this identity management on individuals. They police the behaviour that individuals show while physically presenting as part of the group, in order to build solidarity. Members police those who do not display the appropriate behaviour through gossiping about bad behaviour and calling out non-conformists. From the survey data, it seems while bad behaviour is discussed, nothing is done about it in the wider community beyond stating “Don’t forget to love each other.”

For this thesis, these management strategies can also suggest that participatory non-participation offers a different way to manage the group: rather than policing the problematic individual, any individual can leave and still take part in the group if they themselves see an element as problematic. Therefore, it is done on a more individual basis rather than a wider group context.

There is the easiest suggestion of just experiencing the series as simply a series and not attempting to interact at all, performing a minimal amount of identity management. This was referred to as watching the series like it was on stage, where everyone is quiet. The main benefit to the is method would be that if there is any toxicity, it’s not seen. Therefore, the identity management one would perform as a participatory non-participant would be small, beyond labelling as a fan.

If that is not an option, there is the suggestion to keep the group the one interacts with small. There was the suggestion back in Chapter 4 that the best way to interact online is with 10-20

people that one trusts. This can be limited to one's close circle, such as a partner, and can extend to a small online group. By doing this, one vets who they talk to and what they see.

Lisa suggests another way to do this is to not use a site that has access to a larger group, like Reddit or Facebook, but to curate what content one sees through websites such as Twitter or Tumblr, where they can decide who they follow and what they see. This provides a similar benefit to keeping the group small, while still possibly curating new experiences. For one participant in the survey, this was called a "more manageable social experience", where the larger fandom was overwhelmingly toxic. In some cases, it was possible to see positivity in the curated experience, rather than the toxicity. Their identity work instead is how they consider themselves a fan in relation to the series without discussing, with some considering themselves an outsider on a stage-play, watching the series, occasionally listening to what others say, and then going on about their day.

Therefore, toxicity and parasociality, rather than being seen as a negative, instead serve as a way for fans of the series to be able to perform a type of identity work and decide what kind of fan they want to be and interact with. Should they decide (or not see) that toxicity and parasociality exist in the fandom, they can interact freely. However, should the existence of those elements be an issue, then they can modify what kind of fan they want to be .

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the toxicity and parasociality in the *Critical Role* fandom and considered this a consequence of participatory non-participation. As a way to examine groups online, the lack of direct engagement with the game and the community could be the cause of some negativity among the fandom. Once presented in this chapter, several strategies to mitigate this negativity based on the way members of the fandom have learned in their own groups to manage the parasocial nature of the group was discussed. These strategies were then considered in terms of the internal monitoring of the group, and how individuals manage their behaviour in relation to each other and how they choose to interact with others, as a crucial aspect of subcultural practice.

The following concluding chapter reviews all the substantive chapters to discuss participatory non-participation as a form of digital subculture that has emerged out of the technical capacity of streaming.

Chapter 11: The theory of the subculture of the lurker

Introduction

This chapter engages with the thesis question of whether participatory non-participation can be legitimately understood as a form of subculture, arguing that it can. Not only is participatory non-participation a form of subculture, but as one that has developed out of the capacity for streaming, it is a new one that requires a specific theorisation as the Subculture of the Lurker.

This response to the thesis question proposes that direct participation is not needed to be a participant in a gaming group, as websites such as Twitch allow lurkers to engage with a game without playing a game. As lurkers, participants are still able to define themselves in terms of membership, (Chapter 5) and lurkers still consume the activities of the group just as much as active participants do (Chapter 6) gaining pleasure (Chapter 7) and learning the rules of group membership (Chapter 8) that underpins identity management (Chapter 9) and group attachment and group monitoring (Chapter 10).

The subculture of the lurker also expands scholarship on subcultures, as it argues that one can be a member of a gaming subculture without direct participation, as members can find meaning in their lack of interaction. The specifics of this kind of participatory non-participation or the theory of the subculture of lurkers can be put forward as participatory non-participation enables groups of people to engage with each other in ways that generate: a sense of membership, identity and pleasure, with distinctive rules and self-monitoring.

The Subculture of the Lurker

Previous chapters of this thesis have been spent showing, analysing, and theorising on the data provided. The purpose of this chapter is to take the analysis from previous chapters and apply them to a broader context than a *D&D* web series. Tying together the previous analytic chapters into a coherent theory, this chapter presents the *Subculture of the Lurker* (SOL). This analytic term reflects the nature of how participatory non-participation operates. The term *lurker* denotes the aspect of playing a game without playing a game, lurking in the larger gaming subculture. This chapter provides two aspects: to show that SOL is a theory through which we can analyse contemporary gaming subculture, and that participatory non-participation offers the same benefits of playing a game without playing a game.

The subculture of the lurker is a frame through which we can analyse contemporary gaming subculture. However, rather than focusing on those who engage traditionally, those who want to be engaged and visible, this theory instead turns around and looks at those who don't necessarily engage. This is how SOL provides an approach that has been missing in the literature on subcultures.

Located outside of directly playing the game, only experiencing it through interaction with the people playing the game, participatory non-participants enter into a subculture in which their required engagement is minimal, but their potential gain is large in the gratification they gain from the media product. Through the use of streaming technologies, this thesis has argued that one can play a game without playing a game through vicarious enjoyment, and it is there that the SOL form. For it is the matter of participation, what quantifies it and the perception of it, that matters the most to a theory with lurker in the title. Peeples, Yen and Weigle (2018, p. 251) write that "participation defines fandom" and that:

[w]atching a sci-fi movie does not make an individual a geek. Rather, passion that drives an individual to engage with a film, to discuss it with friends, and to create something of their own around it makes that individual a geek. Consumption consists of sitting down and watching a film. Engagement entails discussing it with friends, writing stories about further events in the movie's world, or making costumes representative of the characters. As traditional geek interests were relatively obscure, sharing such passion was very difficult before the advent of the Internet (Peeples, Yen and Weigle, 2018, p. 251).

The SOL instead look at those who don't traditionally engage, and to what their engagement is, to what extent their engagement is, and how they conceive of this engagement. If participation is key to geek subculture, then this theory inverts the focus of geek culture as being defined by participation and instead argues that *not participating* is still an important aspect of geek culture.

This is labelled a subculture as this thesis has demonstrated that fans of *Critical Role* demonstrate all significant elements of subcultural practice. There is the creation and identification of fans with the group, barriers for entry which define the group, and a shared culture that emerge. These elements all being present strongly indicates that the subculture of

a lurker is a valid approach to analysis of digital subculture (Fine and Kleinmann 1979; Fine 1983).

As has been demonstrated throughout the thesis, fans of *Critical Role* identify themselves as a fan, and are perceived by others as a fan, fulfilling one requirement of subcultural practice as laid out by Fine and Kleinman (1979) and Abramson and Modzelewski (2011). It is this self-definition that is important. Namely, this already applies to fans who have been watching the series long enough that they consider themselves a fan, calling themselves Critters. Long-term watching is key to the idea of a lurker, as it is the long-term quality that forms the bonds of connection and forms a subculture.

This long-term quality contributes to one of the major barrier for entry: the time required to devote to a streamer. While it is possible to jump in, Jodén and Strandell (2021) in their own analysis of streamers found that many in-jokes and references could only be learned by watching previous material. While the act of doing so brings one into the subculture, it was also found to be the major reason why many people will never even try to engage. This is more exaggerated for *Critical Role*, being a story-based series, in my own watching of the series I found many references lost, which only became apparent through my ethnographic observation. However, this possibly would not be the case for individual streamers who play games that aren't in a narrative, such as some of the streamers analysed by Jodén and Strandell (2021).

Similarly, their *lack* of direct engagement with both the community and the game being watched nevertheless exhibits several traits of subcultural practice, still consuming and gaining the pleasures of the subculture to the same degree as in the other literature. Lurkers still take part in the game in the same way that more active gamers do, and gain comparable pleasure from the act. They are still bound by symbols (in-jokes, memes, shibboleths, and merch) and a shared history, which promote solidarity with community and show itself.

It is this lack of engagement crosses over into the area which differentiates this thesis from fandom, the aspect of playing a game without playing a game. Here lurking is defined as interacting with a gaming group without directly playing the game. Members of the *Critical Role* community expressed a fondness for *Critical Role* solely because it allowed them to play *D&D* vicariously. While watching the game played, they identified sufficient engrossment in the

game, much like is found in normal play of regular games (Goffman, 1961) and *D&D* (Sidhu and Carter, 2021).

As was expressed by several participants during the survey, it was watching *Critical Role* that provided a shared experience in a fantasy world. From the symbolic interactionist perspective, this thesis draws from, this shared experience is a key component of why people take part in games (Fine 1983; Buyukozturk and Shay 2022). Participatory non-participation shows how modern forms of streaming can give the same experience of playing a game without directly playing the game.

The SOL is one that also has several notable and recurring meanings for those who watch. By watching people play a game, one can learn ways of playing the game that be otherwise difficult to attain. Much like theories of induction for the subculture, this is also the way individuals learn to play the game. Through watching others play, participatory non-participants learn how to both mechanically play the game itself, but also the social rules for playing with other people. Through this they learn the correct attitudes and meanings to hold to be *part* of a gaming group, much like happens with a physically-interacted subculture (Buyukozturk 2022).

Furthermore, if a game has stigma attached to it, as *D&D* does, then individuals who might suffer from stigma related to themselves (such as a stigma relating to their gender race) or to the game (if it is a game that has been historically stigmatised like *D&D* (Laycock 2015)) can enjoy the playing of a game without directly playing it themselves. This deals with the critical subcultural role of identity management, and how the members of the group manage their presentation to those outside the group.

This leads into the next section, that there is the possibility for the existence of over-attachment to the group, and the existence of toxicity and parasocial elements in the fandom. However, as was argued this can also work as a form of internal policing within the SOL. Through the perception of toxicity and parasociality, fans police themselves and decide how/if they want to interact with the larger fandom.

Finally, it needs to be said that all this happens with differing levels of engagement. Even those who answered that they did not engage still expresses the same level of group identification, lacking the typical engagement expected of a subculture. While the extent of in-group bonds

exists in other literature on subcultures, it is the three distinct types which this thesis contributes by explicitly typifying the different types of engagement identified.

Much like the work of Greener and Hollands (2006) and Sandberg (2012) this thesis crosses over elements of both subculture and post-subculture. Much like their own analyses found, this subculture is tightly bound and shares signs and symbols that would align it with subcultural theory, however this subculture is also geographically widespread and user-diverse, which pulls from post-subcultural theory, putting this thesis in a unison of the two. However, the subculture of the lurker shows that this fusion can work without direct participation in the group being studied, as they have the same characteristics.

This thesis also extends Fine and Kleinman's (1979) symbolic interactionist perspective on subcultures by arguing that interaction can still happen in isolation, even when participants do not interact with each other. Furthermore, while they argue that subcultures develop in interaction with one another, this thesis extends that by showing how participatory non-participation interacts between the subculture of the lurker and the game being viewed. Key points, such as multiple-group membership and identification are still present in the subculture of the lurker.

What to look for in analysis of the subculture of the lurker

Given this conceptualisation of subculture, how would a researcher go about using it in practical terms for their own analysis? What must be identified is another group around a game itself. Taking the example of *D&D*, there is the subculture around the game, and then the smaller, secondary SOL, in this case *Critical Role*.

What is important is the location of secondary fan sites for the researcher to analyse. On these fan sites discussion and sharing of content (such as art, memes, and links to other websites) happens. By looking at *Critical Role*, I was able to find a variety of both independent and sites on larger platforms which are not directly connected to the main website source. These websites may often also display official merchandise and use in-jokes, used to enhance the solidarity of the group.

There needs to be the understanding of what keeps people around. Simple entertainment and pleasure likely exists, however the analysis needs to look deeper at further motivations. This study outlined two distinct motivations: learning of the game (for a complex game such as *D&D*)

and stigma management. For the first element, this further teaches induction to the gaming subculture, showing how it teaches people how to play the game.

Furthermore, the researcher must look into what other actions people do while engaging in the subculture. As a theory of subculture that understands that individuals perform multiple duties in their daily life, it is important to look at the different activities individuals do. This ties into the interactionist methodology which informs this thesis, the need to look at the various interactions one does while consuming the series.

Another thing to look out for is the creation of parasocial bonds. As the SOL is often engaged in on an almost individualistic basis, there is the possibility for the creation of a parasocial bond between the viewer and the streamer. These might not always be immediately present in the larger group, however it is possible for parasocial fans to exist. It is then important to consider how other fans deal with parasocial members of the community, and analysing this as a form of identity management.

It is the suggestion of this thesis that, despite looking at a rather large group (*Critical Role* fans), the SOTL is also applicable to the study of smaller groups. What matters most is the devotion of the fanbase around the streamer and the game, and the existence of external fan sites, rather than explicitly the size of the stream/streamer itself.

Conclusion

This chapter has detailed a new way to theorise subculture, giving participatory non-participation the theoretically infused term “Subculture of the Lurker.” Combining the data analysed over the course of this thesis, the subculture of the lurker is presented as a way of understanding contemporary digital society. Being a lurker allows one various functions which previous theories of subculture do not. By presenting a theory of those who don’t participate, this chapter has contributed to the study of contemporary subculture.

This chapter responds to the thesis question based on the analysis of participatory non-participation, and is presented as the Subculture of the Lurker. This theory emphasises that a lack of interaction is needed for any subculture, and that individuals can be generating subculture without direct participation.

The following chapter provides the conclusion to this thesis, including the limitations, my own reflections on the research process, the ethical considerations, notes for future research, and the summary.

Chapter 12: Conclusion

Introduction

This concluding chapter outlines the limitations of the theory of the subculture of the lurker, my reflections on the research process that led to the development of this theory, the ethical considerations that were a part of this thesis, suggested further approaches using the developed theory, and provides a summary and conclusion to this thesis.

Limitations & Suggested Further Approaches

This section outlines the various limitations of this thesis, areas which the thesis couldn't investigate due to focus, ethical limitations, or timeframe. This section then suggests how these limitations could be dealt with in future research.

Future approaches to investigating subculture of the lurkers should consider the type of game being played. As a social game, *D&D* requires multiple people to play. Several answers to the survey highlighted that they became lurkers of the *Critical Role* series because they were unable to find a group to play with, or their group was not able to meet due to a variety of factors⁴². Future research using this theory could look into single-player games as well. One suggestion would be to closely look into games which have high skill ceilings to enter, seeing how the subculture of the lurker works in that field. One suggestion would be games with a competitive component or games that require knowledge of the games deep mechanics to be enjoyable (such as the zombie survival horror game *DayZ*).

Another area this thesis was unable to look at, due to ethical limitations, was how viewers under 18 view and enjoy the show. Minors may experience the series, and the vicariousness of watching others play, differently. This may be compounded by the social issues unique to childhood towards playing a game of *D&D* that an adult might not face, especially around getting a group together and the late hours a game might require. Unfortunately, this thesis was unable to investigate this aspect.

⁴² One prevalent in responses throughout the survey (Where data was collected during October 2021) was the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic.

Furthermore as highlighted by Jodén and Strandell (2021), Twitch streamers can have more direct interaction with their viewers by asking questions about how the game should go. By focusing on *Critical Role*, this aspect could not be investigated, which may have influenced this thesis. The webseries *Talks Machina* previously existed, where the cast answer questions from the fans, but this did not happen in real time as with most Twitch streams.

This leads to the parasocial aspect investigated in this study, which may have been compounded due to (1) the nature of *Critical Role* as a series that streams *D&D* and (2) the series has multiple personalities on display. In both the survey and the interviews it was highlighted that *Critical Role* was like spending time with old friends. This could have been a result of the game of *D&D*, which requires multiple people. References to parasociality exist in the literature on streaming (Boyns and Loprieno, 2013; Jodén and Strandell, 2021; Leith, 2021), but this has focused on the single streamer. Future research on the subculture of the lurker should consider the different ways in which having a central personality compared to a group one changes the relationship.

Reflections

There were several stages where issues arose during the study which, were it to be started again, could be fixed. These are mainly related to the issue of data collection, especially with the collection of the ethnographic data. Furthermore, ethical considerations arose which had to be dealt with, and raised issues relating to how members of the HEC board interpreted the meaning of this research.

Issues arose during the ethnographic phase of data collection due to the nature of the modern internet. As noted in the Methods chapter of this thesis (Chapter 4), the *Critical Role* community is mainly centralised in two sources: Reddit and Facebook, and held together by thousands of fans on Twitter, Tumblr, and in the Twitch chat who comment directly during the show. Effectively, there are two extremes for fandom, either small, individual, personal websites about the show, or centralised in larger websites. There was no middleman, no larger site run by fans that multiple people could comment on. I find that this reflects the status of the modern internet which is a move to more centralised services owned by a large corporation, rather than individually run websites. This had several benefits for the research however, it was quite easy to get the survey and initial information on the project out there, but made finding fan resources outside these sites difficult.

Furthermore, this thesis was written during the start of the third series of *Critical Role*. This meant that there was greater interest in the series and therefore greater interaction on social media. Further studies could research more inactive communities where series have not been updated for some time, and research those fans to find what makes them stay.

Personally, I did not find myself drawn into *Critical Role*. Coming in rather late, there were several references and jokes that missed me, which I may have understood had I been a fan. Furthermore, my lack of enjoyment may have been influenced by the fact that I saw watching the series as *work*. While I enjoyed watching the series and often found myself engrossed in the stories and jokes, the time investment of 4 hours a week spent listening to something distracted me during tasks I prefer to do. New episodes, and therefore a new four-hour commitment, were met with an obligation to watch it for work rather than to enjoy it simply as an entertainment product. This made my eventual exit of the series rather easy. Had I enjoyed the series more the ethnographic section may have produced more valuable data.

Due to this, the collection of the ethnographic data was one of the hardest aspects of this thesis. In order to try and collect the data, it was deemed important to keep up with the series to understand the data. Given the lack of helpful information gleaned this way, if I were to redo this study I would probably remove this phase.

Ethical Considerations

In accordance with the Human Ethics Committee (HEC) board of the University of Canterbury guidelines on research, ethical approval was needed for this study as it involves human participants. This research was submitted as high risk due to potentially dealing with sensitive factors.

During the ethics applications, some changes had to be made, which included many minor definitions and fixes, and adding incentives to take part in the survey. Originally, it was decided that an incentive of 50 dollar would be given for partaking in the interview, both as a motivator to take part in the interview and to make sure that the survey was not filled with junk data solely to get an incentive. However, at the suggestion of the HEC board, a small incentive of 25 dollars was added to the survey.

One major correction that was made concerned the original title of this thesis “The Subculture of the Lurker.” Lurker in this context stood for the participatory non-participation that has

already been explained. However, the HEC board interpreted the term lurker in the context of a lurker as someone who does not interact with the community at all. It was always intended to change the title to avoid this confusion, with lurker being used as a placeholder while a better term could be found. While this term would eventually be used for the analytical chapter, it was replaced throughout the thesis with participatory non-participation.

Summary of Thesis

This thesis has presented the subculture of the lurker as a way to understand an understudied area of contemporary gaming subculture: participatory non-participation, or members of a gaming subculture (in the case of this thesis, *D&D*) who instead of playing the game themselves gets vicarious enjoyment through watching others play. I argue that this function of watching the series in such a way forms both its own subculture, while still contributing to the larger gaming subculture in which they lurk.

To start, chapter 1 opens with an introduction to this research, stating its aims, methods, findings, and conclusion. By identifying *Critical Role* as a large and popular entertainment product with a large online following, this thesis argues *Critical Role* is an example of participatory non-participation, where one consumes a gaming groups signs and symbols at the periphery, rather than directly interacting with both the game and the community.

Chapter 2 investigated the sociocultural context that has led to *Critical Role*, showing that the series is the result of the long history of *D&D*. This chapter started with an analysis of the literature on wargames and *D&D* itself, before analysing *Critical Role* and the literature on the series. This chapters shows how *Critical Role* as a series both draws on the positive aspects of *D&D*, while also navigating the issues that plagued *D&D* in the past.

Chapter 3 investigated the literature on subcultures, games, streaming, and parasociality, identifying the weaknesses in the literature in that participatory non-participation was missing from academic debate. Therefore, having understood this weakness, this literature reading helped inform how this study proceeded.

Chapter 4 demonstrated the methodological approach and the methods used by this thesis. Using the symbolic interactionist approach to subcultures as provided by Fine and Kleinman (1979), a mixed-methods approach of ethnographic observation, surveys, and interviews was used in data acquisition, and the data analysed with the grounded approach of Glaser and

Strauss (1999). The ethnographic observation happened in *Critical Role* focused spaces, and surveys were distributed in those spaces. These surveys asked questions about fans interaction with both the *Critical Role* series, fandom, and *D&D* itself. At the end of the survey, participants had the possibility to go further with an interview. Out of this stage, there were 244 responses to the survey and 4 interviews.

Chapter 5 provided the start of the analysis of the data. It provided an argument that participatory non-participation is a subculture through showing how fans of *Critical Role* construct a shared history, shared signs and symbols around the series, and had barriers for entry. This chapter also analysed the demographics of the community as collected through the survey, in order to get an idea of just who was enjoying the series.

Chapter 6 investigated the way individuals consumed *Critical Role* as the basis for participatory non-participation, the way to play a game without playing a game. The differing methods of consumption were considered within the idea of multi-tasking in modern society and identification within subcultures. The argument presented here was that the way one consumes the series is still engagement with a subculture, and therefore was analysed within the theory of identification (Fine and Kleinman, 1979).

Chapter 7 analysed the pleasures of participatory non-participation, namely how one can enjoy *Critical Role* as an alternative to playing *D&D*, how *Critical Role* provides enjoyment as an entertainment product in itself, and the self-professed religious feelings this invoked in some viewers.

Chapter 8 analysed the ways people come to the show as a matter of induction, as a form of learning in how to play *D&D* and operate in the *D&D* subculture. This chapter analysed firstly the way people learn to play *D&D* through watching *Critical Role*, using the theory of CHAT to understand the learning process. After that, the chapter looked into how *Critical Role* teaches people how to play *D&D* socially, how one asks questions and declares what they're doing in the game. This was analysed within the theories of Becker (1953) and Goffman (1956) on how one becomes socialised to a new group, looking into the ways one learns and becomes inducted into a subculture.

Chapter 9 analysed how participatory non-participation in *Critical Role* functioned as a form of stigma management, with *D&D* as a historically stigmatised game. This chapter focused on how *Critical Role* is reducing the stigma of the game, and focused on how women and queer players

who have been historically excluded were now enjoying both the game and the series. However, this chapter also identified a new form of stigma: being a *Critical Role* fan, which comes from other *D&D* players.

Chapter 10 provided an analysis on the toxic behaviour and parasocial relationships in the *Critical Role* fandom, demonstrating how participatory non-participants internally manage group behaviour. The existence of parasocial elements caused certain members not want to engage with the larger community as a whole. This chapter concluded by presenting strategies that fans had made to deal with toxic/parasocial elements and internally monitor, while still engaging with the community.

Chapter 11 presented the Subculture of the Lurker as a theory for understanding contemporary digital subculture. This theory emphasises that a lack of interaction is needed for subculture, and that individuals can be a part of a subculture without direct participation. As the one deficit to this theory of subculture, the ways that members of the subculture managed parasocial members was also discussed. Finally, it closed with suggestions for other gaming groups to be investigated.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided the closing words for this thesis, providing the limitations of the research presented here, a reflection on the research process, discussing the ethical processes that came up during the research, and summarising the chapters. The subculture of the lurker is a new, streaming related form of social engagement that thrives on lack of engagement that is set to grow in prominence and influence.

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Appendix

Survey Questions

1. Can you tell me how you define yourself as a fan of *Critical Role*, and what does that mean to you?
2. How long ago was it that you became a fan, and what made you keep watching them?
3. How do you prefer to watch the show (Live, recording, on YouTube, or Twitch)?
4. Can you tell me about any moments (Such as RP or Combat) or things from the show that stick out to you and that you remember? What is special about these?
5. Do you talk to other fans of the show? If so, how did you begin to interact, how do you talk to them, what kinds of things do you chat about? For example do you post/comment on Reddit or livetweet your thoughts about the show? Do you make art?
6. Is there anything specific that you can talk to only fans about that non-fans might not understand?
7. Does *Critical Role* have a physical presence in your life? Do you go to any of the live shows or own any of the books/merch?
8. Can you tell me what connection *Dungeons & Dragons* has to *Critical Role*? For example, was it your introduction to *D&D*, did it teach you how to play, or give you new ideas for games you might play in? [If you don't play, see next question]
9. If you don't play *D&D*, is there something special that *Critical Role* provides you? Is it the community aspect? The group dynamics and Matt's Performance? Why don't you play?
10. Do you interact with or contribute to fan-wikis at all, such as by writing new content or reading entries? For example, did you use it to catch up with the series or to refresh your memory?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add that you feel the above responses missed?

There was a second, optional phase of the survey, where participants were able to enter demographic information. This phase was made skippable by participants in case it made them uncomfortable. These questions include:

1. What age group do you belong to?
2. Which gender do you identify as/pronouns do you use?
3. What country/region do you live in?

4. What ethnicity do you identify as?

With the exception of age groups, where four choices were given, the other three choices were textboxes. Due to the range of gender expression and ethnicities, it was decided that participants should be able to freely enter whatever they choose. While this led to issues during analysis of demographics, it was suited to be more inclusive than a simple choice of “Male/Female/Other.”

Survey Results

Age Ranges	Count
18-25	89
26-35	107
36-50	43
50+	4

Gender Ratio	Count
Male, he/him	144
Female, she/her	75
Other ⁴³	24

Geographic Location	Count
United States	136
United Kingdom	29
Canada	12
Australia	8
New Zealand	7
Germany	6

⁴³ For purposes of being concise, this includes answers such as “Non-binary” Agender”, “Gender non-conforming”, that do not typically fit into a gender binary

Geographic Location	Count
Netherlands	4
South Africa	3
Mexico	3
Israel	3
Japan	2
Russia	2
Sweden	2
Argentina	2
The Phillipine	2
Brazil	2
Singapore	2
Iceland	2
Denmark	2
South Korea	1
Portugal	1
Spain	1
Finland	1
Scandanavia	1
Switzerland	1
South East Asia	1
Venezuela	1
Poland	1
Chile	1
Serbia	1
Norway	1
Luxemborg	1
Total	243

Ethnicity	Count
Caucasian	186 ⁴⁴
Hispanic/Latino/Latina	18 (Including 3 who identified as white/Latin and 1 who identified as White/Hispanic)
Mixed	7 (Including 1 who identified as white/Native American, one who identified as mixed/Hispanic)
Jewish	6 (Including 1 who specified Ashkenazi Jewish and 1 who identified as Yemenis)
Russian	2
Irish	4
Scottish	1
Russian	2
Norwegian	2
Scottish	1
Asian	4
German	2
Portugeuse	1
Maori	1
Filipino	1
Arabian	1
Singaporan-Chinese	1
Asian-American	1
Muslim	1
Other/Prefer not to specify	2

⁴⁴ This combines respondents that put down “white”, “European”, “Pakeha”, “American” as their ethnicity

Ethnicity	Count
Total	243

Living Status	Count
Living with Family	149
Shared Accomodation	54
Living Alone	39

Interview Questions

1. To start us off, can you please tell me about your own personal relationship to *D&D*.
2. What other shows besides the main one have you regularly watched, like Talks Machina (Podcast) or Narrative Telephone? What is it that makes you want to watch them?
3. Can you tell me if, or how, you interact with the fandom. For example is it online, or do you prefer to talk in person with some friends about it?
4. Have you made any friends through the fandom itself?
5. What other online groups do you participate in? Do you see any connections between *Critical Role* and the other group, such as seeing similar people/fanart or ideas? Are there other connections you feel?
6. Can you tell me about your thoughts on the fandom. In my responses things came up about how some people really like the fandom and some are really against it.
7. So, how do you watch the show? [wait for answer] Do you like to perform another activity while doing this? Can you tell me of how you listen to it this way? [follow up by asking about different situations such as being home alone or on a commute]
8. Do you think there would be a difference watching it [live/recorded based on their previous answer]
9. If they watch the show: What do you tend to do after watching?
10. Do you know anyone who liked the show and stopped watching?
11. So, how long have you been watching the show? What is it that keeps you watching when there is so much other stuff?
12. Can you tell me how you view the *Critical Role* players? Like, do you see them as entertainment or as a company?

Interview Information Form



Department of Anthropology, Human Services, and Sociology

Email: jackson.wyndow@pg.canterbury.ac.nz

29th of July, 2021

HREC Ref: 2021/126

The Subculture of Lurkers: Digital Participation in Subcultures

Information Sheet for participants

Hello,

Thank you for expressing further interest in participating in an interview as a part of this study, having confirmed interest at the end of the previous survey. This study is being conducted by Jackson Wyndow from the University of Canterbury | Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha (UC). Other research team members include Associate Professor Ruth McManus and Dr. Erin Harrington. The study is being carried out as a requirement for a Masters of Arts in Sociology.

What is the purpose of this research?

This research aims to study modern engagement with subculture online, especially more nuanced forms. I am interested in finding out about how *Critical Role* fans engage with not only the show, but other fans as well as the wider Dungeons & Dragons community. The information from this

study will help to contribute to our understandings of modern digital subculture and how individuals interact within it.

Why have you received this invitation?

You are invited to participate in this research because you selected you would be interested to take part at the end of my survey posted online.

Your participation is voluntary (your choice). If you decide not to participate, there are no consequences. Your decision will not affect your relationship with me, the University of Canterbury, or any member of the research team.

What is involved in participating?

If you choose to continue taking part in this research, you will participate in an interview This interview will take place online over a service of the participants choosing (Zoom, MS Teams, Discord). I will contact you to arrange a suitable time and location. The interview will involve me introducing myself, answering any questions you have, and confirming your consent to participate. Then, I will begin the interview and will ask questions about your relationship with D&D, your thoughts and participation in the *Critical Role* fandom, how you watch *Critical Role*, and other fandoms you participate in. I estimate the interview will take around 15-30 minutes.

Will the interview be recorded?

With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded using a portable recorder, Zoom's built-in recording feature, or recording through OBS if another service is chosen for the interview. The recording will be used to create a written transcript of the interview, which I will analyse as part of the research. I will transcribe the recording. If you choose to review a copy of the interview transcript, I will provide this to you within 14 days of the interview. I will ask you to provide any amendments or additions via email within 2 weeks.

Are there any benefits from taking part in this research?

For taking part in this interview, participants enter in a draw to win a 50 dollar gift card from the official *Critical Role* Store. Another potential benefit is that participants will develop further understanding of their own engagement in online groups, reflecting on what this means to them.

Are there any risks involved in this research?

The only perceived risk of this research is social risk, where the participant is known to the researcher.

If you are known to the researcher, please be assured that the researchers relationship with you will not be negatively affected in any way if you either decline or withdraw consent part-way through the study.

What if you change your mind during or after the study?

You are free to withdraw at any time. To do this, please let me know either during the interview or after the interview has finished. I will remove any information you have provided up to that point from the data set if it is still possible. Once data analysis has commenced on the 15th of January, removal of your data may not be possible.

What will happen to the information you provide?

I will transfer the audio recording to a password-protected file on the University of Canterbury computer network and then delete this from the recording device as soon as practical. All data will be confidential. To ensure your identity is not known to anyone outside the research team, we will keep your signed consent form in a file separate from your interview transcript. To keep your identity confidential, your name will be changed to a pseudonym (a fake name) whenever it appears in the transcript and anywhere else. We will store the file that links your real name and your pseudonym individually on a password-protected, secure device.

All study data will be stored in password-protected files on the University of Canterbury's computer network or stored in lockable cabinets in lockable offices.

All data will be destroyed five years after completion of the study/publication of study findings. Jackson Wyndow will be responsible for making sure that only members of the research team use your data for the purposes mentioned in this information sheet.

Will the results of the study be published?

The results of this research will be published in a Master's thesis. This thesis will be available to the general public through the University of Canterbury library. Results may be published in peer-reviewed, academic journals. Results will also be presented during conferences or seminars to wider professional and academic communities. You will not be identifiable in any publication. A summary of results will be sent to all participants who request a copy.

Who can you contact if you have any questions or concerns?

If you have any questions about the research, please contact Jackson Wyndow at jackson.wyndow@pg.canterbury.ac.nz for questions, and Ruth McManus at ruth.mcmanus@canterbury.ac.nz for concerns.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). If you have a complaint about this research, please contact the Chair of the HREC at human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).

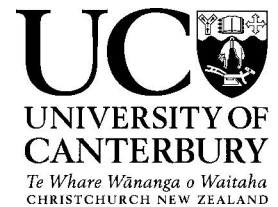
What happens next?

Please review the consent form. If you would like to participate, please sign, scan/take a photo of, and return the consent form to jackson.wyndow@pg.canterbury.ac.nz.

Thank you,

Jackson Wyndow

Interview Consent Sheet



Department of Anthropology, Human Services, and Sociology

Email: jackson.wyndow@pg.canterbury.ac.nz

29th of July, 2021

HREC Ref: 2021/126

The Subculture of Lurkers: Digital Participation in Subcultures

Consent Form for Participants

- I have been given a full explanation of this project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand what is required of me if I agree to take part in the research.
- I understand that participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time without consequences. Withdrawal of participation will also include the withdrawal of any information I have provided should this remain possible.

- I understand that any information or opinions I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher. I understand that any published or reported results will not identify me.
- I understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC Library.
- I understand that all data collected for the study will be kept in locked and secure facilities and/or in password protected electronic form. I understand the data will be destroyed after 5 years at the end of project.
- I understand the risks associated with taking part and how they will be managed.
- I agree to being audio recorded. I understand how this recording will be stored and used.
- I understand that I can contact the researcher Jackson Wyndow (jackson.wyndow@pg.canterbury.ac.nz) or supervisor Ruth McManus (ruth.mcmanus@canterbury.ac.nz) for further information. If I have any complaints, I can contact the Chair of the University of Canterbury Human Research Ethics Committee, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch, (email: human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).
- I would like a summary of the results of the project.
- I would like to go in the draw to win a 50 dollar gift card for the official *Critical Role* store (Region of the participants choosing, winner will be messaged to ask region).
- By signing below, I agree to participate in this research project.

Name: _____ Signed: _____ Date: _____

Email address *(for report of findings, if applicable)*: _____

Instructions for return: Email to jackson.wyndow@pg.canterbury.ac.nz