Intimacy Games: *Critical Role*'s Struggle to Maintain Its Tabletop Authenticity

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Every Thursday evening approximately fifty-thousand people tune in on Twitch to watch a live episode of *Critical Role*. Unlike most Twitch streams where viewers watch streamers play video games, these viewers are tuned in to watch voice actors play the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons*. *D&D* has reemerged a cultural phenomenon in recent years, with its fifth edition skyrocketing the game's popularity. This growth can, in part, be attributed to shows like *Critical Role*, whose live audience only represents a fraction of its fans: weekly uploads of the three- to five-hour show to YouTube hover around a million views. As a result, the cast of *Critical Role* are considered the "ambassadors" of *D&D* by the community and game designers. In 2019, Stephen Colbert, host of *The Late Show*, played an adventure with Matthew Mercer, the show's dungeon master, and Amazon purchased streaming rights to two seasons of an animated series based on the show's intellectual property.

Critical Role is, in essence, a Twitch live stream of Mercer's *D&D* campaign, set in the fictional world of "Exandria." It features a variety of "nerdy-ass voice actors,"[1] as Mercer calls them at the beginning of each episode, who role play as heroic characters going on adventures and interacting with the fantasy world. The entirety of this role playing is done verbally, with the occasional inclusion of professionally and fan-made character art, and a short introductory animation, which remediates some visual aspects of the story. The primary selling point of the stream is the professional voice-over talent of the cast, which creates the show's compelling atmosphere, as their skills in vocal performance translate readily to a *D&D* live stream. It is useful to understand the show as a mix between game: the

[1] The cast of *Critical Role* is: Travis Willingham, Marisha Ray, Taliesin Jaffe, Ashley Johnson, Liam O'Brien, Laura Bailey, Sam Riegal, and Matthew Mercer.

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players roll dice and make tactical decisions as RPG characters, theater: the players perform roles, craft a compelling narrative, and put on accents for a live audience, and improv: since both the dungeon master and players are making consequential decisions moment to moment and playing off each other in character. As the show has grown in popularity its creators have become their own media company with a dozen or so other live shows outside the flagship *D&D* campaign, including talk shows, comic books, video game streams, and the aptly named *#EverythingIsContent* variety show.

As both *Critical Role* and *D&D* continue to gain popularity they offer a compelling medium to study in terms of broadcast and fan culture. First, the show is a remediation of *D&D*, a game not traditionally understood as a spectator affair. Following the definitions set forth by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, the show is a mix of transparency and hypermediation, it attempts to balance being a simple game of players around a table (transparency) with the heightened performance of professionals trying to create an engaging and profitable piece of entertainment (hypermediation). Second, *Critical Role* succeeds not because it mediates a tabletop game, but the feeling of sitting down with friends at the table for game night. It functions as a site of affective response akin to the theater: the audience empathizes with the players, relishing in their victories and sulking in their defeats. The players are immediate to the audience, which generates a sense of intimacy between them. This intimacy allows for more profound emotional resonance, as Jonathon Flately writes in *Affective Mapping*, “Powerful emotional experiences – quite different from more cognitively mediated ones – connect us with, even transport us *into* the materiality of the world around us” (18) [emphasis original]. For *Critical Role* this might imply that the audience's affective response places them at the table with the players. Third, this intimacy is encouraged by the cast, who have cultivated a highly engaged fan community (named “critters”) and incorporate their fans into their broadcasts via Twitch chat, having episodes in front of live audiences, and featuring fan art on each stream. Finally, in recent years, the cast have started their own media company and are branching into other media, primarily live streaming, but also comics and animated television. Considering that one of the primary appeals of *Critical Role* is the perceived authenticity of the cast and the intimacy the show creates with viewers, their attempts at maintaining the affect of the *D&D* table while expanding as a media corporation, and the conflicts that arise as a result, offer an interesting case study on the strained relationship between media and audience in the digital age.

Critical Role as Remediation

Before discussing how *Critical Role* remediates *D&D*, it is important to understand the ways in which the structure of the game resists remediation. *D&D* is not like most games; it does not have a set start time or end time, there are no "winners" or "losers," and there are few visual components to the game. The action is almost entirely in the imagination of the participants. In the history of the game before this decade, *D&D* was not thought of as a spectator affair. There was an animated television series in the 1980s titled *Dungeons and Dragons*, but this remediated the fantasy fiction genre, think *Lord of the Rings*, rather than a tabletop role-playing game. This is why at the outset I'm defining these live streams as part game, part theater, and part improv. If we consider a live stream of the game as just theater we risk removing the stochastic contingencies that the dice offer, and if we consider the game as simply improv we risk undercutting the ways in which players role-play as characters with narrative continuity and a desire to see goals met. These are not insurmountable obstacles, as the success of *Critical Role* displays, but to understand the show, one must understand how it remediates each of these things to function and find success. Perhaps most importantly, *Critical Role* remediates not just the play of *D&D* or the experience of theater, but the experience of a game night with friends. While not traditionally understood as "media," a game night has several unique markers the show borrows, in particular sitting down at the table at a particular time and place, with a reliance on social contingency, to create engaging media.

Part of the intimacy of *Critical Role* has to do with its humble beginnings. Mercer's *D&D* campaign was not intended to be a live stream consumed for audiences. In fact, the group had already been playing together for two years before they started streaming. As a result, the series begins in media res, strengthening the feeling that the audience is viewing the group's normal weekly game of *D&D* rather than a conscious media production. These early episodes typically have poor audio and video quality, with the cast situated in what appears to be a simple living room. This replicates the "lofi" aesthetic of certain musical acts. Andy Stuhl writes in "Reactions to Analog Fetishism in Sound-Recording Cultures" that "song – and performance – centric views treat production as inherently opposed to musical authenticity." For Stuhl, "Lo-fi music presents a striking example of how a whole set of cultural decisions are embodied in an aesthetic category best identified simply

as a 'sound'." While Stuhl specifically discusses rock music, the same principles can be applied to other DIY media. The low fidelity of *Critical Role* episodes helps create a sense of authenticity which fosters the initial intimacy the show cultivates for its audience. The difference between DIY music and streaming rests in their intentionality and how they grow. Stuhl explains that many DIY music acts struggle when they become successful because higher production fidelity can result in a wider audience, but also alienate the initial audience. While *Critical Role's* early lack of fidelity seems to be a result of a lack of resources, the stream has grown into a more professionally produced product over time. Current episodes, now years removed from their earnest beginnings, are set in a studio with high-quality audio equipment, have overlays to display game information, and contain markers of glossy production techniques with a production crew helping run the technical side of the live stream. With the advent of COVID-19, they constructed an elaborate, and reasonably safe, streaming space where they could be in person, but still maintain California's policies on distance for public gatherings.

It is useful though to analyze these early episodes through the lens of remediation, because this is the format that *Critical Role* used to become the most popular *D&D* live stream. At first blush, especially with the DIY aesthetic detailed previously, it might seem as though these early streams are explicitly *not* immediate, considering Bolter and Grusin describe the transparent interface as "one more manifestation of the need to deny the mediated character of digital technology altogether" (24), while Stuhl's lofi aesthetic confers authenticity via noticeable digital remediation. Yet, visual and aural artifacts indicating the digital nature of the stream do fit within the "family of beliefs" that constitute immediacy. Bolter and Grusin argue "The common feature of all these forms is the belief in some necessary contact point between the medium and what it represents" (30). These early streams are filled with such contact points. Particularly in the representation of a weekly game night, whether that be the video feed of the faces of players at a table, the location of the stream in a living room, the various beverages, food, and books that can be seen on the table in front of the players, or the division of the video feed between the dungeon master and players (who function in different roles in a game of *D&D*).

The most important contact point between the medium and what it represents is the fact that it is aired live, though through COVID-19 the episodes have aired a week after they were recorded. Even though the majority of *Critical Role* viewers do not watch the show live, the experience of a *D&D* game night necessitates that

individuals be in a room together and infers continuous play for a set period of time. This liveness is an aesthetic of immediacy for *Critical Role* as a mediated product. The show fits within Philip Auslander's arguments in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* that "live performance recapitulates mediatized representations" (54) and "like liveness itself, the desire for live experiences is a product of mediatization" (55). Similarly, *Critical Role's* "live aesthetic" is part of its mediatization and the affect the series cultivates: instead of being mutually exclusive, they inform one another. The series has, over time, discarded some aspects that marked its liveness in favor of creating a more mediatized product. Auslander resists claims that live performance and mediatized performances are a mirror upon one another, instead arguing, "my view of cultural economy holds that at any given historical moment, there are dominant forms that enjoy much greater cultural presence, prestige, and power than other forms. Nondominant forms will tend to become more like dominant ones, but not the other way around" (162). In the case of *Critical Role*, it is difficult to tell what form it may be trying to mimic is. Initially, as a relatively obscure media product, it could be considered a "nondominant form" which remediates the live show, but as it has grown in popularity, it has become the measure by which other *D&D* shows are judged, with many having some kind of mediated twist on the formula. This extends to other *Critical Role* broadcasts as well and creates some of the disjointed relationships between the show and its audience, since its dominance is rooted in a sense of authentic liveness that can be easily lost when the markers of immediate remediation are removed from the stream. As the show has been professionalized its visual and aural fidelity has improved, the cast no longer eats on stream, and there is a stricter adherence to "good" recording practicing, which impacts the authentic liveness originally cultivated in early episodes. The series is immediate insofar as it confers "liveness" as a principle aesthetic, but as a web-mediated product, it is hypermediated to feel live as well.

Various hypermediations indicate the "liveness" of the stream and help constitute its remediation as game night. Bolter and Grusin define "the logic of hypermediacy," which:

> acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes them visible. Where immediacy suggests a unified visual space, contemporary hypermediacy offers a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window on to the world, but rather as "windowed" itself – with windows that open on to other representations and other media.

(33-4)

While these hypermediations have become more prevalent in the years since the series aired, the early streams are still thoroughly windowed affairs. Outside of the visual remediation of the players, the most prominent of these windows is the live chat box featured early in the series. This fast-moving chat archives the "liveness" of the show by giving the viewer a sense of a live audience watching the show. The comments in chat do not typically rise to the level of meaningful criticism but act as a further remediation of the action of the narrative. For instance, when Willingham's Grog, an unintelligent Goliath, says a funny line, the chat may be spammed with users typing "Grog!" Similarly, emotes and other short phrases help the audience communicate to each other how to feel about what is going on in the game, similar to how a laugh track functions in a sitcom. Chat members may also answer questions for viewers who are not caught up on the series, helping to create coherency where there might not otherwise have been any. Also conferring liveness, these early episodes are hypermediated by a visual pop-up indicating when users followed or subscribed to the stream, which, like the chat box, indicates that the stream is live and that users are interacting with the content as it is aired. As the show has grown as a production and career for its cast, these hypermediations, specifically the chat box and visual announcement of new followers and subscribers, have been removed in favor of sponsorship deals and a more streamlined production. Still, these early streams suggest the importance of maintaining a live aesthetic through hypermediation. Such chats still exist when *Critical Role* is aired live, they are just no longer privileged with appearing in their own box live stream and subsequent uploads.

This is not to say that all aspects that engage fans directly have been removed from the live stream of *Critical Role* as it has professionalized. Much of the dead air time before and after the show, and during the mid-show break, features fan art, specifically noting the name of the artist and where to find their work on social media. Fan art occupies a strange space of remediation for *Critical Role*. On one hand, it presents the narrative as more immediate, giving a visual representation of the characters and depicting their adventures to better facilitate an imaginative understanding of the otherwise aural show. On the other hand, as a hypermediation of "liveness" it functions as a way for the stream to visually engage fans and privilege their affective labor akin to the chat box. The key difference, of course, is that the fan art is premediated and chosen by the production crew while the chat box can be unpredictable. As the cast of *Critical Role* attempt to professionalize

their media product, they make changes to it that aim to maintain the spirit of fan engagement without compromising the marketability of their stream.

Perhaps the most obvious hypermediation on current *Critical Role* streams is their prolific use of sponsorships. In the second campaign, which started airing in 2018 and wrapped up in 2021, nearly every episode is sponsored by *D&D Beyond*, an app that remediates *D&D* virtually by maintaining character sheets, rules, and other information found in the game's rule books. The cast of *Critical Role* use *D&D Beyond* to manage their live game, with tablets on the table during the stream indicating that the players have done away with the traditional pen and paper in favor of a digital remediation. While the core of the *D&D* experience remains, because there are still people gathered around a table talking, this represents a marked change from the first campaign, where no tablets or digital remediations of the game are situated in the play space. A *D&D Beyond* overlay is continually present on the stream, there are advertisements for it during the midshow break. In the introduction before the episode "proper" begins, Riegal typically does a skit which acts as an ad for *D&D Beyond*. These skits are a way to maintain the intimacy of the *D&D* table while attempting to become a more corporatized entity. Instead of just running a traditional advertisement for the product the cast engage in jokes around their sponsorship. A running gag throughout part of the second campaign is Riegal and O'Brien running for "president of *D&D Beyond*" with politically inspired videos that advertise the candidacies, and the product. Whether these skits work or not as advertisements is less important than the clear desire on the part of the cast to maintain authenticity by making light of their sponsorships.

Another hypermediated aspect of the show comes from this relationship with *D&D Beyond*: a sponsored Twitch overlay that tracks crucial game information live. This overlay keeps tabs on each player's health and resources so that the audience has a better idea of how the game is going. This is a hypermediation on not just the stream experience, as the audience gains special access to information otherwise unavailable to them, but on the experience of playing *D&D*, a primarily vocal game in which this information is typically not known between players unless they verbally ask each other or peek over their friend's shoulder. As a result, the audience feels more "at the table," since they have a good idea of the current status of the party, but also transcend the table, knowing information that the players and dungeon master don't know, even if it is not exactly "closed" information, since players can learn it by verbally asking. Importantly, this and other promotions, such as the giveaway each episode, which rewards members of the audience materially

for tuning in live, are still related to the hobby being presented on stream. *D&D Beyond* is an app explicitly for *D&D* players, other advertisements on the show are for *D&D*-related products, and the giveaways are often for supplemental *D&D* items that facilitate play, such as dice or dice trays. As the show reaches for sponsorships outside of the hobby's environment, it creates a disconnect between the cast and the audience, especially when these sponsorships are not explicitly *D&D* related. *Critical Role* broadcasts are thoroughly remediated affairs, attempting to balance the intimacy of the *D&D* table, through liveness and fan interactivity, with the burgeoning needs of a sponsored live stream looking to gain capital through hypermediation.

Critical Role as Affective Media

The previous discussion of how *Critical Role* remediates the *D&D* table to create a mediatized product only captures part of the show's allure to audiences. The series did not reach significant success simply because it remediates *D&D*, there are many shows that do this, but because as a piece of entertainment it generates affective responses. Rather than *just* a game night the audience is invited to be a part of, *Critical Role* is a *heightened* experience of *D&D*, offering a compelling emotional environment that engages fans on a narrative level far greater than the typical table, whether broadcast or private. Case in point, in the *D&D* community there is a phenomenon known as the "Mercer effect," which refers to the way that *Critical Role* sets up high expectations for fans regarding the emotional involvement a game of *D&D* entails, only to be disappointed when a home game does not reach such heights. Mercer himself has addressed the effect on social media:

> we are a table of professional actors and I have been DMing for well over 20 years. We have spent our lives training in particular skills that allow us to get as immersed in the characters as we enjoy doing. Anyone can jump in as deeply, should they wish to, but EXPECTING that immediate level of comfort and interest is unfair and absurd.

The skills and training of the cast results in an experience that is affective in a way unlike the traditional *D&D* table. In this section, I will closely read a few episodes from the show to understand how they generate affective responses from fans.

"Mood" is a good starting point for our discussion of affect in *Critical Role*. Flatley takes "'mood' to refer to a kind of affective atmosphere... in which intentions are formed, projects pursued, and particular affects can attach to particular objects...

our mood creates the world in which we exist at any given moment" (19). Mood, or *Stimmung*, is of particular importance for a *D&D* show because the world of the narrative is entirely imagined. As such, affects "create the world" for the audience that otherwise wouldn't exist. Mood in this sense is not a psychological phenomenon, but rather, as Flatley puts it, "Moods are not in us; we are in them; they go through us... They 'assail us.' And in this sense mood is also total, or totalizing. Moods do not shed light on some thing in particular, but on a whole environment" (22). A broadcast of *Critical Role* does not attempt to create an immediate world in the vein of photo-realism, but it is immediate in an emotional sense, asking the audience to empathize with the players and their characters to create a sense of "realness." These broadcasts go to great lengths to set the mood of the moment: music is curated to generate fear, sadness, or excitement; Mercer describes environments and the action less in specific details and more in the affect he wishes to impart; the cast adjust their posture for different moods. For instance, during a tense moment, everyone will likely be paying close attention, doing as little as possible to distract from the action of the scene, but in casual moments the group will crack jokes, giggle, eat, drink, or have side chats. Bodily, it is not unusual for players to tear up, whether from laughing or sadness, get visibly angry, or physically jump in excitement during the stream. These emotions create the core of the audience's relationship with the show and these moods help create the feeling of "liveness." As Flatley points out: "*Stimmung* is a collective, public phenomenon, something inevitably shared. Moods constitute the '*way* in which we are together'" (22) [emphasis in original]. Thus, in sharing in the mood with the participants at the table, the audience better relates to the action at the table and connects with the narrative. The show is live for them because they feel as though they are living through the action with the cast, but also because they are sharing in this mood with the Twitch chat and the broader community of "critters."

It is worth noting that these streams are quite long. TL Taylor describes multihour broadcasts in *Watch Me Play* as "sometimes exactly *not* 'digestible' but instead composed of long stretches of affective, engaged performance" (255) [emphasis in original]. This lack of digestibility certainly transfers to the *Critical Role* broadcast. While there is typically a break in the broadcast, episodes can last up to five hours, demanding an engaged audience if watching live, or an attentive audience if watching after the fact. These long periods of time the audience spends with the show help cultivate moods; which are able to transition slowly rather than abruptly and crescendo over time. An example of these affective moments occurs

in the episode “Divergent Paths.” A few episodes prior the group functionally adopted an orphan child named Kiri, whose parents likely died on the dangerous road they themselves were traveling down. Of course, the life of these adventurers, filled with travel and violence, is no place for a child, but the group had no choice but to take them in as they progressed to a nearby city. Over the few episodes of spending time with Kiri, a playful mood was struck between the cast and the child, a crow-like creature who would mimic them verbally, creating inside jokes for the cast and audience. Growing close to the child, Jester, played by Laura Bailey, gave Kiri a small music box as a present. Before the group left the city, they helped a family reunite and decided it would be best to leave Kiri with this family. As they leave they tell Kiri she will not travel with them any longer but will be staying with the family. Mercer describes her as “conflicted and confused, but you can see a bit of understanding wash over.” Kiri then pulls out the music box and hugs various members of the party. Subtly, the live, on-stream, music shifts from its standard affair to a cute and simple music box melody, which immediately sets the mood as somber. Within moments two cast members start crying. Marisha Ray tries to stay in character as they say goodbye to the family, but she struggles to maintain composure in the sentimental mood of the goodbye. This affective moment would not be possible without the many hours of prolonged and engaged “indigestible” time that the audience and characters had spent cultivating a relationship with Kiri, reflecting the importance of mood on the most powerfully affective moments the show has to offer.

Because *Critical Role* is a remediation of *D&D*, there is also the possibility of character death. While in traditional theater death is a scripted affair, *D&D* is a game with stochastic characteristics and players cannot prepare for the deaths of the characters they have spent many hours creating and role-playing as. Thus, however infrequent, character deaths do occur in *Critical Role* and are some of the most poignant affective moments the series has to offer. The strain of such a moment can be found in the episode “Found & Lost,” in which Jaffe's character Mollymauk dies. To set the scene, slavers kidnapped a few members of the party in a previous episode and the remaining members set an ambush to save their friends, but as the ambush begins it becomes clear that the party is outmatched. As the fight continues, Mollymauk finds himself in one on one combat with Lorenzo, who is to become the main villain for the next narrative arc. Lorenzo manages to best Mollymauk, and then “makes an example” of him, stabbing him through the chest with his glaive, a merciless decision to hurt an already unconscious character.

Mercer asks Jaffe, “what do you want to be your last words,” with a pained expression on his face, and the entire group reacts with shock. After giving his answer, for the next few minutes Jaffe sits back in his chair, unsure what to do, the combat continues while the rest of the group looks at each other worriedly. Eventually, the pressure is too much and Jaffe leaves the table. After the combat resolves it is obvious that the moment took an emotional toll on the cast: Mercer consoles a guest star who blames herself for what happened, saying “that's the game” and that it was a “terrible convergence of events.” Riegal bluntly says “that's *D&D*.” But in an emotionally real way, these players are dealing with grief, and the tenseness of it is easily felt by the audience as they respond affectively to the emotions of the cast. Some fans of the show were upset to see a favorite character die and there was enough backlash that Mercer felt the need to respond to it on Twitter, writing that it's “the nature of the game, not all ends are written. If you found this one, singular moment so strong to somehow break your trust in me, then... I am sorry. Genuinely.” Mercer empathizes with the audience and acknowledges that the show generates real emotions, asking, “When the stages of grief have washed over, I hope you still wish to join us.” This moment, and the grief felt by fans after it, helps us understand the highly affective environment fostered in the *Critical Role* broadcast as something that *feels real* for the audience. This is akin to television, in which the audience spends a lot of time with characters and can experience grief when those characters move on or the show is canceled. But it is also a byproduct of the engaged and “indigestible” nature of a live stream. Because these tense moments are filmed and broadcast live, their shocking nature reaffirms the “liveness” of the format and the unscripted qualities of the broadcast that help maintain a sense of contingency for the narrative of the show.

A few episodes after “Found & Lost,” the group faced Lorenzo again in “The Stalking Nightmare.” Interestingly for our purposes, this episode was filmed in front of a live audience, a unique fold in the *Critical Role* formula where they play the game in front of a packed theater. In these streams, the affective nature of the show is constantly reaffirmed by the audience's cheers, gasps, and laughter, acting as a literal laugh track on the action. One of the most iconic lines from the series is Mercer's “How do you want to do this?” question when a player gets an important kill on an enemy, allowing the player to help create the narrative of the moment. In this episode, O'Brien gets asked the question after dealing damage to Lorenzo, signifying that they have defeated him. While the entire broadcast the crowd has been loudly engaging with the cast with chants and cheers, they become

exceedingly audible and disruptive when O'Brien's wizard Caleb gets this kill. The camera cuts to the audience, who are almost all standing with their arms in the air cheering and clapping. The video feed of the actors becomes obscured by the audience's raised hands and the action of the moment is delayed until the audience calms down. This moment helps connect the perceived affective response of the studio episodes with the actual response of audiences. The elation of the live audience contextualizes the grief of Mollymauk's death and the kinds of emotional connections the audience has to the narrative.

Overall, these examples point to how the Critical Role creates a mood that facilitates moments of affective response in both cast members and the audience, whether they be elation, sadness, or desperation. While these kinds of affect can be found in other media, they don't exist in *Critical Role* because it is remediating theater or film, but because it is a contingent game with uncertain outcomes. Like a spectator sport, it is the uncertainty of the outcome of events that keeps the audience engaged with the narrative, in particular affective moods, which in turn the "liveness" of the stream that indicates that anything can happen in the shared imagined world of players and audience.

Critical Role as a Media Company

In its early days, *Critical Role* was a broadcast on "Geek & Sundry," a platform and YouTube channel which mostly programs unscripted shows based around "nerdy" hobbies and intellectual properties like *D&D*. But in early 2019 the show split with their production company to form one of their own, "Critical Role Productions LLC." Since forming their own company there has been a significant uptick in spin-off productions. These productions often aim to capitalize on the wide audience of *Critical Role*, its affective nature, and the connection the audience has to the main cast. *Talks Machina* is an aftershow in which a few cast members discuss that week's episode, while *Critical Recap*, as the name implies, offers quick summaries to keep fans in the know as to the events of the series. The former of these functions more within the mood set by *Critical Role*, since it maintains the personal touch of the cast and relies on their position as players and actors to generate interest. *Critical Recap*, on the other hand, is a kind of remediation itself on *Critical Role*, since it retells the events of the episode in a story-like and direct manner. Importantly though, the affective labor that the cast does is lost in these recaps, since it is hosted by a production coordinator and not a member of the cast. While

this functions like “last time on...” promos before television series, because of the “indigestible” nature of live streams it simply recaps narrative points without successfully relaying the mood or emotional resonance of an episode. While it may catch the viewer up on narrative details, like the aforementioned promo, it does a poor job of communicating the liveness of the media in question. Both of these *Critical Role* paratexts represent some of the most straightforward pathways to expansion for the production company, since they focus on the flagship program, but other shows attempt to remediate the affective nature of the show without being related to *D&D* at all.

One such show is *Between the Sheets*, an edited talk show between Brian W. Foster, an author and host of *Talks Machina*, and the cast members. Typically, Foster sits down one on one with a cast member and they discuss their life, what lead them to become an actor, and their experiences on *Critical Role*. Specific details about the narrative are left at the door while the show tries to create an intimate atmosphere between host and guest. They usually sit down at a bar and make a mixed drink while the guest tells stories from their life. While no *D&D* is present, the mood set by the show carries over to these interviews: the one-on-one premise helps create an atmosphere of engaged, affective performance. These interviews represent one way in which the affective nature of *Critical Role* carries over into related media and specifically points to intimacy, whether it is between host and guest or audience and cast, as something key to the success of the show, meant to be maintained even when they are not playing *D&D*.

This intimacy between cast and audience was almost immediately mobilized when the cast became their own production company. In the spring of 2019, just a month after they broke ties with Geek & Sundry, the company announced their first Kickstarter campaign to create an animated series based on the first campaign with the entire cast reprising their roles as voice actors instead of players on a stage. While this animation would be interesting as a remediation of the show, already a remediation of a game night, it is still in development at the time of this writing. Still, the circumstances of its funding, like the live crowd in “The Stalking Nightmare,” give us a tangible understanding of the value of *Critical Role* to its audience. The initial goal of the Kickstarter was to raise $750,000 to produce an animated special, but this amount was raised in merely 40 minutes after the Kickstarter going live, and the one-month campaign ultimately took in over $11 million dollars. This exceptionally fast and overwhelming support from fans of the show suggests how effective the emotional mood of the show is at captivating its

audience. As with all Kickstarters, the cast implemented many "stretch goals," which were special prizes for backers if particular monetary goals were met. These stretch goals pointedly play off of the affective nature of the show. For instance, the 10 million dollar stretch goal was for a live stream of Willingham going on a "spooky journey through a haunted house." The update notes, "If you know Travis, you know that he's not fond of scary things–in fact, you might say that he's vehemently opposed to all things frightening." This stretch goal plays up the affective nature of the show, presenting Willingham as someone the audience "knows," and the reward itself, a live stream of Willingham's affective response to a haunted house, is another piece of entertainment linked to the mood created by the show. As such, it is not just that *Critical Role* generates a particularly affective atmosphere, but they know they do and explicitly use it to raise capital and engage with their audience.

Still, the cast of *Critical Role* doesn't always understand this atmosphere, what it means to their audience, and what their audience expects from them. A misalignment of these expectations came in late 2019 when the cast replaced their normal Thursday night broadcast of *Critical Role* with a sponsored live stream of a Wendy's parody of *D&D* called *Feast of Legends*. Almost immediately this sponsored stream received a vitriolic reaction from many fans of the show. These fans were complained about how Wendy's was not part of the "Fair Food Program," an initiative that "ensures humane wages and working conditions for the workers who pick fruits and vegetables on participating farms." While the show has embraced left-wing politics and views, in particular LGBTQ+ issues, it seems unlikely that it was just Wendy's being an "evil corporation" that frustrated fans. After all, streams are on Twitch, a subsidiary of Amazon, whose corporate policies and unwillingness to treat employees well are continually controversial, and episodes are archived on YouTube, owned by Google. Instead, the affective nature of the show, as evidenced by the Kickstarter, has fostered a sense of ownership among fans. If they feel, as Flatley puts it, that they are in the "materiality" of the show, or that they are sitting down each week at a friend's game night, it makes sense that audience members might feel disconnected when the content of the weekly show is corporatized and sponsored by a commercial entity: suddenly the show doesn't feel like it is "theirs" anymore.

The backlash to this episode was intense enough to spark a reaction from the cast. Within 24 hours of the stream Mercer posted an apology on Twitter:

Striking into the unknown of independent business is a delicate, scary

> thing... What we have done with CR, and are striving to keep doing, is an exercise in vulnerability in a sometimes volatile space... In this vulnerable space, we make our decisions out in the open, sometimes stumbling. Hard lessons can and will be learned from... What we have always done and will continue to do is listen and learn from you, the Critters, and make amends the best we can.

This apology points to the heart of the relationship between the cast and the audience. Mercer correctly identifies not that the fans are angry about a *Wendy's* sponsorship, but that as a piece of affective entertainment they have created a kind of social contract with their fans that confers an "ownership" onto them. Mercer's continued insistence that they have created a "vulnerable space" suggests how important the collective mood of the show is to maintain. His appeal that they will learn from their audience directly places them as open participants in the affective atmosphere of *Critical Role*. The official Twitter account of the show also tweeted an apology and donated all the profits from the sponsorship to Farmwork Justice, an organization that fights for the rights of farm workers, clearly a backpedal trying to respond to the criticism of the sponsorship. Since airing the *Feast of Legends* stream, the company has completely distanced themselves from it: they have deleted all tweets promoting the event and have not uploaded the episode to YouTube.

This moment strikes at the nature of affective entertainment in the 21st Century on platforms like Twitch. Streamers, even ones with large audiences and able to raise such significant sums of money, are still precarious laborers in a gig economy. TL Taylor writes of this in *Watch Me Play*, "many ways in which game live streamers precariously navigate between self-determination, creative expression, and meaningful interaction and structures always at work to capture as well as regulate their endeavors" (259). In this case, the cast of *Critical Role* must balance its self-determination as a new company and creative avenue for its artists with the demands of an engaged modern audience who, in part due to their affective ownership of the show, "regulate" its content through public feedback and outrage. While there has always been a relationship between popular art and audiences, the success of *Critical Role* points to both the possibilities and troubles that come with making such a relationship explicitly intimate, showcasing the vulnerability of the artist and using it as a vehicle for profit and recognition. There is a constant push and pull, then, between the capitalistic tendencies of *Critical Role* as a corporation and its situated ethos as an affective provider of a particular mood. The conflict

between capital and ethos suggests that in 21st Century entertainment there is a high price tag for authenticity and intimacy; it can bring about potential viewership and revenue, but it limits a platform by creating particular expectations for an audience, which, if not met, can result in a schism between fans and creators. The cast of *Critical Role* walk this fine line and have still not fully managed to figure out what that means.

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