Identity Negotiation and Resistance

in *Dungeons & Dragons* Liveshow *Critical Role*

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Humanities

at the University of California, Irvine

With the support of the

UCI Humanities Honors Program &

UCI Summer Undergraduate Research Program &

UCI Undergraduate Research Program

Advised by UCI's

Professor of English, Andrea Henderson &

Assistant Professor of Informatics, Aaron Trammell

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Professor Andrea Henderson and Professor Aaron Trammell, my research supervisors, for their patient guidance, enthusiastic encouragement, and sharp critique. I would also like to thank the University of California, Irvine's Humanities Honors Program, the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program, and the Summer Undergraduate Research Program for their financial support in the development of this research. Without a full summer of dedicated time to this project, I would not be where I am today. I would also like to thank the Humanities Honors Program and its director, Professor Nancy McLoughlin. Professor McLoughlin's patience, guidance, and feedback have been crucial to my writing process. Similarly, I would like to thank my cohort for their feedback. It has been an honor and pleasure to develop this thesis with the support of other passionate, dedicated researchers. Finally, I'd like to thank my cohort member Sierra Myer and UCI Informatics Ph.D. student Amanda Cullen. Sierra has given constant, thorough feedback on every version of my draft since over a year and a half ago. Amanda has also been generous in her detailed feedback and mentorship. Thanks to this thesis and the support of all those acknowledged, I will be continuing my research in this field in Fall 2021 at the University of California, Irvine's Ph.D. in Informatics program.

Abstract

Over the last two decades, *Dungeons & Dragons*, a tabletop roleplaying game (TTRPG), transformed from a niche subculture to a mainstream aspect of popular culture.[1] Tabletop gamers now utilize new media to create "actual play" experiences, in which a group of people play TTRPGs for an audience. In traditional tabletop, Dennis Waskul and Matt Lust propose that role-playing engenders three unique roles within one person, that of the person, the player, and the persona.[2] In this thesis, I propose that actual play TTRPGs necessitate the addition of a fourth role: the performer. Because of the nature of live television and theatre, both the actors and the audience experience the effects of this fourth role, in recorded actual play and live actual play. I will explore how the division of self into four tangible roles reveals in and out of game identity negotiation. Through a case study of one of the most popular actual play shows, *Critical Role*, this thesis aims to uncover the ways in which a new type of media—the D&D liveshow—both performs and inspires new conceptions of personhood for players and viewers alike. My close reading and case study thus far suggest that play, the medium of D&D itself, engenders social recreation at the table, and therefore outside of the table, due to how closely the game mimics life and how the roles necessitated to play the game reflect real-life social roles. *CR*, and at large the new genre of the D&D liveshow, gives players, naive and experienced, not only the permission and example, but also the opportunity, to take rules and break them.

Key words: identity, actual play, live-streaming, tabletop roleplay

[1] Charlie Hall, "'Actual play' RPG experiences like Critical Role, Adventure Zone are having a moment," Polygon, July 9, 2018, https://www.polygon.com/2018/7/9/17549808/actual-play-critical-role-adventure-zone-kickstarter-graphic-novel.
[2] Dennis Waskul and Matt Lust, "Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing," *Symbolic Interaction* 27, no. 3 (2004): 335. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2004.27.3.333.

Purpose

Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) is a fantasy tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) originally designed by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. The game has undergone five numbered editions with significant revisions, published by Wizards of the Coast (WotC) since 1997. Over the last two decades, D&D transformed from a niche subculture to a mainstream aspect of popular culture. Tabletop gamers now utilize new media to create "actual play" experiences, in which a group of people play tabletop games for an audience. Actual play can be anything depicting a tabletop game, such as a YouTube video, podcast, livestream. Contrary to what the words suggest—an actual, realistic look at tabletop gameplay—most actual play is pre-recorded, which can allow for editing. Even when unedited, actual play inherently changes because the game is being performed by a cast, actors aware of an audience, instead of people in privacy. However, when an actual play show is livestreamed, some of the realness of the game stays. T.L. Taylor, in her book *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming,* explores the recent phenomenon of video game livestreaming on Twitch.tv. Taylor establishes that esports complicates traditional gaming with the introduction of communication between the player and the viewer.[3] Similarly, the players of actual play D&D on Twitch.tv or other streaming platforms can now interact with their audience.

The importance of gaming and roleplaying's capacity for real-life exploration and expression has been thoroughly discussed. Why, then, return to theorizing roles in 2021? In 1994, Phil Masters wrote in *Interactive Fantasy,* that "If we are going to discuss role-playing games with any kind of rigor, we are going to need to define our terms," which he then does.[4]

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[3] T.L. Taylor, *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Liv Streaming* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018) 258-60.
[4] Phil Masters, "On the Vocabulary of Role-Playing: Notes towards Critical Consistency?" *Interactive Fantasy* 1, no. 2 (1994): 57-74.

Other prominent instances of creating a lexicon for tabletop gaming include Montola's "The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing" (2009)[5] or Harviainen's "Hermeneutical Approach to Role-Playing Analysis" (2009).[6] Usenet group RGFA gave birth to one of the best known TTRPG typology, the so-called Threefold Model, which focuses on gamism, dramatism, and simulationism.[7] Since then much of this theorization on roles has occurred, however, D&D has had its biggest resurgence yet. D&D now occupies space with television and e-sports. This shift not only in popularity, but also in medium, provides an opportunity to reconsider how the rapidly evolving Internet is creating and re-shaping roles constantly.

In considering how live streaming has affected tabletop gaming, I will begin with one foundational text on non-streamed tabletop gaming by Dennis Waskul and Matt Lust, who propose that role-playing engenders three unique roles within one person, that of the person, the player, and the persona.[8] To study the application of their division of roles within the self in this burgeoning genre, I propose that not only are all three applicable, but that there must be a fourth role. Live actual play[9] roleplaying divides the self into fourths: the person, player, persona, and the performer. Part of the appeal of live actual play is that it presents the closest version to a natural D&D game played at home in private, as it is not scripted or edited beforehand. I posit that because of the nature of live television and theatre, both the actors and the audience experience the effects of this fourth role.

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[5] Markus Montola, "The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing The Social Framework of Role-Playing Process." *International Journal of Role-Playing*, iss. 1 (2008). http://www.ijrp.subcultures.nl/wp-content/uploads/2009/01/montola_the_invisible_rules_of_role_playing.pdf.

[6] J. Tuomas Harviainen, "A Hermeneutical Approach to Role-Playing Analysis." *International Journal of Role-Playing*, iss. 1 (2008). http://www.ijrp.subcultures.nl/wp-content/uploads/2009/01/harviainen_hermeneutical_approach_to_rp_analysis.pdf.

[7] "The Threefold Model," Darkshire.net. Last updated March 20, 2008. https://www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/theory/threefold/.

[8] Dennis Waskul and Matt Lust, "Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing." *Symbolic Interaction* 27, no. 3 (2004): 335. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2004.27.3.333.

[9] "Actual play," "liveplay," and "liveshow" are commonly exchanged terms expressing the nature of broadcasted TTRPGs. Actual play may be live when it is played, with no editing (except, at times, the insertion of ad breaks) after recording, still rendering it "live" for the listener. Similarly, actual play may be broadcasted live in real time, on sites like Twitch.tv.

Grounded in the constructionist approach to representation, as outlined by Stuart Hall, I will consider the ways in which *Dungeons and Dragons* restructures cultural codes. Hall argues that "if meaning is the result, not of something fixed out there, in nature, but of our social, cultural, and linguistic conventions, then meaning can never be *finally* fixed,"[10] or, in other words, that meaning is a result of context. Meaning is constructed, not inherent to an object, person, or event. Similarly, meaning can be altered by those who construct it. Meaning in this case is the meaning of social roles and identity. However, other meanings are constantly shifting, with the progression of time and technological invention. Because meaning is made by humans and not objective truth, Hall posits that people have the power to change meaning directly.

With this case study of one of the most popular actual play shows, *Critical Role*, I hope to discover not only how the roles of self that are accentuated and clarified when playing D&D expose and reflect real-life social roles, but also have the potential to change them. While many studies have focused on issues of race,[11] sex,[12] gender,[13] and queer identities[14] within D&D, little attention has been given to *CR* in particular.[15] This new type of media—the D&D liveshow—both performs and inspires new conceptions of personhood for players and viewers alike. To establish this, I will use a close reading methodology shaped by theoretical texts on play, performance, fan culture, and identity; my work will center around how, as Professor Aaron

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[10] Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997), 17.

[11] Philip Jameson Clements, "Roll to Save vs. Prejudice: The Phenomenology of Race in Dungeons & Dragons." Master's Thesis, Bowling Green State University (2015): 84. http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=bgsu1448050814.

[12] Arne Schröder. "'We Don't Want It Changed, Do We?' - Gender and Sexuality in Role Playing Games." Eludamos. *Journal for Computer Game Culture* 2, no. 2 (September 21, 2008): 241–56. https://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/viewArticle/vol2no2-7/87 .

[13] Aaron Trammel, "Misogyny and the Female Body in Dungeons & Dragons." *Analog Game Studies* 1, no. 3 (October 6, 2014), http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/10/constructing-the-female-body-in-role-playing-games/.

[14] Jaakko Stenros and Tanja Sihvonen. "Out of the Dungeons: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Source Books." *Analog Game Studies* 2, no. 5 (July 20, 2015), http://analoggamestudies.org/2015/07/out-of-the-dungeons-representations-of-queer-sexuality-in-rpg-source-books/.

[15] One notable exception is PhD student Robyn Hope's Master's thesis on season one of *Critical Role*:
Robyn Hope, "Play, Performance, and Participation: Boundary Negotiation and Critical Role." Master's Thesis, Concordia University (2017), https://spectrum.library.concordia.ca/983446/.

Trammell states, "identities, discrimination, and representation are actively constructed and negotiated by players."[16] Key to this exploration of identity is the division of the role-player into Waskul and Lust's three identities, the player, persona, and person, with my new addition of the performer. Waskul and Lust ask, "Since all people necessarily juggle a multiplicity of roles—sometimes shifting from one to the next with remarkable fluidity—are not we all players of fantasy role-playing games?"[17] With my addition of the fourth role, I will explore how these four roles shed light on real life social roles by acting as heightened divisions of self. Ultimately, I argue that *Critical Role* and these four roles exemplify how the D&D liveshow has unique potential to encourage and allow its players and audience to reshape not only the world of the game, but the real-life world.

[16] Aaron Trammell, "Representation and Discrimination in Role-Playing Games." *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations* (April 24, 2018): 440-446.
[17] Dennis Waskul and Matt Lust, "Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing." *Symbolic Interaction* 27, no. 3 (2004): 337. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2004.27.3.333.

What is *Critical Role*?

Critical Role (*CR*) is a live-streamed *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D) show hosted on Twitch.tv where "a bunch of nerdy ass voice actors play *Dungeons & Dragons*."[18] For notation's sake, italicized *CR* indicates the show itself, while CR without italics refers to the company and its larger operations, for the purposes of this analysis. The show began streaming in June 2015 and has become a D&D sensation. The show is closely affiliated with D&D's official publisher, Wizards of the Coast (WotC). Critical Role, the company, published the supplemental book *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount* under WotC, becoming a part of the official D&D canon.[19] *Critical Role*'s website describes the series as such:

> What began in 2012 as a bunch of friends playing in each other's living rooms has evolved into a multi-platform entertainment sensation, attracting over half million viewers every week. Now in its second campaign storyline, the show features seven popular voiceover actors diving into epic Dungeons & Dragons adventures, led by veteran game master Matthew Mercer.[20]

For most of its history, *CR* was broadcasted on Twitch.tv live, similar to many other streams and even TV news. However, since the national spread of coronavirus and social distancing guidelines, the show has changed to a pre-recorded format, after a few months break at the beginning of the pandemic. *CR* resumed season two and their regular schedule on July 2nd, 2020. The cast and crew now record a week in advance and upload the video to Twitch the following Thursday.

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[18] A common introductory phrase coined by Matthew Mercer. GeekandSundry. One of many instances of its usage: Twitter Post. January 9, 2018, 9:30 AM. https://twitter.com/geekandsundry/status/950781884392382464?lang=en.

[19] Matthew Mercer and the Wizards RPG Team, *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount*, (Renton: Wizards of the Coast, 2020). https://dnd.wizards.com/products/wildemount.

[20] Critical Role, https://critrole.com/.

Accompanying *CR* is their weekly hour-long talk show, *Talks Machina* (*TM*), during which cast members sit with internet personality and actor Brian W. Foster to answer fan questions. These discussions range from personal discussions that provide insight on the person behind the persona, to interrogations of character creation that have yet to be explored in-game. When discussing *CR*, I will be integrating discussions from *TM*.

CR's cast consists of DM Matthew Mercer, Ashley Johnson as Yasha Nydoorin, Laura Bailey as Jester Lavorre, Liam O'Brien as Caleb Widogast, Marisha Ray as Beauregard Lionett, Sam Riegel as Nott the Brave/Veth Brenatto, Taliesin Jaffe as Mollymauk Tealeaf and Caduceus Clay, and Travis Willingham as Fjord Stone. The show's second campaign began on January 11, 2018. The second season is set in the same universe as season one, with an in-game timeskip of about 20 years. Season two follows the adventuring party The Mighty Nein as they navigate through a continent at war, quickly becoming involved in politics, cults, pirates, and more.

As one of the most popular D&D shows, due in part to the cast's existing fame from video game voice over work, *Critical Role* deliberately strives to be a nexus of change in viewer and player perceptions. *CR* has the opportunity to redefine D&D culture, especially given their official status through collaboration with WotC. Currently the mainstream conception of D&D understands the game in relation to first edition of the game as D&D scholar Antero Garcia notes: "Although the initial language and images of D&D mean it is unsurprising that popular media—from the Netflix hit *Stranger Things* to the television series *Freaks and Geeks*—largely depicts primarily White male characters reenacting nostalgic sessions rolling dice with friends in the 1970s and '80s, this is a landscape that can change."[21] The cast of *CR* is white, reinforcing

[21] Antero Garcia, "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games." *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 24, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 244. https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2017.1293691.

the default conception. However, both the show's brand and employees in their personal lives reinforce their belief in diversity and equity.[22] A recent endeavor dedicated to supporting underserved communities came on September 24, 2020, when they announced the Critical Role Foundation. According to Critical Role Foundation President Johnson, the nonprofit's mission statement is "to leave the world better than we found it."[23] Their first fundraising campaign raised money to revive the Native Youth & Culture Fund, which has raised 200,000 USD and funded eight programs for 2021.[24] Critical Role, the company and the foundation, have been a bastion of support for diversity, in play and in fundraising; their transparency in doing so redefines the original, first edition of D&D and its community, which was made for and by white men. In studying this show and the community, I hope to illustrate the fluidity provided by D&D and its impact on players' identity, as well as the relation of this identity with the potential power of the players to work against and radicalize its origins for the benefits of the disenfranchised.

[22] View the company's official core values and community guidelines. "Value Statement & Community," *Critrole.com*, Critical Role. Last updated October 27, 2020. https://critrole.com/community/.
[23] "Critical Role Foundation," *Critrole.com*, Critical Role, https://critrole.com/foundation/.
[24] "Critical Role Foundation," *Critrole.com*, Critical Role, https://critrole.com/foundation/.

Rules of the Game

To understand the D&D show *Critical Role*, the phenomenon of D&D itself must first be understood. D&D was first released in 1974 by Tactical Studies Rules, Inc. Its creation is commonly credited to Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, and the franchise is now managed by Wizards of the Coast (WotC). D&D consists of three core rulebooks, *Player's Handbook* (PHB), *Dungeon Master's Guide* (DMG), and *Monster Manual* (MM). Each book provides information on not only rules, but also setting and lore. The game is played with books, figurines, and dice. A player of the game is either a player or a Dungeon Master (DM). The DM creates a story and world which the players can explore as "characters" —representations of the self created using the *Player's Handbook*. Players use their characters' abilities in combination with die, a random chance modifier, to adhere to the rules and situation presented by the DM, as well as progress through a narrative.

At its core, D&D is a story of make-believe where a group of friends, called an adventuring party (or simply party), enters a fantasy world. Players are encouraged to roleplay as their characters. Characters can be created by the player or use and adapt pre-made characters included in the core rulebooks. Typically, characters are made by players. In the most recent release of the game, fifth edition (5e), characters are built by filling in four important sections on a template for managing a character (known as a character sheet): class, race, background, and ability scores. Each section provides the player not only with a sense of the character they will be inhabiting, but also mathematical values that increase or decrease a character's success at certain aspects of life, which will be explained in further sections.

While players are acutely aware of the values they assign to their characters, such awareness is discouraged during play. Discussion of probability or math-based decisions by

players (referred to as "metagaming") is often discouraged by the game's arbiter, the DM. The DM mediates the rules of the game while providing an overarching world and connective thread for the characters to follow or avoid. While a DM is responsible for creating a plot, they must be ready to adapt to any situation depending on the unpredictable improvisation engendered by roleplaying. The game is encouraged to operate primarily as a roleplaying experience, not a mathematics competition or simulation game. This is unique to fifth edition, as D&D found its origins in small-press wargaming, and earlier editions of D&D did emphasize pure math approaches. That is not to say that math is unimportant; else, D&D would rid itself of concepts like hit points (HP), representative of health, which are key to gaming at large.

Chapter one of the 5e *PHB* gives step-by-step character creation rules, which is especially useful for those new to the game. While these steps must be taken for anyone creating a character, their order is flexible. Many players familiar with the game do not follow order of the suggested character creation steps. However, the order of core building blocks to a player's persona are fundamental to understanding D&D's roleplaying:

1. Choose a race
2. Choose a class
3. Determine ability scores
4. Describe your character
5. Choose equipment
6. Come together[25]

The first decision a player must make, notably, is their character's race. The rule book describes race as such: "The race you choose contributes to your character's identity in an

[25] Wizards RPG Team, *Player's Handbook* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast, 2014), 10-15.

important way, by establishing a general appearance and the natural talents gained from culture and ancestry."[26] Each race comes with a set of mechanical benefits, such as an additional known language or a mastery in a unique type of weapon. Race also provides cultural context for each player to understand their origins. Each race is provided with a quote describing the category, as well as one page of text describing physical appearance, typical attitudes, and relations with other races. Races in the *PHB* include: dragonborn, dwarf, elf, gnome, half-elf, halfing, half-orc, human, tiefling.[27] Further rulebooks, considered add-ons to play, add more diverse races, such as leonin, satyr, aarakocra, genasi, goliath, and more.[28]

Similarly, the player's next decision is choosing their class. Unlike in our real world, class does not refer to social standing or economic wealth. Instead, class is explained as: "Class is the primary definition of what your character can do. It's more than a profession; it's your character's calling. Class shapes the way you think about the world and interact with it and your relationship with other people and powers in the multiverse."[29] Class, like race, is core to a player's understanding of who they are supposed to be when enacting their persona. Classes available in the *PHB* include: barbarian, bard, cleric, druid, fighter, monk, paladin, ranger, rogue, sorcerer, warlock, and wizard.[30] When choosing one's class, step five often occurs at the same time, as the options are given within the class set-up. Alternatively, instead of choosing from the class' starting equipment, a player may opt for a cash sum and purchase any gear they wish.

A character's race and class provide the scaffolding for a player to create a "backstory," or the events in an adventurer's life before the D&D game began. D&D provides further

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[26] Wizards RPG Team, *Player's Handbook* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast, 2014), 10.
[27] Wizards RPG Team, *Player's Handbook* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast, 2014), 17-42.
[28] The most prominent playable race expansion is *Volo's Guide to Monsters*. Further reflection is needed on the impact of labeling people—playable races—as monsters in this expansion. Wizards RPG Team, *Volo's Guide to Monsters* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast, 2016).
[29] Wizards RPG Team, *Player's Handbook* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast, 2014), 45.
[30] Wizards RPG Team, *Player's Handbook* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast, 2014), 45-112.

guidelines for creating a backstory in chapter four of the *PHB*, where alignment, personality traits, and backgrounds are explained. Alignments are moral and personal attitudes that guide a character's interaction with the world, which are chosen by the player during creation. The D&D alignments are: lawful good (LG), neutral good (NG); chaotic good (CG); lawful neutral (LN); true neutral (N); chaotic neutral (CN); lawful evil (LE); neutral evil (NE) and chaotic evil (CE). The personality traits section provides bonds, ideals, and flaws in order to add depth to the persona, which a player may choose from or invent on their own. Lastly, backgrounds provide "important story cues about your character's identity,"[31] which reveal why the character has left their regular life in favor of dangerous adventuring. Each background reflects choices made by the player for certain mechanical benefits, such as skill proficiencies, established connections to the world, or even additional starting funds. Players can either choose a background from a pre-set list or create their own.

The game is played using complex rules, called "mechanics." Mechanics in gaming are the choices of game design that dictate the limits of player actions. For example, level progression is a mechanic, which forces a player to complete some goal within the level before progressing. In contrast, gameplay consists of what happens when a player acts within the space of the game, following the mechanics. Other examples of mechanics could be using dice, using cards, taking turns between players, laying tiles, puzzle solving, and so on. One of the most important mechanics in D&D are "ability scores," numerical representations of a character's physical or mental acuity. These values are assigned by various methods, up to the discretion of the players. The current edition has six abilities: strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, wisdom, and charisma.

[31] Wizards RPG Team, *Player's Handbook* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast, 2014), 125.

Attributes are used when a character attempts a related activity in skill checks. Skill checks are a numerical challenge determining if a character can or cannot succeed at what they want to do. For example, if I wanted my character to push a boulder, I would roll a "strength check," which entails rolling a twenty-sided die (d20) and adding my strength modifier. The DM determines a number which I would have to "beat," or roll higher than, based on the attempted action's difficulty. In addition to ability modifiers, there is also a proficiency modifier, which is the same for all characters regardless of their class and changes at certain level milestones. The proficiency bonus is added to a roll when a character is particularly skilled in that area. A player often chooses the skills in which they are proficient often based on their backstory, their life pre-game. For example, if my character was a soldier, it would make sense to choose proficiency in the athletics skill. Classes give a specific list from which they can choose a specified number of proficiencies. Races and backstory can also provide additional proficiencies or other abilities.

Qualitatively, a player creates their D&D character by choosing race, class, and background. These narrative choices translate into quantitative ability scores and skill proficiencies. This translation from qualitative to quantitative can also work in reverse, as players can decide which ability scores and skill proficiencies they desire and then pick corresponding qualitative components. From the first iteration of this game, D&D's rules have focused on clearly defining personhood by separating aspects of a character into distinct qualitative and quantitative categories. A person's relative physical attributes can be quantified in D&D's system, as well as ambiguous qualities like personality, through choices like background and alignment. So, then, D&D presents the opportunity for its players to dissect these divisions. The changes in these rules for character creation and play highlight not only significant changes in representation over the last 50 years, but also changes in the concept of

identity itself. For example, the first edition takes up the issue of humanity directly in its definition of class. The classes available in the 1977 "Basic D&D," the second iteration of the game before entering into "editions," feature a race-as-class mechanic. A player could not choose to play both a race and a class; for example, a player had to be a thief *or* a halfling, not a halfling rouge.[32] D&D first official edition, Advanced D&D published in 1978, featured race as different from class. The split between Basic and Advanced continued until 2000, when the versions of the games merged into 3rd edition. In Basic, dwarves, elves, and halflings are referred to as "demi-humans," described by the Basic rules as:

> Most D&D characters will be humans. A human may be a cleric, fighter, magic-user, or thief. Humans are the most wide-spread of all races. The human traits of curiosity, courage, and resourcefulness have helped them to adapt, survive, and prosper everywhere they have gone. Some players may wish to have demi-human characters (elves, dwarves, or halflings). Each type of demi-human is a class in itself. The demi-human races are cousin species to humans.[33]

Similarly, Advanced editions of D&D placed level restrictions on demi-humans, despite separating race from class;[34] this continued until 3rd edition as well. These demi-races, in turn, are deprived of human experiences. Their race is their class; because they are only partially human, they are lacking. The conflation of race with class leads to a potential implication that a demi-human is not capable of developing a profession. What it means to be "human" in the first place, aside from biological differences between animals and people, is muddled in D&D, and will be explored. As most players know now, however, there is a clear distinction between *race*

[32] Tom Moldvay, ed., *Basic Rulebook* (Lake Geneva: TSR Hobbies, 1981), B9.
[33] Tom Moldvay, ed., *Basic Rulebook* (Lake Geneva: TSR Hobbies, Inc., 1981), B9.
[34] Gary Gygax, Iplayers Handbook (Lake Geneva: TSR Hobbies, Inc., 1978).

and class. The term demi-human, a race depriving some but not all non-human races of class benefits, is no longer part of the fifth edition. Non-human races now must choose a class, repairing the limitations on equality created by the term demi-human.

Since the concept of demi-humans, D&D has radically changed. However, the game still carries the weighted history of these prejudiced rules in its system. Given the serious biases and prejudices present in the first edition of D&D, why do people still play the game? Why play D&D at all, when other alternatives are available? In first edition D&D, the D&D player was almost always intended to be a white man. Stanford Professor Antero Garcia performed a study of D&D representation in all editions and found that "the fifth edition significantly increases the number of images of women, and qualitatively the women within the book are not as sexualized or placed in positions of terror as in previous editions."[35] In the first edition, there are only six women shown in pictures in the handbook.[36] Similarly, in the pre-first edition Basic version, there are only are highly sexualized depictions of women and one, Medusa, is monstrosized.[37] They are all, of course, white, as are all the men. Yet, in fifth edition, as Garcia notes, the depiction of women has improved. This move toward more equal representation within WotC core texts has been accompanied by a surge in the number of women playing D&D.

In addition to changes within the source material of the game, in the almost fifty-year gap between first and fifth editions, many barriers minorities have faced to playing D&D have been broken down. The gaming industry has a long history of gatekeeping—limiting access to the game or its community. The most well-known instance of gatekeeping in gaming was

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[35] Antero Garcia, "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games." *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 24, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 240. https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2017.1293691.

[36] Antero Garcia, "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games." *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 24, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 240. https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2017.1293691.

[37] Tom Moldvay, ed., *Basic Rulebook* (Lake Geneva: TSR Hobbies, Inc., 1981), B1, B6, B10, B20, B39.

#Gamergate, a Twitter hashtag in 2014 where people would discuss, perpetrate, and argue about the systematic harassment of feminist women in the gaming community.[38] Gamergate was just one instance of gatekeeping present in all types of communities, not just games. Garcia, in a 2017 Stanford lecture, directly addresses the impact of "terror, nationalism, and Gamergate."[39] He explores how the roots of D&D, a game made by and for white men, can foster collaboration, learning, and player agency. Fifth edition has turned the game's origin on its head, making progress each edition. In June 2020, WotC addressed their previous gatekeeping by framing 5e as a step away from discouraging diverse groups in play:

> One of the explicit design goals of 5th edition D&D is to depict humanity in all its beautiful diversity by depicting characters who represent an array of ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, and beliefs. We want everyone to feel at home around the game table and to see positive reflections of themselves within our products. "Human" in D&D means everyone, not just fantasy versions of northern Europeans, and the D&D community is now more diverse than it's ever been.[40]

The new edition and its ongoing expansion rulebooks turn away from gatekeeping and instances like #Gamergate. Fifth edition's release provides an opportune moment to analyze the TTRPG community's shift towards inclusion.

Studies like Garcia's, and like this one, aim not only to provide a theory-based analysis of our zeitgeist, but also to impact content creators and consumers by emphasizing the ways in which they (and we) have an opportunity to not only promote diversity, but critique the

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[38] Aja Romano, "What we still haven't learned from Gamergate," *Vox*, January 7, 2021, https://www.vox.com/culture/2020/1/20/20808875/gamergate-lessons-cultural-impact-changes-harassment-laws.
[39] Antero Garcia, "Dungeons & Dragons in an Era of Terror, Nationalism, and Gamergate," *mediaXStanford*, Stanford University, April 28, 2017, YouTube video, 46:03, https://youtu.be/5LqvmrF-_y4.
[40] Wizards of the Coast/D&D Team, "Diversity and Dungeons & Dragons," *Dungeons & Dragons*, Wizards of the Coast, June 17, 2020, https://dnd.wizards.com/articles/features/diversity-and-dnd.

structures key to forming and shaping identity for young adults. Ultimately, by adapting a close reading methodology with fan studies, undergirded by theoretical texts, I aim to answer the following two research questions:

1. In *CR*, audiences watch players adapt the role of the performer, which is critical of D&D's rules and its clear roles. As a show, then, *CR* is unusual in that it lays bare the process of character-building and typification. How do D&D roles highlight the logic of typification and reveals its constructedness, while providing a contrast to real-world roles?
2. In *CR*, the casts' expression of racial, sexual, and gender identities alters the traditional D&D typification of the default player and party. How does the cast, through the use of their four roles, claim and re-imagine D&D, a medium traditionally played by patriarchy-conforming outcasts, into a safe space for diverse play in-game and in real life?

Person, Player, Persona, and Performer

Players in *Critical Role* diverge from Waskul and Lust's three categorizations of the identity of players in a roleplaying game due to its unique status as not only a tabletop game, but also a live stream. The most applicable term for *Critical Role* is as a D&D liveshow. It intersects with several mediums: actual play, live streaming, television, and theatre. Within actual play, most content is pre-recorded; its name is misleading, as it does not reflect what the actual play experience is like in real-time and live. *Critical Role*, which airs live, is most akin to the meaning supposed by the term actual play, as it cannot be edited afterwards. Within film and television, content is pre-scripted, unlike a D&D game, and there is no audience interaction. Live streaming, however, is not pre-scripted and relies on audience feedback in the chat; yet there is no narrative structure and streamers rely on their humor instead of narrative structure to keep audiences engaged. Within the theatre, while audience interaction is vital, content is also pre-scripted, except in the case of live improvisation (improv) shows.

Waskul and Lust's three categorizations are the person, the player, and the persona. The identity of the person is the human being outside the context of the game at hand. For example, my person is that of a student, daughter, employee, and so on. The identity of the player, however, is one that arises wholly out of the ruleset and operation of the game. This is an identity that compartmentalizes rules on status conditions, flanking, class improvement, and other mechanical inner workings of D&D. Lastly, the persona is the identity of the character embodied by a player. If I, the person who is also a dog mom, a student, a daughter, was to play D&D, I would first need to know the rules as a player, and then create a persona. My persona would consist of the background, race, class, and alignments described previously, which are attributes that mechanically inform a narrative creation of a persona. In *Critical Role*, the personas are the

characters, Jester, Fjord, Caleb, Beau, Yasha, and Veth. Jester, the persona, is a bubbly tiefling cleric who puts the wellbeing of others before her own. Jester is played by the person and player, Laura Bailey, who is a wife and mom. Fjord is a half-orc paladin learning to love himself, played by Travis Willingham, husband to Laura Bailey. Similarly, each character has their own adjectives, voice, tone, mannerisms, and line of thinking enacted by the player. The persona is like a second self, an extension of certain traits explored in an "as-if" D&D realm.

Waskul and Lust relegate the person to the background when observing players: "Participants in role-playing games may fluidly move between player and persona, but other aspects of personhood are more carefully contained. For the most part, players bracket their persons with relative ease; it is implicit in the social structure of the gaming sessions themselves."[41] That is, to put it simply, one does not think about the chores waiting at home when playing D&D.

However, in practice, Waskul and Lust note that the division of identity is not as clear-cut as it seems in theory. The identities brought about by playing TTRPGs are separate roles, but they do occur simultaneously: "[role playing] involves a participant who actively occupies two distinct simultaneous roles within the same activity; he is the fantasy persona he plays and the player who enacts the persona."[42] During play, being myself (the person) and my D&D character (the persona), seem exclusive; upon further reflection, however, the distinction between the roles erodes. While Waskul and Lust present several examples of the roles, the *CR* cast highlights how messy the roles can be in practice, even with trained actors.

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[41] Dennis Waskul and Matt Lust, "Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing," *Symbolic Interaction* 27, no. 3 (2004): 345. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2004.27.3.333.
[42] Dennis Waskul and Matt Lust, "Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing," *Symbolic Interaction* 27, no. 3 (2004): 347. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2004.27.3.333.

Because in *CR* the D&D game is a show, *CR* benefits from reflection and players skilled in narrative creation, as opposed to typical D&D games with non-professional actors. Waskul and Lust do not consider directly the impact of D&D as a liveshow, as this is a recent phenomenon. They do, however, consider the overlap between the theatre and at-home roleplaying games explicitly: "In spite of certain similarities, participants in role-playing games are also quite different from theater actors: the role-player does not share bodies with the persona they play. While they do share minds, 'the player's body is never seen as the character's body' (Mackay 2001:88)."[43] With *Critical Role,* however, the cast often do share bodies with their personas. Perhaps due to the cast's formal theatre education, the cast embody physical traits of their characters through movement in each episode. Similarly, in rare cases like show trailers,[44] the cast wears full costumes (hair, makeup, body paint, props) of their character. The extent to which the actors do adopt the body of their persona further conflates the sense of division between their person and their persona, if only briefly.

Uniquely, the cast is aware of the division (and lack thereof) between the roles needed to play the game. Mentioned previously, CR cast members participate in a weekly or bi-weekly talk show, *Talks Machina,* where they answer questions about the recent sessions. In a *Talks Machina* episode, Sam Riegel expresses how his identities as a player and person impact his choices as his persona: "As a player, I don't want to be the guy who's always leaving the party during a campaign."[45] His character Veth feels an urge to leave the party and return to her home, as she is a mother and wife whose main purpose was to rid herself of a curse and then return

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[43] Dennis Waskul and Matt Lust, "Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing," *Symbolic Interaction* 27, no. 3 (2004): 347. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2004.27.3.333.
[44] "Check Out CRITICAL ROLE's New Intro!" Geek & Sundry, May 18, 2016, YouTube video, 1:30, https://youtu.be/mHfXAXM4O3E.
[45] "Talks Machina: Discussing Up to C2E113 – A Heart Grown Cold," Critical Role, October 27, 2020, YouTube video, 1:20:36, https://youtu.be/Yp16O4rnKZw.

home. However, Sam Riegel the player and person does not want to return home, to have Veth leave the party. In the previous campaign, Riegel also changed characters for a significant amount of time. Notable here is that Riegel refers to his identity as a player, not a person. However, as the player is concerned with mechanics—certainly, removing Veth from the campaign and creating a new character is a challenge for the player—his desire is more aptly understood as a part of his role as a person. *Talks Machina* host Brian W. Foster picks up on this division of roles, asking "It makes me wonder about you. Do you, in your life, feel stuck?"[46] Riegel applies affirmatively, but vaguely, attributing feeling stuck to the pandemic. Riegel both is and is not Veth; he does not have her body, being of the opposite sex, but *is* her voice and movements, at times. He is, to some extent, projecting an inner part of himself into this character. The question assumes that it is common among players to be aware of this overlap between their person and in-game decisions. This assumption is typically true for most anyone who writes or acts; drawing from real-life helps flesh out any character. Waskul and Lust's three divisions of self fall short to account for Riegel's, and the D&D liveshow player's, self-awareness.

Riegel's attribution of his decision to keep Veth with the party relies not on his role as a person, player, or persona exclusively, but on his role as a *performer*. The role of the performer is a necessary addition, highlighted through *Talks Machina*, because Waskul and Lust's research centers on non-live streamed or pre-recorded D&D games. The performer, then, negotiates the aspects of creating content for consumption. The performer engages with the audience and considers narrative arcs, as well as their impacts. Riegel the performer chooses for his persona to not leave the party, as that would be an unsatisfying journey for himself and the audience. This

[46] "Talks Machina: Discussing Up to C2E113 – A Heart Grown Cold," Critical Role, October 27, 2020, YouTube video, 1:20:36, https://youtu.be/Yp16O4rnKZw.

choice is a unique opportunity available only to actual play liveshows because of its reactive audience. Riegel and the cast are able to view the impact of their choices immediately due to the streaming service's chat. They have the opportunity to think and respond according to what they see, unlike regular media programming where content has already been recorded.

The aspect of liveness in this new genre appeared to be the crux of the unique division of identities. However, because of the pandemic, CR's programming changed drastically. After several months of break, the show returned, but as a pre-recorded program. The show airs at the same time as the liveshow would, and still on Twitch. Similarly, *Talks Machina* is occasionally bi-weekly instead of weekly. While recording each week's new *CR* episode, the cast is able to see the real-time reactions to the previous week's pre-recorded episode. While this diminishes the impact of the audience on the players, thus diminishing the role of the performer, the audience still carries weight. Because the show is being recorded while the cast has access to live reactions from the previous game, the players are still afforded the benefits of a liveshow during play. Historically, Riegel in particular is teased for always being on social media during the game.[47] One significant moment that crystalizes the new role of the performer occurs again with Riegel, even in the pandemic programming format.

In episode 102[48] Riegel was reading the Twitch chat of their live broadcast from the previous week. To clarify, episode 101 was streaming live on Twitch while the cast was recording episode 102, which aired the following week. However, because the previous week's episode was airing at the same time as this recording, Riegel was able to view real-time reactions to the previous week's game. Riegel discovered from a user that the character with whom the

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[47] "Ghosts, Dinosaurs, and Stuff | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 102," Critical Role, July 20, 2020, YouTube video, 3:27:03, https://youtu.be/hKlo5FWlxnA.

[48] "Ghosts, Dinosaurs, and Stuff | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 102," Critical Role, July 20, 2020, YouTube video, 3:27:03, https://youtu.be/hKlo5FWlxnA.

party was interacting, Vilya, was the mother of Marisha Ray's playable character from season 1. The players up to this point had known her by the name Viridian, as she had lost her memory. However, the identity of Viridian had become apparent to most viewers from home; she was described by Matt as a woman with druidic powers and a leg made of vines,[49] like Keyleth's mom. After Mercer revealed Viridian's name to be Vilya, the following occurred.

Riegel: You guys know who that is, right?

Willingham: --from Tal'dorei, and she's from where?

Ray: Vilya…

Johnson: Azalea is her name?

Mercer and Riegel: Vilya.

Bailey: Who's Vilya?

Jaffe: Oh my god, the council.

Riegel: No!?

Johnson: What?

Jaffe: I don't know.

Willingham: No…

Riegel: Come on.

Ray: Wait…my mom?

Riegel: Yeaaaah![50]

Bailey inquired how Riegel knew, to which he replied that he "found out ten minutes ago and told Liam." In general during play, Riegel exhibits the unique opportunity of the medium of

[49] "Ghosts, Dinosaurs, and Stuff | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 102," Critical Role, July 20, 2020, YouTube video, 3:27:03, https://youtu.be/hKlo5FWlxnA.
[50] "Ghosts, Dinosaurs, and Stuff | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 102," Critical Role, July 20, 2020, YouTube video, 3:27:03, https://youtu.be/hKlo5FWlxnA.

the D&D liveshow to check the stream, its number of viewers, and comments from the audience at any given moment during play. Upon further questioning, Riegel explained:

> We are the most suspicious people, and it didn't occur to any of us… like, 15-20 minutes ago, I just glanced down to see how many people are watching our show at the end of the night, and in chat, flying by, somebody goes "I think that's Keyleth's mom."[51]

Riegel exercises the decision making necessary of the performer, and allowed only because of the performer, in this instance. Due to the infringing world around him, his person, persona, and player selves have no capacity to deal with this information. Riegel's person, as non-game identities, have little impact given the new information. Similarly, his persona, Veth, would not have the information he just read. Lastly, the player has little to no interest, as the information is mechanically useless. However, almost acting as a synthesis, Riegel's identity as a performer allows his narrative consideration of the impact of this fact, not only on the world of the game, but also on his friends and the audience. Narratively, Keyleth is an almost god-like druid with immense capability. Finding her mother was one of her main goals in season 1, and it went unfulfilled. Vilya, similarly, is another powerful figure. The world of the game has changed. Additionally, Riegel's own personal attachment to his season 1 persona's relationship with Keyleth ignites his excitement, as well as his excitement for Ray. Riegel ignores this fact for the sake of the game until Vilya's identity is revealed by the DM, choosing to stay silent and allow current events to unfold; as a performer, he prioritizes the flow of the game instead of their personal interest in Vilya's identity. Similarly, the flow of the game is not only important for those at the table, but also those at home watching the game. Even if the audience is three steps ahead of the players at the table, other genres like movies and novels do not spoil the events that

[51] "Ghosts, Dinosaurs, and Stuff | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 102," Critical Role, July 20, 2020, YouTube video, 3:27:03, https://youtu.be/hKlo5FWlxnA.

are about to occur. As CR likes to reiterate, this is not a scripted game. Events are *live* for the players, and those watching. By not spoiling Vilya's true identity immediately, Riegel, as a performer, chooses to keep heightened suspense and an ultimately greater sense of shock for Ray, which creates a more exciting performance for those watching.

While Riegel's choices based in narrative structure and audience-focused thinking support the existence of the fourth role, the performer, also clear in this microcosm are the blurred lines between the roles that already exist. Most notable is Ray's impulse to say "my mom," not "Keyleth's mom." The overlap between Ray's person and her persona is clear to those watching; it is hard for Ray to create distance between herself and her character Keyleth. The four roles work in tandem to add to Ray's excitement and passion for the game—the person exists in this dynamic because she cannot be removed.

Contrastingly, some moments are clearly divisive, with little overlap between the four roles. Caleb Widowgast, played by Liam O'Brien, cast the spell Disintegrate during episode 105. Disintegrate prevents resurrection by most spells. Although Caleb cast Disintegrate at the creature they were fighting (Vokodo), the creature had already been shown to be able to reflect magic cast at it. This reflection ability meant that Caleb's spell could bounce onto any of his other party members, or himself. O'Brien rolled a 72 on damage, which would reduce several party members, including Caleb, to 0 hit points, meaning they could be disintegrated, and thus permanently removed from the game, if Vokodo bounced the spell Caleb cast.[52] The relief from the players when the spell succeeded was palpable, as seen in Figure 1.

[52] "Rumble at Rumblecusp | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 105," Critical Role, August 10, 2020, YouTube video, 4:42:21, https://youtu.be/ItgpnsJS2pE.

Fig 1. Screenshot from *Critical Role* campaign 2, episode 105, after Vilya's identity is revealed.[53]

After the Disintegrate moment, O'Brien explained his experience in the fight on TM, saying, "A lot of people think I went 'bet it all on black, let's see what happens,' but what if I told you I Larkin'd for the first 20 seconds of that moment, and a quarter to midnight I just forgot that the reflection thing was a thing."[54] O'Brien's role as the player failed, as he mentioned: "I'm not an animatronic D&D machine."[55] Whether this was a failure of his role as a player, or the tiredness of recording at night as a person, or the heat of the moment as a persona, O'Brien simply forgot the rules and made a very risky decision. He was not playing as a player or person or performer, but as Caleb. The four roles completely collapsed, leaving the audience and players with only one, clear, and distinct role with certain priorities. The Disintegrate moment brings to light the moving parts of the four roles. Players like O'Brien are aware of the distinct parts of selves required to play the game, like the "D&D machine" self (player), and how, at times, they

[53] "Rumble at Rumblecusp | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 105," Critical Role, August 10, 2020, YouTube video, 4:42:21, https://youtu.be/ItgpnsJS2pE.
[54] "Talks Machina: Discussing up to C2E111 with Liam O'Brien and Ashley Johnson," Critical Role, October 1, 2020, YouTube video, 1:40:07, https://youtu.be/RjCj_ILG0bE.
[55] "Talks Machina: Discussing up to C2E111 with Liam O'Brien and Ashley Johnson," Critical Role, October 1, 2020, YouTube video, 1:40:07, https://youtu.be/RjCj_ILG0bE.

turn on and off like switches. The only switch working for O'Brien was that of his persona, leading to his choices. O'Brien mentions "a lot of people think" something about his decision; he is acutely aware that his choices are being watched and judged.

These two examples, the revelation of Vilya identity and Caleb's dangerous use of Disintegrate, highlight both how clear and how blurry these four roles can be, for an audience and the players. The role of the performer necessitates critical thought on part of the players; by hearing feedback, critique, and praise from the audience, during or after the D&D game, players must interpret their game as a method of important, purposeful meaning-making, instead of just a game. This new medium of the D&D liveshow, even extended to a semi-live format during the pandemic, affords a unique lens into real-time identity making in the space of a game. In the next section, I will discuss how this process of identity negotiation in-game can reflect real life identity making, because of this new genre. The contradictory nature of in-game social roles—both clear and unclear—as well as my addition of the fourth role suggest that the D&D liveshow is, perhaps, one of the closest approximations of real life available.

The Four Roles' Impact Beyond the Game

The effect of the clear-but-not distinctions between these four roles in D&D has enormous implications. As a fantasy game, D&D exaggerates one's importance. How people choose to act in the world of the game can make them a hero or a villain. D&D is larger than life, with a grander scope than a typical day-to-day life. The game operates in collective fantasy, but have a tangible, real impact on the out-of-game lives of its players and viewers. Of the four roles, only the persona acts fully in the fictional world. Waskul and Lust conclude that "role-playing games neither represent nor imitate but simulate."[56] As a simulation, tabletop role-playing games purposefully reflect real world activities. They are not abstracted versions of reality, or purely fiction; they are intended to provide similarity to reality. If the game itself simulates real life, then the four roles required to play the game must also reflect reality to some extent. How one operates within these four liminal categories presents a starting point for considering how one manages the overwhelming quantity of overlapping roles in the real world, like mother, daughter, student, employee, caretaker, dog-owner, citizen, and more.

Necessarily, however, the type of roles present in D&D are not structurally analogous to roles played in real life. The kinds of performances and constraints involved in a tabletop game and real life are different. These differences can be minimal, however, as most social roles in real life are similar in kind or structure, like daughter or student; they often overlap, as do the four roles by Waskul and Lust and myself. These four roles act as explicit and exaggerated divisions of self, which are easier to parse in a TTRPG than in real life. I will argue that the D&D liveshow creates the one of the most accurate simulations of life, allowing its players to play with real life social roles through in-game roles knowledgably and purposefully. As the D&D

[56] Dennis Waskul and Matt Lust, "Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing," *Symbolic Interaction* 27, no. 3 (2004): 353. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2004.27.3.333.

liveshow becomes more and more of a popular medium, these four roles impact not only its players, but also its viewers.

As a fan of the show myself, one impact of these roles comes through Laura Bailey's depiction of her character, Jester Lavorre, as a cleric. I will discuss how Bailey's play with expectations for her character's class encourages real-world play with our own social—particularly gendered—roles. Cleric is one of the many 5e classes, discussed previously. Each class comes with its own beneficial set of abilities and attributes, granting characters strengths and weaknesses that are no better or worse than those of other classes. Each class is created by the game designers to be of equal strength. This theoretical equality does not always work in practice, however, and some players find ways to "break" a class, or make it so powerful that it is better than other classes. As in reality, one's class in *D&D* is shaped by a long history of preconceptions. As a core mechanic of the game, the existence of a persona's class at times reflects real life social issues. By providing classes similar to yet different from our real-world conception of classes and careers, D&D creates the chance for players to work within or break the rules with a degree of flexibility not found in real life. Similarly, the four roles necessitate this kind of categorization-oriented thinking.

In actual play, moreover, class taxonomy in the form of party composition is important to the players as a group. For many RPG players, having a group of adventurers that are all the same class is almost unfathomable, even ridiculous. Often discussed in online forums, gaming chats, and gaming journals, party composition is considered in any game. Players can strive for what is called party balance—a combination of classes that makes the party stronger. In having classes that reinforce each other's skills, the players "metagame," or optimize the game by using

their knowledge of the rules. This type of metagaming is encouraged, because it occurs outside of the game itself, as a decision made before play even begins.

For Jester's class, Bailey chose cleric. Clerics have a long history in gaming and fantasy at large. Recently, the video game *Overwatch* experienced a community concern over players' micro-management of in-game healers who "weren't doing their job" such that non-healing capable characters constantly said, "I need healing!" Often, healers would purposefully not heal those who used the command as a form of punishment; since their job is to heal, they often *already know* when a teammate needs healing. While the phrase is now a joke, "I need healing!" echoes a long struggle within gaming over the role of support classes. Although *Critical Role* is a tabletop game, it shares the same origins as *Overwatch*—like many video and RPG games, they are both rooted in fantasy fiction and make use of well-defined character types. (*CR* DM Mercer voices *Overwatch* character Jesse McCree.) Moving beyond the semiotic definition of cleric, the idea of what a cleric should and shouldn't do or be capable of, the cleric moniker entails a focus on healing, which is also traditionally associated with feminine gender roles. Historically, what *D&D* refers to as clerics have had a variety of names in role-playing games, tabletop and digital: white mage, healer, and priest. Notably, these healers are mostly women, or feminized men. In video gaming's long line of RPG series, women healers outnumber male healers significantly.

For example, Todd Harper *et al.* in their book *Queerness in Play* investigate *Final Fantasy*, a series of RPG video games. They conclude that while the character classes are "generally androgynous, the medic or healer—the white mage, as the series calls it—is coded as female in the game's many remakes and remastered re-releases." Healers are often "coded as female by a long flowing robe, fair hair, and softer lines." We see this in modern RPGs as well, particularly within the newest *Fire Emblem* game, *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*, in which there

are four total healers, one male and three female. One of *Overwatch*'s most popular healer characters, too, is a woman named Mercy.

The CR cast pinpoints the gendered and limited structure of clerics and healing in 5e in one of their shows, *Critter Hug*, with Matthew Mercer and Mica Burton. Winter 2021's *Critter Hug* started with guest interviewee Aabria Iyengar, who discussed her introduction to D&D, where her players at the table handed her a cleric and told her to stay back and heal. Mercer and Burton coined that experience: "They girl-healer'ed you!"[57] In tabletop and video gaming, healers are women; and most women playing a cleric have to be healers. 5e defines the role of a cleric as such: "Clerics combine the helpful magic of healing and inspiring their allies with spells that harm and hinder foes. …clerics depend on their combat training to let them wade into melee with the power of the gods on their side." Here, too, the support class operates according to gender roles, as it does in the examples from gaming culture. The *PHB*'s image of a cleric is a stout dwarf wielding a warhammer, instead of a "girl healer":

[57] "Critter Hug: DM Combat Banquet | Winter 2021," Critical Role, February 25, 2021, YouTube video, 1:11:50, https://youtu.be/uxtCfTvuAl0.

Fig 2. Image of a cleric from 5e *Player's Handbook*.[58]

This cleric is unlike the iterations seen in *Fire Emblem* and *Final Fantasy*; gone are white robes and magic-based equipment like staves. 5e presents a martial, *manly* cleric, despite the fact that the very order of words suggests a priority in the role of the cleric: to heal. Do clerics heal (female), or do they fight (male)? What would it look like to feature a female dwarf with otherwise masculine attributes, like the warhammer? In Western culture, are healers (doctors) not often conceived by default as male? Is violence perceived as a masculine trait? 5e does not "girl healer" anyone, thus breaking the fantasy genre and gaming expectations of women as passive healers. However, by avoiding the presentation of a more gender-neutral cleric, instead leaning on a very masculine, combat-focused presentation of a healer, 5e still adheres to gender expectations previously established by different editions and other RPGs.

[58] Wizards RPG Team, *Player's Handbook* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast, 2014), 56.

As it stands in 5e, the cleric class necessitates a melding of gender roles because of their unique combination of healing and damage capabilities. Clerics are similar to paladins, who are fighters imbued with a small amount of divine magic—paladins have more or less the inverse of the cleric's set priorities, focused on fighting and not healing. The class system within *D&D* naturalizes such distinctions. Without thinking about it consciously, players and characters in-game know what their responsibilities are. In making deep and practical distinctions between core identities, *D&D* replicates social distinctions in our modern moment, similar to education level and profession.

That is all to say—Bailey's portrayal of Jester is dually typified as both a healer and fighter within her cleric class. For Jester, there is no correct version of a cleric, unlike moments such as "I need healing!" and "girl healer"ing would suggest. In a *TM* interview with host Brian W. Foster, Bailey revealed the context behind her choice in character class. Originally, Bailey intended to play a warlock, a damage-oriented spellcasting class.[59] However, before confirming her decision, her husband and co-player Travis Willingham decided to play warlock, creating an accidental overlap of class. As a result, Bailey chose to reimagine her character as a cleric. In previous one-shots (single, non-serial *D&D* sessions) on other channels, Bailey had already played Jester, and always as a trickster cleric.[60]

However, *CR*'s portrayal of its first second season cleric within the party, Jester, separates from *D&D*'s long-standing presumptions regarding the role: she truly melds the

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[59] "Talks Machina: Discussing C2E94 – With Great Power…," Critical Role, February 13, 2020, YouTube video, 1:05:08, https://youtu.be/zRbJXCY9yIk.

[60] Two oneshot games feature Laura Bailey exist where she introduced Jester as a trickster cleric. A Reddit post also documents Bailey's mention of her previous character, Jester, a tiefling cleric, in a Pathfinder game.
"Critical Role at GameSpot Livestream." GameSpot, March 22, 2016, YouTube video, 2:07:37, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6ndE0N4l1g.
"Critical Role x Kinda Funny: Dungeons & Dragons – The GameOverGreggy Show Ep. 123." Kinda Funny, April 15, 2016, https://youtu.be/UIZyqKSA7Rc.
Swanson188, Reddit, 2018.
https://www.reddit.com/r/criticalrole/comments/7yj6w5/no_spoilers_i_just_noticed_that_jester_existed/

healing and combat opportunities afforded to the cleric class, without falling into strict gender norms. Jester is not the "girl healer" whose only priority is to heal. She is also not the dwarven fighter cleric in the PHB, seemingly focused on damage. She melds gender and genre expectations—women as passive, men as active—in her exploration of what being a cleric means to Jester. In episode three of season two, early into her role, Jester reflects her lack of personal interest in healing when talking with Beauregard (played by Marisha Ray) about her relatively new powers:

Ray as Beauregard: You have a six pack of doughnuts, but not a healer's kit in there? And you're the cleric? I'm confused…

Bailey as Jester: I'm THE Cleric?!? I've never traveled with a bunch of people I thought would die in front of me!

Their confusion over Jester's role as a healer and the party's expectations—as Jester at that point was the only character in the party with the ability to heal—is reflected by the significant amount of damage she had done, as shown in Fig. 1.

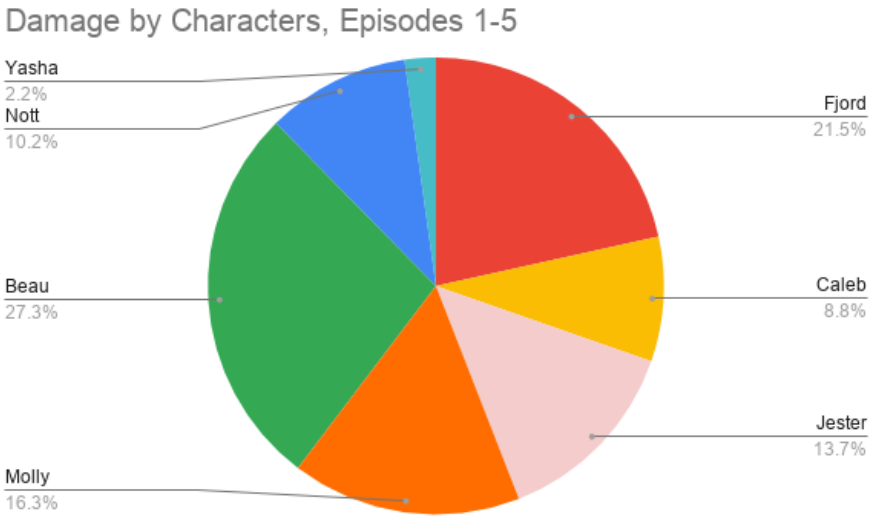

Fig 3. Damage by Characters, Episodes 1-5. Data collected from a compendium of all roles on critrolestats.com and organized by the author.

Quickly, within the world of the show, Jester came to be ridiculed for her lack of interest in healing; she was actively *not* a "girl healer," and not a "cleric," as the class implies a focus on healing. Healing was a key component of her role, but it wasn't necessarily her impulse. After the season's first playable character death, cast member Taliesin Jaffe created another cleric, Caduceus Clay. Outside of the diegesis of the show, the cast's decision to add a secondary cleric reduced problematic stereotyping against Jester; as the need to fulfill the expectations of her class lifted with the introduction of Caduceus, Jester was encouraged to defy norms because she no longer had the single burden of keeping the party alive with healing magic.

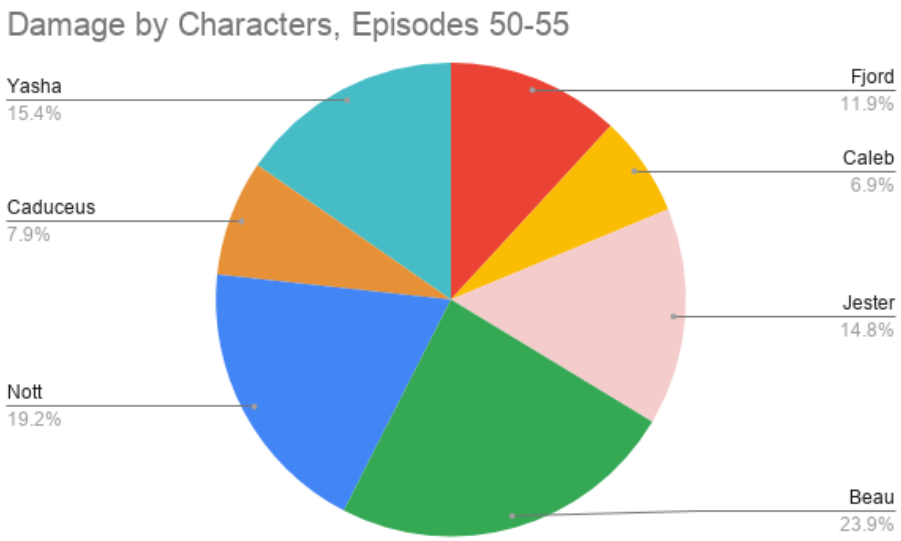

Fig 4. Damage by Characters, Episodes 50-55. Data collected from a compendium of all roles on critrolestats.com and organized by the author.

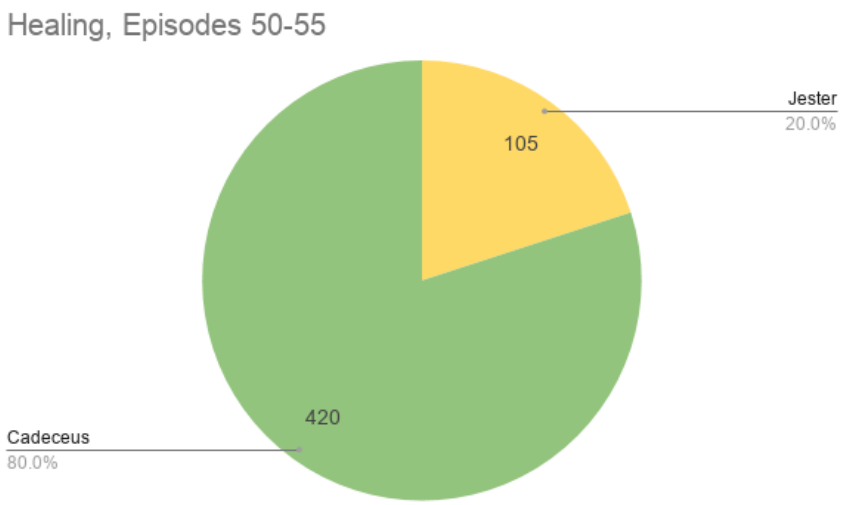

Fig 5. Healing, Episodes 50-55. Data collected from a compendium of all roles on critrolestats.com and organized by the author.

From that point on, Jester's damage relative to the other players increased (see Fig. 2), and her healing compared to Caduceus' is significantly less (see Fig. 3). The creators' decision to allow and even encourage Bailey to play Jester against the expectations of her type is even more significant given that DM Mercer has often allowed players to change class or alignment. In season one, Vax'ildan (played by Liam O'Brian) changed class from rogue to paladin. Similarly, season one's Vex'ahlia (played by Bailey) was forced to change her moral-religious "alignment" after theft.[7] In season two, even Willingham's Fjord Stone changed class from warlock to paladin after forsaking his warlock pact deity.

Yet, neither Bailey nor Mercer have sought to change Jester's class. She is still a cleric, and she meets some invisible standards of what a cleric is, such that adopting a different class would not be an accurate description of the tasks she performs. Instead of finding an appropriate class to suit Jester, the cast transforms the concept of class from within. In Jester's particular case, she typically heals when absolutely necessary—when fellow player characters are on the

brink of death, creating an interesting comparison to a combat medic. However, here, Jester is not a medic in combat, whose job is to provide care—she is a combatant, who can perform healing. Jester is a "trickster" cleric. Trickster is one of many official subclasses for the cleric class. Most classes in D&D, such as ranger, have subclasses as well. These subclasses are named differently depending on the class. For example, clerics have "domains," not "subclasses"; rangers have "archetypes," such as hunter or beastmaster, not "subclasses." Functionally speaking, a cleric's domain and a ranger's archetype is a subclass. I will use the term "subclass" to refer to these class-based branching paths in character creation. Jester's identity as a trickster cleric then suggests she should be playing pranks, in addition to healing, but does not necessarily focus on damage as a part of her role. As demonstrated, however, Bailey ignores class expectations completely, as Jester mostly does damage, and saves trickery for poignant sparse moments (or inappropriate jokes). She is a trickster cleric, not a war cleric, and yet she does a considerable amount of damage and heals when she must. We thus see push-back against non-conventional clerics within the game itself.

Cleric domains in the base *PHB*, in addition to trickster, include knowledge, life, war, light, nature, and many more. Yet, no such subclass has created controversy as in-depth as a damaging healer. As seen earlier with *Overwatch*'s "I need healing!" trope, the concept of a healer with a domain focused towards damage, like a cleric such as Jester with the subclass of war or trickster, can be considered unconventional. Notably, *Overwatch*'s popular healer character, Mercy, is typically referred to as "Battle Mercy" when played with a damage focus. In distinguishing a Battle Mercy from simply Mercy, the fandom exemplifies a connotation in gaming that healers are not meant to deal damage.

In our own world, the closest to such a type would be that of a combat medic. Still, a combat medic's main purpose is to heal soldiers, not to be soldiers themselves. The cleric and paladin class provide the opportunity to combine the healer role with other subclasses, like those of scholars (cleric subclass knowledge) and fighters (cleric subclass war). The rules engender a potential mixing of social types from our own world precisely to engender playing with roles. On the other hand, despite the formal acceptance of Jester's damage-heavy portrayal of a cleric and the addition of another healing-capable player, Jester's struggle with stereotyping continues up to the current moment, reinforcing the proliferation of typing and roles. In a conversation with her mother, Marion, fellow party member Nott the Brave (played by Sam Riegel) sarcastically downplays her excitement about healing:[61]

Bailey as Jester: I know! They've saved my life, you know. And I've saved theirs because I'm a really good cleric. Did you know that I do that now?

Mercer as Marion: I did not!

Bailey as Jester: I can heal people, Mom!

Mercer as Marion: That is incredible!

Riegel as Nott: She *can* heal people. She is able to.

Here, even friendly joking reflects the stereotypes and expectations of class inherent in a fantasy setting. The rules of the game and in-game fantasy expectations lead other characters to mock Jester for not fulfilling the expectations of a cleric, reflecting familiar real-world tensions when others go against norms. However, because the game managers and the players allow Jester to keep and thus modify the class, *CR* begins to engage in a radical re-conception of not only class and gender roles, but also the use of types and norms in and out of play.

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[61] "The Ruby and the Sapphire | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 33," Critical Role, December 19, 2019, YouTube video, 3:54:09, https://youtu.be/QbrorVyH4mk.

Players like Bailey fight against the class archetypes within *D&D* and their corresponding expected priorities and gendered roles. By defying these norms while acknowledging their existence, Jester shifts the role of clerics in the world of *Critical Role* and *D&D* as a genre. Bailey's embodiment of the tricker cleric exemplifies the show's message of resistance against the exclusionary power structure of the gaming industry's many status quos. Jester does not fit into her cleric archetype and *she doesn't have to*. Jester's class is but one instance of many where a D&D liveshow, in particular *CR*, works against the game while still playing it. The players' decision to include a second cleric encourages a rethinking of classification on a group level, instead of an individual basis, which is reinforced by the party nature of *D&D*. When playing in a party, where a group of differently specialized individuals are working toward the same goal, party composition is usually a focus. Gamer adherence to party composition was exemplified by Bailey's decision to not be a second warlock, upon hearing Willingham's declaration of class as a warlock. Typically, a party would have a healer, a damage dealer, and a magic user—a composition familiar to any gamer. To have two of one class in a game strays from tradition. However, the show took steps that Bailey did not. As of episode 100, the cast is composed of two clerics and one paladin; three healing-capable classes, as opposed to the original one. In *D&D*, within *CR*, the opportunity to change perceptions of party balance (i.e., to have three healers with different specialties) provides an alternative to the restrictions placed upon RPG players.

Bailey's decisions here are that of her person and performer. Jester, as a persona, deals only with in-game teasing, which does not provide a compelling reason to doubt social roles. Out of game, however, Bailey has personally and professionally considered how to be a cleric without being a "girl healer." As a livestreamed game, CR provides a heightened awareness of

gender dynamics around the cleric class, expressed through live dialogue and negotiation of expectations. In moments like *Talks Machina* interviews with the cast, audiences have the unique experience of hearing from the cast specifically about key choices and moments in the show. TM derives its namesake from *The Talking Dead*, *The Walking Dead*'s after-show interview with its actors. However, because this is a D&D liveshow, the actors are also the writers, in the loosest sense of the word. They create the game as they go. Actors, generally, do not have that type of agency in long-form performances. The D&D liveshow opens up entertainment to a new kind of expression, for those watching and those playing.

Conclusion

In *CR*, audiences watch players adapt the role of the performer, which is critical of D&D rules and its clear roles. As a show, then, *CR* is unusual in that it lays bare the process of character-building and typification. Combined with the overlap of social roles, characters and narrative in D&D become heightened depictions of real life, exaggerated through the mechanics of the game and its clear-cut rules. Within the game, the *CR* cast in particular adopts racial, sexual, and gender identities that alter the traditional D&D typification of the default player and party. In portraying a healer who doesn't heal—and other similar nontraditional choices from the cast—*CR* is one of many actual play shows that transform D&D into a safe space for diverse play in-game. The CR cast is, notably, not too radically diverse in their own player makeup. Other actual play groups, like *Friends at the Table*, often feature more diverse players.

In *CR*, all cast members work at the level of the player in order to manipulate the persona, ultimately reflecting their values as a person. Those values include both an interest in the construction of types *and* an investment in challenging them. Even when working against the grain, the rules still necessitate restrictions. For example, although the cast and players allowed Jester the freedom to reimagine the role of a cleric, she still struggles against the stereotypes of her class within the diegesis of the show, just as any minority group would in our own world, even in an accepting community. The rules of D&D rasp against Bailey's reinterpretation of class, but the same rules give each specific group of players the power and opportunity to defy such rules. In giving us a set of accepted norms, the society that D&D presents reflects our own. Yet, as a game focused on player power, 5e D&D also gives players the opportunity to explore the meaning of class, in the broadest sense of the term, within constraints similar to real life, without real-world repercussions.*CR* is one instance of *D&D* that democratizes the interpretation

of rules and encourages a reshaping of traditional roleplaying-game play. The cast encourages this safe space in real life, too, as given by one of the show's mottos: "Don't Forget to Love Each Other."

Several studies explore this reimagination of roles in real life through roleplaying. Adam Brown and Deb Waterhouse-Watson analyze the impact of gender in such games, concluding that "Given their inherently performative nature and the ability to engage board gamers in flexible (though still structured) narratives incorporating various randomised or selectable components…, games of all kinds are particularly promising platforms for revising and reconfiguring gender norms."[62] The combination of performance and flexible yet structured narrative are key here. No other medium can lay claim to flexible but structured mechanics that require improvisational acting. Theatre comes the closest, as actors often create new, original lines despite having a script. Even so, they are still firmly placed inside the act-based structure of the play. The players acknowledge this unique real-life quality of D&D. In *Talks Machina* episode 144, Riegel discusses the growth of his character Nott the Brave, also known as Veth:

> In media and stories, …usually the story takes you from the place where the characters have a goal and wants to change, and goes on a journey. And at the end of the story, changes. The end. But D&D, and our campaign, is so f*king long that you can do that, and then do it again, and then do it again, and keep doing it forever.[63]

Ray follows up with the comment: "It's great, because it's like life!"[64]

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[62] Adam Brown and Deb Waterhouse-Watson, *Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Popular Culture.* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 135.
[63] "Talks Machina: Discussing C2E97 – The Fancy and the Fooled," Critical Role, March 5, 2020, YouTube video, 1:06:12, https://youtu.be/c3iOkvFunTo.
[64] "Talks Machina: Discussing C2E97 – The Fancy and the Fooled," Critical Role, March 5, 2020, YouTube video, 1:06:12, https://youtu.be/c3iOkvFunTo.

There is no beginning, middle, and end for those who play D&D. Like real people, the characters the cast embody do not follow a predictable arc of growth. By playing in a medium that mimics life, as Brown and Waterhouse-Watson suggest, games are a promising platform for redefining social dynamics. D&D replicates life at a physical and mental distance from reality, thus providing a safe space for overlapping norms in and out of the game to be explored. For example, instead of race as we conceive it, D&D provides races like orcs and elves; race is then fully fantastical, deceptively unlike our conception of race. In the real world, our awareness of certain categories such as sex, race, gender, class, and so on is acute. *CR* dramatizes our attunement to identity politics by making them not only mechanically important, but socially important such that D&D players and viewers see what it would mean to play within real world boundaries.

I have discussed here how specific moments in *CR* necessitate the involvement of all four roles. I have argued that these roles meaningfully affect the narrative of the game, and the experience for those playing and watching. In the close reading of Laura Bailey's mediation of her character's class, as a cleric, I have argued that Bailey exercises a unique self-awareness and determination to play with social expectations and norms. Play, the medium of D&D itself, engenders social recreation at the table, and therefore outside of the table, due to how closely the game mimics life and how the roles necessitated to play the game reflect real-life social roles. *CR*, and at large the new genre of the D&D liveshow, gives players, naive and experienced, not only the permission and example, but also the opportunity, to take rules and break them.