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DOCUMENTED AND ACTUAL PLAY IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

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This chapter examines documenting role-play. It explores how *Actual Play Media*, that is, the recorded play of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs), bridges the analog and the digital and how that confluence of media has helped role-playing games (RPGs) to become mainstream (Trammell 2019). It will reflect on how Actual Play evolved with the advent of digital media from fanzine wargaming battle reports to online forum play reports to hit shows like *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone*. As a burgeoning medium, Actual Play has grown significantly in the past two decades. As a convergence of analog and digital platforms, Actual Plays have further mediatized tabletop roleplaying and are themselves sites of commodification and consumption (Marsden and Mason 2021; Švelch 2022).

Actual Plays are documented play sessions of a tabletop role-playing game, typically in audio or video format, that are livestreamed and/or edited post-recording and then put online to an audience consuming them as a form of entertainment or education.

Whether live streamed or recorded and post-edited audio or video, Actual Play essentially *documents play*. As Torner (2021) points out, the act of documentation itself affects the play that occurs. At a minimum, it inserts dim awareness of a potential further audience into the minds of players and game masters (GMs). At the high end, Actual Play media transforms recording a hobby game session into a professional, commercial performance, including huge viewerships and celebrity status.

Box 18.1 Definitions of Actual Play

Primarily verbal accounts of one's own experience of play, not as a fictional experience related to one's character, but as the non-diegetic interpersonal experience of being at the table and interacting with others in order to play the game.

(William J. White 2015, 87)

a concept or movement within hobby games in which people record and broadcast their game sessions—particularly campaigns of tabletop roleplaying games—over the internet.

(Diana Jones Award 2018)

Actual Play ultimately involves:

1. Folks (of any background and ability/familiarity with gaming) playing an RPG (either physically together or remotely) and broadcasting that play session in some way (e.g., podcast, livestream)
2. Consumption of that media as a commodity by an audience thereby transforming play into performance
3. Sharing or spreading this media through participatory culture as fans interact with the content in some way.

(Jones 2021b)

Early Documented Wargaming and TRPGs

Before the advent of TRPGs, wargamers already documented play sessions and campaigns as written “after-battle reports” in fanzines such as *The Mixumaxu Gazette* or campaign newsletters (→ *Chapter 9*). *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) co-creator Gary Gygax himself submitted such reports to outlets like *Wargamer’s Newsletter* and *Panzerfaust*, while Dave Arneson, the other D&D co-creator, documented his Blackmoor campaign in the fanzine *Corner of the Table* and the news sheet *Blackmoor Gazette and Rumormonger*. His early play reports document a shift away from wargaming realism and chronicling of troop movements as they incorporated more and more fantastical elements, developing what eventually would become D&D and tabletop role-playing (Peterson 2012).

Picking up the wargaming practice in old and new fanzines like *Alarums & Excursions*, TRPG play reports were spaces for both verisimilitude and reflection. Authors might document what occurred in the play session (including discussion of both mechanics and narrative); opine on a particular aspect of the events; or discuss particular rules, how a referee or GM could (or should) handle them, or variations of play including house rules.

Then and today, play reports function in a variety of roles: pure entertainment, inspiration for others’ future play sessions, strategies for GMs, design notes and theorycrafting, or documenting specific events such as gameplay at conventions. Expanding the audience beyond a private gaming experience, play reports often bridge the gap between private and public, transforming play into an object to be discussed and analyzed by others. Some play reports even blur or cross genre lines into (fan) fiction, transforming recorded play into a literary text, potentially for commercial sale. One of the most famous examples of such commercialized play reports, sometimes called “replays” in Japan, is *Record of Lodoss War*. Originally serialized in the magazine *Comptiq*, this fantasy novel series sold over ten million copies in Japan and has been adapted into anime, manga, and computer game formats.

The Forge and Actual Play Reports

With the rise of the Internet, TRPG play reports moved online. They grew alongside and with video game Let's Plays, which began as text (and screenshot) play reports of video gaming sessions on online forums (McKittrick et al. 2023), to later move on to online video.

Let's Play A play session of a digital game documented in video (or other media like screenshots and text) that often includes the player's commentary and reaction to the game. Often edited and curated, Let's Play videos tend to emphasize the player's subjective responses as a form of entertainment or information as opposed to more "objective," information-focused walkthroughs.

Torner (2021) and White (2020) locate the origins of "Actual Play" or "AP" in reports of game sessions on *The Forge*, an influential online forum that became a focal point of RPG theorizing and independent TRPGs. Ron Edwards, game designer and co-founder of *The Forge*, encouraged users to post "AP reports" for the purpose of "discussing actual role-playing experiences, systems applications, settings in action, and usage of text and so on" (Edwards qtd in Torner 2021, 26). Forge AP reports were initially focused on understanding the player experience of a game in order to further RPG theory and, ultimately, design (White 2016). Yet over time, "the conversation moved away from theory and toward a self-reflexive or introspective engagement with a subject's own play via dialogue with a skilled or knowledgeable interlocutor" (White 2015, 97). The threads of Actual Play reports in *The Forge*, then, were shared conversations among fellow game designers and players, who offered valuable insight within a small, focused community.

Box 18.2 Online Freeform and Journaling Role-Play

In parallel to online Actual Play reports, players and designers created new forms of text-based *online freeform role-playing*, using chat, online fora, email, or other media to role-play via distributed journaling and discussion (→ *Chapter 8*). Such textual role-play has flourished with recent (*solo*) *journaling role-playing games* like *Thousand Year Old Vampire* (Hutchings 2020), facilitated by independent publishing platforms like itch.io. These games provide structuring material and prompts for, often, an individual player to invent and journal live events from a character's point of view. While literarily written Actual Play reports or replays can read like the resulting texts of journaling and online freeform games, they differ in that the text documents primary life play, whereas in textual role-play, writing the text is life play.

From Reflective Text to Audiovisual Performance

While online text on *The Forge* and later Google+ helped game designers and players reflect on gameplay, the rise of online audio and video and, with it, audiovisually recorded Actual Play, moved Actual Play toward *performance* (→ *Chapter 11*). The purpose of Actual Play shifted from playtesting and design reflection toward entertaining an audience other than the immediate players and GM. With that, the focus widens from the single system

designer, scenario author, or GM toward the overall performance of the players and GM. Over time, audiovisual Actual Play media broadened the audience from the close knowledge-base community of game designers to RPG players to a much larger population that may not necessarily identify as gamers. Thus, audiovisual Actual Play Media simultaneously “enhances the legitimacy of tabletop roleplaying games” and “obsolesces the game designer” (White 2019).

Killer Dungeon and *Killer Breakfast* are some of the earliest examples of Actual Play as (videorecorded) performative entertainment events (D’Anastasio 2017). At TRPG conventions like Gen Con or Dragon Con, fans wanted the opportunity to play with celebrity GMs such as *D&D* designers. But since only a handful of gamers could play in a given session and thousands of gamers in attendance, the solution emerged to stage a TRPG session as an event played in front of an audience. At Gen Con, this became *Killer Breakfast*, created and hosted by *Ravenloft* and *Dragonlance* co-creator Tracy Hickman. In *Killer Breakfast*, a handful of audience members would be brought into the game at a time, given first-level characters, and then during play “all die horribly, in various entertaining ways” (Laws 2007, 119). This early instance of TRPG as a Coliseum-esque watchable performance, where audiences rooted for first-level characters to try to survive impossible scenarios, already shows how performative Actual Play becomes tied to celebrity.

In 2008, then *D&D* publisher Wizards of the Coast teamed up with the creators of gaming web comics *Penny Arcade* (Jerry Holkins and Mike Kurhulik) and *PvP* (Scott Kurtz) to create a series of audio podcasts to showcase the then new 4th edition of *D&D*. This series would become the foundation of the now popular Actual Play franchise *Acquisitions Incorporated*. The original podcasts were intended to both entertain and market the 4th edition *D&D*, including helping listeners learn how to create a character, the gestalt of *D&D*, and the mechanics of the new edition. With the success of the podcast, *Acquisitions Incorporated* then adopted a model of performing live at conventions starting in September 2010 at the original Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) in Seattle. As this US gaming culture convention expanded to new sites with PAX East, PAX West, PAX South, PAX Australia, and PAX Unplugged, *Acquisitions Incorporated* added additional live show games and rotated players and GM with changing storylines, posting recorded sessions as online videos and adding animated recap videos. This spun off into *Acquisitions Incorporated: The “C” Team* (2017–2021), an in-studio production streamed live that featured interactive audience participation.

Perhaps the most popular Actual Play Media to date is *Critical Role*, a weekly show that now streams every Thursday. *Critical Role* began as a home game of self-proclaimed “nerdy ass voice actors” that was then transformed into an online show on the *Geek & Sundry* YouTube channel in March 2015. At the time of writing, the first video of its “Vox Machina” campaign, “Arrival at Kraghammer,” has been watched on YouTube over 20 million times. Now boasting nearly 2 million subscribers on their own YouTube channel and over a million Twitch followers, *Critical Role* has launched its own production company to produce its Actual Play campaigns along with other shows featuring the main cast. A testament to the popularity of *Critical Role* is its hugely successful 2019 Kickstarter (over \$11 million) for *The Legends of Vox Machina*, an animated video series of the show’s original story arc, which was picked up and renewed by Amazon.

Thus, despite some early scholarship questioning the “watch-ability” of TRPGs (Padol 1995; Werkman 2001; Hitchens and Drachen 2009), Actual Play has proven to be a massively popular medium that has brought TRPGs into mainstream media. Even as early as

2017, *D&D* senior director Nathan Stewart reported that “over half of the new people who started playing Fifth Edition got into *D&D* through watching people play online” (qtd in DeVille 2017). In 2018, the Diana Jones Award, one of the TRPG industry’s most prestigious awards, was awarded to Actual Play. The award committee credited “the movement” and particular media like *Critical Role*, *The Adventure Zone*, or *Acquisitions Inc.* with having “done more to popularize roleplaying games than anything since the Satanic Panic of the 1980s, and in a far more positive way” (Diana Jones Award 2018).

That said, highly produced Actual Play Media is a double-edged sword, both attracting new audiences and players and yet intimidating or disappointing new. This has become known as the “Mercer effect,” named after actor Matt Mercer on *Critical Role*: new *D&D* players entering *D&D* from watching Actual Plays have unrealistic expectations that their play will or should be similar to the performances of seasoned actors they watched online (Girdwood 2019).

Watch-able Play and Frame Analysis

With the advent of watch-able play, many early conversations examined Actual Play Media through the lens of *frame analysis* (→ *Chapter 12*). Developed by sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) and quickly applied to RPGs (Fine 1983), frame analysis unpacks how people make sense of social life by coordinating and interpreting interaction according to different shared types of situations or frames. Thus, if a player says “Let’s roll” within a TRPG session, this statement may be part of the *narrative* frame—what is happening within the story of the game between the characters. For example, they may speak in-character, demanding that the party leave the town. But it may also belong to the *mechanic* frame (e.g., game mechanics, dice rolls, or rules)—asking another play to roll the dice—or the *social* frame (i.e., what is happening between the people at the table in the actual world), asking other players to stop debating whether to order pizza or not (Cover 2010).

While keeping different frames apart in TRPG play can be tricky, *watching* other people play TRPGs can make it even more challenging (Decicio 2020). In an analysis of *Critical Role*, Robyn Hope (2017) suggests that Actual Play helped create an additional frame, the *fan frame*. This self-referential and metatextual frame comprises player references to being fans themselves, either through pop cultural references or references to their own show, for example, *Critical Role* players joking about video games that they are also players of and voice-actors in.

Fans and Interactive Viewership

Fans and fandom culture are critical parts of the success and proliferation of RPGs (→ *Chapter 20*)—and of Actual Play. A key aspect and an allure for many fans of Actual Play is not just watching, but interacting with the media (Gardner 2020), as Actual Play Media provide spaces for potential players and veterans alike to witness and participate in the social and cultural interaction of and around gameplay that is a core appeal of TRPGs (Grouling 2010). Thus, fans not only watch live streams of games but also spend countless hours creating paratexts about their favorite shows. For some Actual Play Media, this kind of media spreading, archiving, and recirculating fan production is the only fan interaction allowed. For instance, while early episodes of *Critical Role* offered an active chat feature on Twitch, this was quickly removed and replaced with the cast interacting on Twitter and

various interactive giveaways during the show's break. Meta talk shows about Actual Play Media such as *Talks Machina* and *The Adventure Zone* now provide fans with opportunities to ask direct questions of the casts (van Os 2021, 90). But direct audience interaction with the game and narrative remains very limited. With a continued emphasis on “storyteller” as a key component of its identity and brand (Friedman 2021), *Critical Role* maintains tight control over its narrative. Even when performing in front of a live audience, audiences were “explicitly discouraged for the sake of an uninterrupted viewing experience but also as a way of ensuring that the cast had a full creative control of the game” (Švelch 2022, 1672). However, even acknowledging the existence of an audience in the players and GM's speech and incorporating hyper-referential language (e.g., references to the everyday world, to pop culture) positions the fan audience as part of the storyworld and thus brings them into the process of worldbuilding (Apple 2021).

Other media do provide significant and direct opportunities for meaningful audience interaction and participation that create complex author-webs that allow for joint narrative creation (Whittemore 2021). For example, *Acquisitions Incorporated: The “C” Team* lets audiences directly affect gameplay and narrative via polls (e.g., which player character should get a magic item) or donating bits, Twitch currency, to support their favorite characters or the DM's cauldron. Players can use accrued bits to activate an ultimate ability or to reroll a die; when the DM's cauldron is full, this initiates a particularly significant event that can then alter the narrative. Dubbed the “Shadow Council,” the audience practically acts as an NPC within the gameplay as they have myriad opportunities to influence the narrative (Franklin 2021).

Documented Larp Play

Documenting live-action role-play or larp has often been portrayed as inherently insufficient—and yet is common practice. Larps get recorded in photographs or short films (sometimes by dedicated photographers recruited by organizers) but also in player diaries, props, or communal wikis. These record specific events, characters, or objects, but the overall gestalt or lived experience of a larp would seem beyond recreation (Waldron 2014; Torner 2011). In their photography-rich book *Nordic Larp* documenting its culture, Stenros and Montola point to the “ephemerality, first person audience, subjectivity, cocreation and essence of larp” (Stenros and Montola 2011, 12) as key challenges to its documentation. Larp shares with TRPGs, theater, or performance art that it is an ephemeral live performance; but unlike them, the space and time of play are not necessarily contained in a neatly circumscribed few hours and fixed table or stage space. Larp affords a complex plurality of concurrent first-person stories and embodied and potentially transformative first-person experiences that defy recording. Thus, the functions of documented larp seem to rest in providing players memory aids to reminisce and discuss past play and organizers with marketing material for future games.

Actual Play and Representation

As Gary Alan Fine (1983) argues in his early analysis of TRPGs, “Gaming is definitely a specialized universe of discourse; it is one to which anyone can obtain access, but in which learning the ropes is difficult for the potential member who/does not share the background interests of other participants” (247–8). By letting non-RPG players witness others play,

Actual Play Media arguably lowers the entry barriers into this universe. They help those new to TRPGs learn the *feel* and practice of role-playing games and their foundation, if not some of the more Byzantine rules, and demystify and debunk pervasive stereotypes about RPGs. Similar to other online gaming videos explaining how to play, there is a didactic aspect to Actual Play. While teaching a TRPG might not be the sole intent of the content creator, viewers can often learn a multitude of gameplay aspects (Layne 2021), such as character classes, races, abilities, statistics, game mechanics, rules, combat strategies, or role-playing styles. Actual Play videos are “effective instructional tools because the presenters verbalize strategy decisions” all the while now drawing “attention to the learning that is taking place” (Layne 2021, 203).

In addition to lowering access barriers and teaching how to play, Actual Play Media help spread TRPG narratives and worldbuilding to vast audiences. Historically, fantasy TRPG storyworlds have contained problematic racism, misogyny, and vile stereotyping (Trammell 2014, 2016, → *Chapter 25*). When broadcasting these storyworlds to audiences, players and GMs come under heightened scrutiny, which may lead them to be more sensitive and cautious about proliferating negative representations. For instance, prominent Actual Play Media such as *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone* have had narrative moments that fell into the Burying Your Gays trope (killing LGBT characters in a way that casts them as more expendable than heterosexual counterparts). Fan backlash when these moments occur has helped educate the cast and fans alike on potentially harmful and problematic storylines (van Os 2021, McMullin and Hibbard 2021). Partly in response, some Actual Play Media have specifically sought out fan interaction as a means of improving inclusivity. For example, *The Adventure Zone* has repeatedly indicated a willingness to have fans critique their storyworld to help improve its representation and diversity (McMullin and Hibbard 2021).

Indeed, Bosstick (2021) sees Actual Play podcasts as an opportunity for oral storytelling that can function as

a key part of expressing queer identity and exploring the ways it is performed in several variations: the folk artifacts that communicate gender and sexuality, the performances of characters by their respective players, and the narrative structures created by the gaming systems themselves.

(2021, *iii*)

In other words, Actual Play Media can provide a space for growing inclusive gaming practices and shared storytelling and community building, particularly for those whose voices are frequently otherwise denied or ignored in the still predominantly White, male, heterosexual, able-bodied space of RPGs. Speaking on the success of *Rivals of Waterdeep*, an Actual Play show comprised of all BIPOC performers, Tanya DePass said that the show has had a great impact on people of color who “saw themselves in our crew and show; and told us they felt a sense of belonging in the TTRPG space after seeing *Rivals*” (Wieland 2022). Actual Play Media can help reiterate that gaming is, in fact, diverse, encourage folks new to the hobby to feel included and safe, and hold groups accountable for the diversity of gaming, or lack thereof. With an all-South Asian cast GMed by Jasmine Bhullar, the recent Kickstarter success of the *D&D* Actual Play *DesiQuest* demonstrates a thriving market and fan desire for more diverse Actual Play Media.

Mainstream Media, Capitalism, and Actual Play

Actual Play has aided TRPG's transition into the mainstream. Many of the more successful Actual Plays have incorporated celebrities into their games. While all players in *Critical Role* are well-known voice-actors, particularly of various video game franchises, the show has also included arguably mainstream celebrity guest players such as Stephen Colbert for a Red Nose charity game and Vin Diesel. *CelebriD&D*, a collaboration between *Critical Role* and the Nerdist, has featured actors such as Joe Manganiello, Terry Crews, and Nathan Fillion. These larger celebrity games often eschew the livestream format in favor of prerecorded and edited production, controlling their narrative and their image. Indeed, while livestreamed Actual Play media continue to proliferate Twitch and YouTube channels, many of the larger names choose to edit their media with postproduction additions such as character art and re-creating key narrative moments with graphics or miniatures. For example, though *Critical Role* started off as a livestreamed show, with the COVID-19 pandemic, it switched to prerecorded sessions that helped ensure cast attendance as well as narrative control.

Such mainstream appeal, thanks to celebrity tie-ins and increased production values, goes hand in hand with commercialization. Professionalized Actual Play transforms amateur collaborative storytelling into “intellectual property that can be monetized in multiple media” and corporate convergence (White 2019; Marsden and Mason 2021; Švelch 2022). Many of the more popular shows are sponsored by companies that manufacture role-playing accessories, such as Wyrmwood dice trays, Dwarven Forge terrain, or D&D Beyond's digital tool. These partnerships both help provide the shows with requisite materials and funding and also market high-end accessories to the viewers as necessary for play (Švelch 2022).

Several of the larger Actual Plays have not only created typical souvenirs and merchandise (e.g., apparel, dice bags, stickers), but have also produced transmedia offshoots like sourcebooks (e.g., *Critical Role's Tal'Dorei Campaign, Acquisitions Incorporated D&D* sourcebook), graphic novels (e.g., *The Adventure Zone: Here There Be Gerblins*), even a novelization of the official backstory of characters (e.g., *Critical Role: Vox Machina—Kith and Kin* by Marieke Nijkamp), and most notably *Critical Role's* Amazon series *The Legend of Vox Machina*.

While modern Actual Play Media embrace merchandising and consumerism, overt advergaming, games that function as advertising for corporations, have proven a bridge too far for gamer-fans. This was made manifest in fan outcry when *Critical Role* played *Feast of Legends*, a branded TRPG sponsored by the US fast food chain Wendy's. Faced with massive backlash, *Critical Role* ultimately removed the episode from their archive and made a donation to the Farmworker Justice advocacy group (Condis 2021; Jones 2021a).

Yet when we dig past the largest names of Actual Play, we find that the bulk of videos and podcasts are created by hobbyists and fans of TRPGs, of science fiction and fantasy, of Actual Play itself. Chalk (2022) reminds us that Actual Play “foregrounds the importance of alternative (that is, non-monetary) economics in understanding the motives and energies driving its production” (20) as most of the folks participating in the hobby are doing it for fun rather than multimillion-dollar Kickstarters and Amazon deals. Actual Play sits at a nexus of work and play, as the labor required for GMing, playing, post-producing, and social media distribution all require significant effort in the name of *play* (Chalk 2022).

Box 18.3 Popular Actual Play Media

Acquisitions Incorporated

www.penny-arcade.com/podcasts/show/ai

Starting off as a *D&D 4th edition* podcast, this collaboration between Penny Arcade and Wizards of the Coast quickly became a highly successful Actual Play. The cast, which has changed over the years, plays live at PAX (Penny Arcade Expo) shows throughout the year. *Acquisitions Incorporated* is now officially part of *D&D*, with a campaign book featuring how to franchise on adventuring. The spin-off *C Team* is a weekly Actual Play livestream and podcast DMed by Jerry Holkins, a player in the original series.

The Adventure Zone

www.themcelroy.family/theadventurezone

Originating as a one-off of the *My Brother, My Brother, and Me* podcast, *The Adventure Zone* quickly garnered critical acclaim as its own podcast on the Maximum Fun network. It now features multiple campaigns and different TRPG systems including *D&D*, *FATE*, *Monster of the Week*, *Urban Shadows*, and more.

Critical Role

www.critrole.com

Arguably the most popular Actual Play, *Critical Role* started off as a livestreamed show through the *Geek and Sundry* channel. Its larger campaigns are based off of *Dungeons & Dragons*, but it often produces one-shots that showcase indie RPGs such as the much-beloved *Honey Heist*, a free, one-page RPG created by Grant Howitt. Its highly successful Kickstarter helped create the hit Amazon animated show *The Legend of Vox Machina*, which was renewed for a second season.

Dimension 20

www.youtube.com/@dimension20show

A product of the Internet comedy company College Humor and now featured on Dropout, *Dimension 20* shows numerous campaigns DMed by Brennan Lee Mulligan with rotating cast members. Using *D&D* rules, the campaign settings vary widely from a fantasy high school to a magical New York City to parodies of popular media such as *Game of Thrones* and *Lord of the Rings*. The show has over 600,000 subscribers on YouTube.

The Future of Actual Play

On the surface, Actual Play Media differ widely, for instance, in length and production quality of editing, sets, costumes, props, and the like. While *Critical Role* episodes often run three to four hours (with some a staggering seven hours long) and have campaigns that arc over a hundred episodes, other hit shows like *High Rollers* and *Dimension 20* eschew

lengthy run-times and seasons. Indeed, in order to help their fans keep up with their epically long episodes, *Critical Role* began creating official “Critical Role Recap” videos and text.

Yet the visual template for livestreamed Actual Play has not changed much. Its aesthetic structures of screen organization and information are a holdover from video game Let’s Plays (Friedman 2022). Still, over time, Actual Play as a medium will undoubtedly distinguish itself from traditional improvisational theater and television formats (e.g., half-hour episodes or animating the narratives that have been role-played by the players such as in *HarmonQuest*). More recent Actual Play media are taking advantage of newer social media platforms such as TikTok, playing with the length of streams, and incorporating special effects and interactive elements to further engage new audiences. Liveplays like *As Above So Below* have included interactive elements like QR-coded Easter eggs to further engage audiences.

One more recent change, arguably accelerated by COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns in 2020–2022, has been virtual tabletop (VTT) platforms, which facilitate remote TRPG sessions and were quickly embraced to stage Actual Plays of remote sessions.

Virtual Tabletop An application or web platform that emulates and handles tabletop game assets (e.g., dice, cards, maps with miniatures, character sheets) and supports joint remote play. Tabletop Simulator and Tabletopia are popular board game-centric examples, while Roll20 is a popular TRPG-centric platform.

While popular media such as *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone* have incorporated one-shots or mini-campaigns with games such as *Honey Heist* and *Monster of the Week*, the majority of Actual Play Media still cover *D&D*. Indeed, more than half the games played on Roll20.net, a virtual tabletop simulator, are *D&D* (Hall 2019). Emerging Actual Play Media may look beyond *D&D* to showcase indie TRPGs. A good example is the One Shot Network, a community hub for diverse gamers with shows like *Asians Represent!* and that spotlight indie designs.

Summary

Actual Play arose out of textual play records in fanzines and online fora that shared memorable narratives and reflected on the experience of playing TRPGs to advance the medium. This initial focus on RPG theory transitioned to performance as Actual Play Media moved into livestreamed and recorded podcasts and videos. Beyond spectator entertainment, audiovisual Actual Play also functions as didactic tools for learning TRPGs. Actual Play helped broaden the demographic of role-playing games, demystifying the hobby, and moving it into the mainstream. Actual Play media have become platforms for fandom interaction and potentially, diversifying RPGs. High-profile Actual Play Media are today highly professionalized and commercialized franchises, demonstrating the commercialization of fandom and fan labor. At the same time, Actual Play Media have become common and increasingly, essential channels for new TRPG designers, games, and players to find audiences.

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