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Not Actual Play: Examples of Play and Expectations of Experience in TTRPGs

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Abstract

This article explores TTRPG play examples as forms of mediated play. TTRPG makers have long provided instructions on how to (role)play in the form of scripted vignettes of game sessions. More recently prospective players have been guided towards "Actual Play" podcasts or video series. Drawing on a range of Actual Plays in both printed and audio-visual formats, as well as player comments and discussions, this article reflects on the ways that such representations of role-playing imply or construct gameplay norms, and how these norms shape player expectations and experiences. Grounded in perspectives drawn from film and media studies, it pays particular attention to the form of mediation in each case, seeking to understand how different presentations of play afford different interpretations of what role-playing is and might be, and the implications of this for the present and future of this game form.

Keywords: Actual Play; TTRPG; mediation; play experiences; textuality; *Critical Role*; *The Adventure Zone*; *Pathfinder*; *Middle-earth Role Playing*; *HeroQuest*; *GangBusters*; *Paranoia*.

> *The actual play of a campaign game is a constant conversation between the players and the game judge. Players tell the judge what they are doing; he tells them what happens as a result of their actions. Watching an actual gaming session is the easiest way to see how a campaign game is played*.[1]

Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) of all kinds have long struggled with the sense that new players may not truly understand what they are or how to play them. As a consequence, TTRPG makers have generally provided both instructions on how to play and guidance on the specifics of role-playing games. And while this guidance can take a variety of forms, it is commonplace for it to incorporate some form of play example, helping potential players to piece together all the guidance into a "sense" of the game. In many TTRPGs, these play examples are typically expressed in the form of scripts, presented as vignettes of game sessions; in more recent years, game publishers have also employed video or audio play examples. In addition, they, and the gaming community as a whole, have also directed prospective players towards "Actual Plays"[2] – a term which has become synonymous with podcasts and video series such as *Critical Role*, *The Adventure Zone*, *Happy Jacks* and *Battle for Beyond*, and which foregrounds a direct relationship to the process of play, echoing language used in some older, textual examples such as that given above from *GangBusters*, a game about organised crime in the US of the 1920s.

In this article, we explore some of the ways in which such play examples might shape expectations of what TTRPGs are like, and the potential consequences of these constructions for the TTRPG form. We argue that play examples, whether in written, audio-visual or other forms, offer a heavily mediated engagement with TTRPG play which typically bears only a limited resemblance to the experience of most TTRPG players. The most popular audio-visual Actual Plays are tightly structured and produced, featuring professional entertainers and highly experienced players who provide an extraordinarily fluid and charismatic performance of tabletop role-playing.[3] These streams, videos and podcasts have such a pronounced impact on player expectations that it is recognised within the fan community with a specific label: the "(Matt) Mercer effect".[4] Printed play examples, conversely, are in many cases the opposite: often stilted, decontextualised scripts,

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[1] TSR: *GangBusters*. 1990, p. 63.
[2] Marsden and Mason: *Consumable Play*. 2021, pp. 181–182.
[3] Our focus on more widely viewed and popular audio-visual actual plays reflects the relative "authority" granted to these texts in the shaping of norms or expectations of TTRPG Play. Either through overt endorsement or more casual recommendations, actual plays such as *Critical Role* are closer to the canonical texts of (in this case) *Dungeons & Dragons* than actual plays with a smaller viewership. It may be fruitful to explore the relative authority of different texts through the lens of Michel Foucault's author-function, or work on transmedia storytelling and canon but this is beyond the scope of this article.
[4] Girdwood: *What is the Matt Mercer effect?* 2019.

presenting a mélange of rules and formulaic dialogue.

Our analysis focuses substantially on *Dungeons & Dragons*, given its dominance of the TTRPG space over many years and the range of examples provided across its various editions, but we also incorporate other TTRPGs – notably *Pathfinder*, *Middle-earth Role Playing (MERP)*, *HeroQuest*, *GangBusters* and *Paranoia* – to unpack some of the ways in which the norms established by *D&D* are articulated in different play spaces. We draw on a range of Actual Plays, alongside current and historical TTRPG manuals and attendant materials as well as player comments and discussions, and approach these materials from the perspectives of film and media studies. The article highlights the centrality of mediation in shaping these examples, and considers the ways in which they adopt the conventions of other media forms, reflecting on their weaknesses as representations of TTRPG activities even as they seem to offer a "perfect version" of an idealised game experience. We argue that Actual Plays – whether written, spoken, filmed or otherwise – are texts in their own right, with their own formal qualities which are shaped by their viewers' pre-existing media experiences and expectations, which are then carried across to the games they purport to represent. In closing, we reflect on how the ever uncertain nature of TTRPGs – as improvised theatre, as performance, as *games* – is inflected by these mediated examples, and the implications this has for established norms of TTRPG play.

Actual literature on Actual Play

Although very little attention has been paid to printed play examples of the kind we examine here, the highly visible and impactful phenomenon of audio-visual Actual Plays has encouraged a range of scholarship in recent years, including a wide-ranging collection edited by Shelly Jones,[5] alongside a selection of chapters and articles in a range of venues. In this material, there has been an extensive attempt to understand what exactly Actual Plays are, and to understand them as a media form in their own right, with their own performative qualities, audiences and fandoms, with frame analysis representing a common approach. Much as with the typical focus of TTRPG studies on *Dungeons & Dragons* – and relevant to our own research –, the focus of this analysis has centred on the most visible and popular of Actual Plays, *Critical Role*, although *The Adventure Zone* has also received substantial attention,[6] and there has been some (more limited) attention paid to other popular iterations of the form, as well. And there has certainly been strong interest in the impact of Actual Plays: it is typically remarked that Actual Plays are responsible for bringing some fifty

[5] Jones: *Watch Us Roll*. 2021. See also, for example, Chalk: *Mapping an online production network*. 2023.
[6] For example, Apple: *Limits of the "Infinite Imagisphere"*. 2021; Hedge: *The Adventure Zone as Transmedia Stunt Spectacular*. 2021; McMullin and Hibbard: *The Fandom Rushes In*. 2021.

percent of new players to *Dungeons & Dragons*, following a comment made in an interview by Nathan Stewart, then Creative Director of *Dungeons & Dragons* Fifth Edition.[7] As we suggest, scholarship on Actual Play is acutely conscious of its status as a medium in its own right: as having "brought TRPGs into mainstream media",[8] as conveying *D&D* "through played media",[9] as a "narrative medium",[10] which "newcomers to D&D are frequently encouraged to explore… in order to learn the expectations for play",[11] and thus, through which, media producers take on the "initiatory labor" of "increasing D&D's accessibility and empowering new players".[12]

Going further, work by writers such as Jan Švelch[13] reflects more broadly on the mediatisation of TTRPGs, considering both the way that core supporting products (for example, rulebooks) have been digitised, but also the way that Actual Play constitutes a mediation of a TTRPG experience, commodified as entertainment. The process of commodification, framing TTRPG as a form of "consumable play",[14] is centrally important to considering the form and function of Actual Plays and their connections to other media, as we explore below. Existing writing points to a range of ways in which this commodification is made visible: through the nature of Actual Play as performance,[15] through on-screen information which provides data about characters and situations,[16] and, most notable for more "successful" Actual Plays, through the ever-present trappings of the economic foundations of the form – sponsorship, partnership and advertising.[17] As this work shows, TTRPG developers and publishers – Wizards of the Coast prominent among them – are heavily invested in the success of Actual Play media, as a vector for the recruitment of new players. With this in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that some scholarship has framed Actual Plays as paratexts,[18] a perspective we will explore at length later in this article.

If Actual Plays are understood as playing an attractive and educative role for new players, concerns about their impact on player expectations make sense. Certainly, the "Mercer

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[7] DeVille: *The rise of D&D liveplay*. 2017: "Over half of the new people who started playing Fifth Edition [the game's most recent update, launched in 2014] got into D&D through watching people play online".
[8] Jones: *Documented and Actual Play*. 2024, p. 355.
[9] MacCallum-Stewart: *"You're Going to be Amazing"*. 2024, p. 136.
[10] Blau: *Birth of a New Medium*. 2021, p. 32.
[11] Marsden and Mason: *Consumable Play*. 2021, pp. 181–182
[12] Chalk: *A Chronology of* Dungeons & Dragons. 2018.
[13] Švelch: *Mediatization of tabletop role-playing*. 2022.
[14] Marsden and Mason: *Consumable Play*. 2021.
[15] E.g. Jones: *Watch Us Roll*. 2021, p. 209.
[16] Švelch: *Mediatization of tabletop role-playing*. 2022, p. 1673.
[17] Chalk: *Mapping an online production network*. 2023, p. 456; Apple: *Limits of the "Infinite Imagisphere"*. 2021, p. 175; Švelch: *Mediatization of tabletop role-playing*. 2022, pp. 1670–1671.
[18] Sidhu and Carter: *The* Critical Role *of Media Representations*. 2020, pp. 11–12; Stanton and Johnson: *Inclusivity and diversity in "Actual Play"*. 2023, p. 232.

effect" is widely referenced as an issue of player concern in the literature, where it is used to underline *Critical Role*'s aspirational status[19] and the unrealistic expectations that it creates,[20] as well as to argue that it in fact describes a style or technique of play[21] rather than an experience of TTRPG play that is (perhaps forever) out of reach. Important here is the recognition that Actual Plays are not only a performance but also a spectacle,[22] constructed and played for an audience,[23] which is sometimes directly addressed (for example, through "'we see' narration")[24] or involved in shaping the narrative (through polls or donations).[25] As Mariah E. Marsden and Kelsey Paige Mason note,[26] Actual Plays represent a challenge to the assumed relationship between performer and spectator, given that expectations of a performance may not marry well with pre-existing (pre-Actual-Play) conventions of play. Indeed, and as we will explore in more detail in our analysis, the Mercer effect may be less about players having unrealistic expectations of TTRPG play and more about players continuing to see themselves as media audiences rather than participants.

Actual play in print

As we have already indicated, the work on printed examples of play is far more limited. Work on Actual Play as a form of mediated TTRPG experience that performs an educative role introducing players to role-playing is a useful jumping-off point for consideration of printed examples of play as mediations of the role-playing experience. Indeed, Jones's definition of Actual Play may equally well to printed examples of play. Like Actual Plays, printed examples are (purportedly) "documented play sessions" that the reader consumes for "education".[27] The most obvious distinctions between the audio-visual Actual Play and the printed example of play are the differing forms of production and distribution. Actual Plays are "typically in audio or video format" and distributed online as livestreams or "edited post–recording and then put online".[28] Printed examples of play, on the other hand, are usually written documents resembling a script or screenplay, published in rulebooks and starter sets.

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[19] Švelch: *Mediatization of tabletop role-playing*. 2022, p. 1674.
[20] Jones: *Documented and Actual Play*. 2024, p. 356; Sidhu and Carter: *The* Critical Role *of Media Representations*. 2020, p. 8.
[21] MacCallum-Stewart: *"You're Going to be Amazing"*. 2024, pp. 123, 136.
[22] Hope: *Critical Role and Audience Impact*. 2021.
[23] Stanton and Johnson: *Inclusivity and diversity in "Actual Play"*. 2023, p. 238. Evan Torner's study (*Actual Play Reports*. 2021) of early uses of the term on the internet forum *The Forge* notes that this was not always the case, demonstrating how Actual Play was originally understood "as a way to better one's designs and close the gap between the *potential* and the *actual*", in contrast to contemporary Actual Plays that are "geared towards an outside audience" (p. 30).
[24] Apple: *Limits of the "Infinite Imagisphere"*. 2021, pp. 174, 183.
[25] Jones: *Documented and Actual Play*. 2024, p. 357.
[26] Marsden and Mason: *Consumable Play*. 2021, pp. 180–181.
[27] Jones: *Documented and Actual Play*. 2024, p. 352.
[28] Jones: *Documented and Actual Play*. 2024, p. 352.

The distinction between Actual Plays as audio-visual media and examples of play as print media becomes increasingly blurry when considering the ability to access Actual Plays such as *Critical Role* in the form of transcripts, with formal properties much closer to printed examples of play.[29] It is also appropriate to note the flexibility granted by Jones's use of "typically". As such, we propose treating both audio-visual and printed examples as expressions of the Actual Play across various media.

A potential challenge to this framing is the assumed difference in ontological relationship with a "real" play session. At first glance, the audio-visual Actual Play appears to have a more or less transparent relationship to a session of TTRPG play, whereas the printed Actual Play is assumed to be a highly mediated transcript or more likely a fiction conceived with the purpose of giving a sense of role-playing to the reader. The *Middle-earth Role Playing* (*MERP*) example hints at this ambiguous fictionality with the disclaimer that "[a]ny similarity between these characters and any persons (real or FRP), living or dead, may be pure coincidence". Far from clarifying the status of the participants as fictional or otherwise, the disclaimer muddies distinctions between "real" and role-playing, and obfuscates intention through the use of "may".[30] *GangBusters*, on the other hand, elides any distinction between reading an Actual Play and "watching an actual gaming session", moving immediately from the claim that "[w]atching an actual gaming session is the easiest way to see how a campaign game is played" to the Actual Play in the next paragraph.[31] Here, we are less concerned with the apparent truth status of Actual Plays than with exploring the formal properties of both audio-visual and printed Actual Plays as texts that mediate the experience of TTRPG gameplay.

Turning to the text of TTRPG rulebooks, guides and manuals, it becomes clear that despite the variety of systems and editions, the Actual Play in print is a relatively coherent form with its own formal conventions and narrative tropes. Typically these are presented in a format that resembles a script or screenplay, sometimes beginning with a list of *dramatis personae* indicating the names of players and their role within the game. The identity of the speaker is presented at the start of a line, typically formatted to differentiate the name from the dialogue being spoken. Similarly, actions such as die –rolls are differentiated from dialogue in a manner resembling stage directions, although there is considerable variety in the exact formatting used. The "SAMPLE FRP ADVENTURE" in the *MERP* rulebook, for instance, begins with an explanation that clearly sets out the recognisable formal conventions of the

[29] Previously the work of volunteers, Critical Role has employed a professional transcription service since April 2019. See Lockey: *CR Transcript*. 2019 for more details.
[30] Iron Crown Enterprises: *MERP*. 1986, p. 6.
[31] TSR: *GangBusters*. 1990, p. 63.

Actual Play in print:

> This section is an example of a fantasy roleplaying adventure. The adventure is presented in the form of the dialogue between the players and the Gamemaster, with other actions and information in italics. This example does not detail some of the game mechanics and rules used to resolve actions. Examples of these mechanisms and rules are presented in later sections.[32]

This brings to the fore the effect of the script format, which is to favour dialogue over the explanation of mechanics. The educative value of the printed actual play is hence not to serve as a worked-through example of specific rules mechanics but a more general sense of the form that TTRPG gameplay takes. This has implications for the assumed audience of Actual Play in print. The authors of the 2009 edition of *HeroQuest* introduce the Actual Play with an instruction to "[e]xperienced roleplayers" who have "read versions of this section many times before" to move along as "there's nothing to see here".[33] By making a distinction between "experienced roleplayers" who should skip the section and "neophytes" who should read on, the authors imply that such examples exist solely for the benefit of players new to TTRPGs. While both the new and the experienced player could be encountering *HeroQuest* for the first time, the Actual Play is only essential reading for the player without any prior experience of other similar games. Conversely, advice to the experienced player on whether they should or should not skip the sections on character creation, even if they may have also read similar versions many times before, is notably absent. The implication here is that, while other sections of the rulebook determine what is specific to the game or edition, the Actual Play demonstrates a practice common to all TTRPGs.

Paranoia **and Parody**

The 2005 edition of the *Paranoia* TTRPG from Mongoose Publishing (*Paranoia XP*) critically engages with the lack of specificity in printed examples of play through a parodic "[n]on-example of play".[34] Rather than a script that ostensibly documents an actual session of *Paranoia*, the text instead presents an account of a session of "*Popular Fantasy RPG™*" played as if it were *Paranoia*, or – as is stated in the text – "filtered through the paranoid mindset". *Popular Fantasy RPG™* is, of course, a thinly veiled reference to *Dungeons & Dragons*, and the Actual Play features characters, antagonists and locations more suitable to the fantasy settings of Greyhawk or Faerûn than the dystopian science fiction setting of *Paranoia*'s Alpha Complex. While clearly a reference to the cultural (and economic)

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[32] Iron Crown Enterprises: *MERP*. 1986, p. 6.
[33] Laws et al.: *HeroQuest: Core Rules*. 2009, p. 5.
[34] Varney et al.: *Paranoia XP*. 2004, p. 6.

dominance of Wizards of the Coast's TTRPG, it allows for the representation of a party composed of the stock classes that have featured in D20 fantasy introductory vignettes since the *AD&D 2nd Edition* boxed set *First Quest: An Introductory Adventure*. For the non-example, the cast includes an unnamed 'Gamemaster', 'Warrior player', 'Rogue player', 'Priest player', and 'Wizard player'.[35] The non-example therefore not only draws attention to the broad conventions of printed examples of play, but to the specific conventions of party composition in printed Actual Plays for fantasy TTRPGs.[36] This shifts the non-example from a simple parody of formal conventions to a metatextual engagement with the purpose of Actual Plays within the context of game design. Indeed, this connection is made overtly where the authors adopt the narrative persona of "Famous Game Designers", to argue that the Actual Play examples in rules manuals shouldn't be skipped because they reveal "a lot about the designers' philosophy".[37]

As expected, the Actual Play follows the conventions of a script or screenplay, with the names of characters preceding dialogue to indicate the speaker. Actions taken during play, such as rolling dice, are presented in square brackets. The non-example also follows the convention of introducing common TTPRG terminology, such as the first reference to rolling a die describing the number of sides in plain English first ("twenty-sided die") followed by the customary short-hand notation "1d20".[38] The non-example begins *in medias res*, part way through an ongoing adventure, with the Gamemaster describing the environment to the characters:

> Gamemaster: You're in a long dungeon hallway with a dirt floor, stone walls and an arching stone ceiling. There are burning torches in wall sconces every ten feet. You see one door.
>
> Warrior player: What color is the stone?
>
> GM: Sort of orange.
>
> Rogue player: Aah! I'm only Clearance RED! Get me out of here!
>
> Priest player: I'm casting *Mass raise security clearance* to make us all ORANGE.

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[35] Varney et al.: *Paranoia XP*. 2004, p. 6.
[36] *First Quest*, *D&D 3rd Edition*, *D&D 3.5 Edition*, and *Pathfinder 2nd Edition* all feature a party composed of cleric, fighter, thief/rogue and wizard. *D&Dragons 4th Edition* features a smaller party without a cleric. This party composition roughly approximates the original *D&D* classes of cleric, fighting man, and magic-user, with the thief added to the game in the Greyhawk sourcebook. The *Pathfinder First Edition* example of play, however, features an atypical party of bard, paladin, ranger and wizard.
[37] Varney et al.: *Paranoia XP*. 2004, p. 6.
[38] Varney et al.: *Paranoia XP*. 2004, p. 6.

[Passes note to the GM: 'I'm also casting Subvert to Communism *on the warrior.']*[39]

The non-example continues in a conventional manner, focusing on the dialogue between the GM and the players. The players usually address the GM and each other in character, with the exception of the warrior player's initial line of dialogue. This sort of exchange is typical in examples of play, from the Caller in the *D&D Basic Set* example inquiring if there is "Anything else in the room?" to the player Russel in the *2024 Player's Handbook* asking "Ack! How many Skeletons?".[40] The rogue's exclamation of "Aah! I'm only clearance RED!" on learning that the stone is "sort of orange" serves as a representation of active role-playing equivalent to the *2024 Player's Handbook* example above. While even lighter on mechanics than the typical printed Actual Play, the non-example *does* dramatise dice rolls and checks by the GM. The vignette ends on a cliffhanger encounter with a hobgoblin, with the GM asking "Who's going in first?" and the warrior, priest and rogue pointing at each other and replying in unison: "*Him!*"[41]

In terms of its formal properties, the non-example is no different to any other Actual Play in print. It represents gameplay as a dialogue between the players and the GM, but the content and tone of that dialogue differs significantly, particularly in the direct antagonism between players, represented initially by the clandestine passing of notes between GM and player, before later escalating to direct confrontation. After receiving the note from the priest player, the GM passes a corresponding note to the warrior player, informing them that they feel "a strange treasonous impulse". The non-example also dramatises an unspoken exchange between the priest player and rogue player, which in turn prompts the rogue player to also pass a note to the GM. This marks a subtle but more striking departure from the conventions of examples of play, not in relation to player behaviour, but in the positioning of the reader in relation to the narrative. Typically, the narration adopts an omniscient third-person perspective, ensuring that the reader is privy to any concealed information such as hidden dice rolls or the results of checks made by the DM. While the narration makes known the content of the first two notes, the content of the note passed by the rogue player as well as the result and purpose of the check made by the GM are withheld from the reader. This reframes the reader's position in relation to the non-example and allows for dramatic tension not typically present in Actual Plays. This comes to fruition when the wizard player reaches for their Gem of Memory and is informed by the GM that it is missing. This revelation is

[39] Varney et al.: *Paranoia XP*. 2004, p. 6.
[40] See Gygax and Arneson: *Dungeons & Dragons*. 1978, p. 40, and Rivera: *2024 Core Rulebooks*. 2024.
[41] By this point in the example the wizard has been killed by a malfunctioning 'Wand of Fireballs' and the player instructed by the Gamemaster that they can't contribute to the conversation whilst the character is dead. Varney et al.: *Paranoia XP*. 2004, p. 6.

immediately followed by the rogue's line "Uh-oh! You've lost a valuable magic item", prompting the reader (and the wizard player) to infer that the rogue's note to the GM explained their intention to steal the gem and that the unexplained roll was a check to see if this was successful.[42]

Secret checks and concealed rolls are not uncommon in printed Actual Plays. The *Pathfinder 2nd Edition* example features the somewhat stilted and awkward line of GM dialogue "sure, but checking for traps is a secret check, so I'll roll for you", followed by an explanation of the GM rolling a d20 "*behind his GM screen, hidden from the players' view*".[43] The result of the role and difficulty of the check is made known to the reader through the narration, but the GM only conveys the outcome to the players. Where the reader of the *Pathfinder* example is an omniscient observer, then, the reader of the *Paranoia* non-example has a limited perspective not clearly aligned with any of the "characters" in the drama.

Where most Actual Plays in print can be understood as offering a general sense of role-playing to players who have not played TTRPGs before, the *Paranoia* non-example manipulates the formal conventions of the Actual Play in print to convey a specific sense of what it is like to play *Paranoia*. Crucially, this is not through representations of the mechanics of the game or even through direct reference to the setting, but rather through dramatising the experience of uncertainty or, indeed, *paranoia* characteristic of the game. This observation maps neatly onto the stated aims of the non-example and aligns with the statements of the "Famous Game Designers" regarding design philosophy. In addition to dramatising the feeling of playing *Paranoia*, the deconstruction of the conventions of the Actual Play in the *Paranoia* non-example lays out the workings of the form as a way of representing and constructing norms of role-playing.

Textuality and media form

It will be evident, then, that much as with audio-visual Actual Plays, printed Actual Plays have sufficiently consistent formal qualities to enable the designers of *Paranoia XP* to parody them successfully. That such parody exists also points to the way that Actual Plays, across the range of forms that they take, are enmeshed in a range of transtextual relationships. Audio-visual Actual Plays may serve a function in guiding players to specific TTRPGs, as we suggest above; but there is also evidence that more popular Actual Plays are consumed as texts in their own right and in particular by people who already play TTRPGs – with data suggesting, for example, that more than half of the listeners of *The Adventure Zone* Actual

[42] Varney et al.: *Paranoia XP*. 2004, p. 6.
[43] Bonner, Logan, et al.: *Pathfinder Core Rulebook*. 2019, p. 14.

Play podcast had played TTRPGs before.[44] Similarly, our *Paranoia XP* non-example demonstrates clear metatextuality, referencing relationships with other, better known TTRPGs such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. In this respect, Actual Plays are similar to other remnants of play which are commonly (but mistakenly, as Webber has suggested elsewhere[45]) labelled as paratexts in a way which encourages us to understand them in a limited manner. They are both complex texts in themselves and texts that have multiplex relationships with other texts.

This specific textuality is important because it directly informs how we should understand Actual Plays as a media form or forms, and the way in which Actual Plays act to construct expectations of TTRPG play experiences in their audiences. As we have already indicated, prior work has drawn attention to some of the ways in which we can understand audio-visual Actual Plays as mediations of TTRPGs. And while observations have been made about the televisual qualities of Actual Play livestreams, and some attention paid to some of the elements of mediatisation, the focus has generally remained on the ways in which Actual Plays represent TTRPG play sessions (or do not).

The assumption that Actual Plays are in some way a direct representation of play is, of course, at the heart of discussions about player expectations, and thus the Mercer effect. While a range of interventions – including from Matthew Mercer himself – have pointed to the ways in which the performative qualities of *Critical Role* and other Actual Plays should not be read as a norm, the broader media experience that these shows offer creates a space of aspiration, as Švelch indicates.[46] Actual plays have most certainly been interpreted and understood as entertainment, but the extent to which they are understood as media has been more limited. Although they are discussed as podcasts or streams (or, in the case of written examples, as scripts or transcripts), the ways in which the affordances of these media forms – and, significantly, the ways that they also evoke other (narrative) media forms, most notably radio, television and theatre – provide valuable insight into the way that audience expectations are shaped.

To understand how audience – and subsequently player – expectations are shaped, then, we need to recognise that Actual Plays evoke expectations connected with other media experiences, which have the potential to be transferred to play activities seen as "connected" with the Actual Play. To quote one astute observation, "comparing a D&D home game to an

[44] Stanton and Johnson: *Inclusivity and diversity in "Actual Play"*. 2023, p. 234.
[45] Webber: *The past as (para)text*. 2023, pp. 82–83.
[46] Švelch: *Mediatization of tabletop role-playing*. 2022, p. 1674.

episode of Critical Role is like comparing hanging out with friends to the show *Friends*".[47] Encapsulating both the unreasonable expectation of comparison and the produced-for-television artificiality of the sitcom, this example offers a valuable point of comparison for audience, and academic, attempts to read audio-visual Actual Plays as representative of TTRPG play. Resonance with other, established media forms is important because it is understood that our perceptions of authenticity are as closely linked to media experiences as they are to more immediate knowledge. In historical terms, for example, players' sense of "authenticity" in historical games based on their previous experiences of mediatised historical spaces – as Esther Wright observes, the "authentic" Old West that players of *Red Dead Redemption* are attuned to is filmic rather than historical.[48]

The influences of other media forms on audio-visual Actual Play are visible throughout: for example, in a trusted GM or host reading out copy from sponsors or advertisers, blurring the boundary between content and promotion in a manner similar to 20th-century US radio; in the serialisation of streamed shows into watchable packages released weekly and compiled into seasons, echoing broadcast television; in the dice-rolls-as-stage-directions trope we have mentioned above; in the references to Actual Play participants as cast members rather than players; and, to return to the *Friends* analogy, in the occasional creation of content before a live studio audience. These are, increasingly, conventions of the form, alongside their aesthetics,[49] the visual layout of video Actual Plays, the seamless editing of podcasts, and the increasingly high production values which have come to typify or even to be expected of Actual Play content.[50] These highly familiar media characteristics serve to render the mediation (more) invisible, helping us to forget that we are not in fact watching, listening to or reading about TTRPG play, but in fact engaging with a carefully constructed entertainment experience. For many of the more popular Actual Plays, this is compounded by the visibility of human relationships such as friendships (e.g. in *Critical Role*) or familial ties (e.g. in *The Adventure Zone*) which provide affective engagement beyond the narrative elements of the show. Indeed, as Alex Chalk suggests, "[w]hat is really on display here is not the game, but the players".[51] In this respect, audio-visual Actual Plays are less about a mediation of a TTRPG than they are about the spectatorial pleasures provided by other people's relationships. More bluntly, watching *Critical Role* is less about *watching D&D* and more about *watching people play D&D*.

The shift in focus from game to players is facilitated by a focus on dialogue over explanation

[47] Langum: *Critical Role's "Mercer Effect" Explained*. 2023.
[48] Wright: *Rockstar Games and American history*. 2022.
[49] Jones: *Documented and Actual Play*. 2024, p. 361.
[50] Friedman: *First decade of actual play*. 2022.
[51] Chalk: *A Chronology of* Dungeons & Dragons. 2018.

of mechanics that we also see in printed Actual Plays. While audio-visual Actual Plays do serve as introductions to TTRPG, the cast are not usually under the same pedagogic obligations as printed Actual Plays, and so dialogue can eschew much of the rules explanation woven into printed examples in favour of narrative, character development or humour. Dialogue is the focus not out of technological necessity, such as the absence of images in radio, but for the same reason a sonnet has 14 lines: It is a formal convention and not an inevitable condition of the medium. Close analysis of the formal conventions of an Actual Play makes visible its constructed nature and status as text. This, in turn, makes it possible to more accurately articulate the relationship between Actual Plays and TTRPGs.

With this in mind we turn to a brief analysis of the first episode of *Critical Role*'s third campaign. Following a fifteen-minute showcase of fan art, thirteen further minutes elapse before the cast begin "playing D&D". The showcase integrates the fan community into the visual fabric of the show while also providing an opportunity for viewers to interact through the live chat. Subscriber-exclusive Twitch emotes, particularly those in the likeness of cast members, are a key feature of this interaction. The mediatisation of cast likenesses as shareable emotes reinforces the sense that the players, and not the game, are the focus and affective loci.

An announcement segment follows the art showcase. Throughout this segment, three main camera set-ups are used to map an implied spatial relation between Mercer at the head of the table and the other cast members arranged on either side in groups of three or four.[52] Mercer appears on screen first to welcome the viewer. This has the effect of collapsing the roles of DM and host, which troubles the already contested hierarchy of TTRPG roles and tends to confine Mercer to the role of straight man reining in the antics of his co-hosts/players. A standout example of these antics is the three-minute musical number performed by Sam Riegel in this episode. While Riegel is known for his comedic rendering of ad copy, this is a particularly elaborate example. After initially reading the copy straight, Riegel later reveals he has "written a Broadway musical that the sponsor did not ask for and has never seen before". As Riegel delivers this revelation, the stream cuts to his cast members to showcase their amused reactions. Riegel exits the frame, and the stream dissolves to an image of red curtains overlayed with the text "Hitpoint Press presents 'Sponsor Me'".

The musical number features Riegel and guest Mary Elizabeth McGlynn as a couple in

[52] This is an implied spatial relation conveyed through editing, as no shot is provided of the actual shape and size of the "table" and each cast member's spatial relationship. This is an unspoken convention of screen fiction, where editing serves to connect disparate spaces. We assume that Monica and Rachel's apartment does have a fourth wall, and that the apartment opposite is visible from their window, regardless of the material reality of the sets.

financial distress due to lack of sponsors. After receiving a “telegram” (a manila envelope with the word telegram written on it) from a new sponsor, the background shifts from the quasi-realistic space of the couple’s spartan home to a series of stock backdrops of banknotes and business transactions. These are replaced by increasingly incongruous images, such as potatoes being sorted on a conveyor. At the end of the sequence, Riegel asks “was that too self-indulgent?” The musical number is an extravagant spectacle that paradoxically implies a modest budget and showcases sophisticated production. By presenting the rest of the cast as an appreciative audience, the broadcast unites cast and viewers as an audience for Riegel’s spectacle.

Marisha Ray, Ashley Johnson and Laura Bailey also perform less elaborate but similarly self-aware announcements. Ray’s announcement features an uncharacteristically formal delivery, which she justifies by indicating she is performing her duty as creative director of *Critical Role* welcoming new viewers. Johnson, speaking as president of the Critical Role Foundation, imitates Ray’s delivery, with the additional flourish of pointing at the camera and announcing “I think it’s that one”, making visible the similarities between *Critical Role* and a multi-camera live entertainment broadcast. Bailey’s excitable hawking of new merchandise provides a counterpoint to the official tone of the previous announcements. During the segment, Bailey presents a consciously elevated version of her onscreen persona, her enthusiasm for merchandise congruent with her reputation among the cast as a dice hoarder. Bailey’s excitement aligns her with fans and obfuscates her role within the *Critical Role* corporate entity, much as Ray’s affected awkwardness creates a distance between her identity as a player and as a media executive. Riegel’s rendering of ad copy as a comedy skit similarly serves to simultaneously conceal and make visible the economics of streaming, as noted by Chalk. Much like the self-reflexive parody of *Paranoia XP*, the self-referential spectacle of “Sponsor Me” makes visible the workings of *Critical Role* as text. The pleasures afforded are not those of TTRPG gameplay but of variety shows and sitcoms.

Conclusion

For Gregory Avery-Weir, “actual play podcasts are a lie”, because they are carefully crafted to create a particular narrative, to produce something consumable, to evoke play rather than to document it.[53] Certainly, Actual Plays do not represent transparent recordings of play experiences, but rather carefully crafted educational or entertainment media, organised around what is often an imagined “perfect version” of a game,[54] something recognised by

[53] Avery-Weir: *Actual Play Podcasts Do Not Portray Actual Play*. 2019.

[54] It is evident from cast commentary that audio-visual Actual Plays are often not, in fact, playing the expected TTRPG. See, for example, Griffin McElroy’s comment in Hedge: *The Adventure Zone as Transmedia Stunt Spectacular.* 2021: “We were barely playing *Dungeons & Dragons* by the end of the

existing literature on the subject. Building on this, we have argued that, as media products, Actual Plays have their own formal conventions connected with their form of mediation which help to render that mediation invisible, and which privilege narrative-rich dialogue and affective interpersonal interactions and relationships over the representation of TTRPG play. Notable here is the position of printed Actual Plays, which bridge the gap between the historical and contemporary space of TTRPG mediation. As a recent discussion on social media platform Cohost demonstrates, audiences expect Actual Plays to focus on the factors we highlight, prompting criticism of the "new 'Actual play intro'" to the 2024 *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook* for too accurately representing the experience of playing *D&D* as "slow and tedious".[55]

These discursive and affective mechanisms are at the heart of the impact of Actual Plays on player expectations. Mediated performances of sociality are more consequential than we might immediately expect, and as we have already indicated, the example of the TV sitcom *Friends* as a comparison to an Actual Play was well chosen: A host of magazine articles and forum posts exist discussing the extent to which the represented sociality in this TV show is realistic, demonstrating how it pushes viewers to ask questions about their own social experiences.[56] In terms of TTRPGs and Actual Plays, the idea of the Mercer effect recognises that player expectations exist, but discussions have tended to tie them to the game itself, and to performative playstyles, obscuring the important social dynamics of playing a game with friends and family. Through their attention to dialogue, we have argued, Actual Plays foreground such relationships, and thereby encourage us not only to set high expectations of our TTRPG experiences, but of our social relations as well.

show, in fact we had a whole arc where we played a game I made up because I thought that would be the best way to reflect the somewhat ambitious narrative goals that I had for that arc."

[55] Aura: *Wizards of the coast's new "Actual play intro"*. 2024.

[56] Alter and Dockterman: *Friends Gave You Unrealistic Expectations*. 2014; Hampson: *Why Friends gave us a false idea*. 2021.

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