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Critical Role: When Passionate Fans Come Face-to-Face with a Streaming Service Dragon

It began with a birthday gift. Voice actor Liam O'Brien, known for his work on anime and video games, wanted to play a game of Dungeons and Dragons with his fellow voice actor friends Sam Riegel, Laura Bailey, Travis Willingham, Talisen Jaffe, Marisha Ray, and Ashley Johnson, so as a birthday gift, Matthew Mercer, already known for being a talented Dungeon Master, put together a game (Kuchera). Years later, after the group had been playing together regularly, Felicia Day pitched the idea of airing the game live on Geek and Sundry's new Twitch stream (Kuchera), and since then, the show known as Critical Role has streamed every Thursday night. With video-on-demand (VOD) available on YouTube for free the Monday after, ultimately "each episode garners around 1 million views" (Spangler Mar. 2019). This number continues to grow as new fans catch up. In March 2019, having already become independent amicably from Geek and Sundry as the studio Critical Role Productions (Spangler Mar. 2019), this group of friends took the next big creative step. Critical Role decided to adapt its first campaign, which ended in 2017, into an animated series, partnering with animation studio Titmouse. Met with confusion by major streaming distributors at the unique story, the team turned to fans to help fund a pilot special (Spangler Mar. 2019). Fans of Critical Role, called Critters, are a passionate group, and the initial Kickstarter goal of \$750,000 was reached within the first 40 minutes. In the end, "88,887 backers pledged \$11,385,449 to help bring this project to life" (Critical Role). This

allowed Critical Role the opportunity to produce not only an animated special but an entire animated series, *Legend of Vox Machina*, all through fan-financing.

In November 2019, it was announced Amazon Studios had signed an exclusive distribution deal for *Legend of Vox Machina*, increasing the series by 14 new episodes, creating an entire second season of the show (Spangler Nov. 2019). The announcement of this partnership was met with anger and hesitance by some fans. As a Critter myself, this discourse is something I want to examine through a media scholar's lense. Both the difference between how Amazon and Critical Role responds to fans, and fan conflict with the said partnership, is due to differences in the platforms' models. As a large company, Amazon is more concerned with profit over its content and only considered Critical Role as a legitimate form of entertainment after fans proved the show was financially viable, without acknowledging the love and labor of the thousands of fans who participate in the community. In contrast, online platforms like YouTube and Twitch allow for personal connections to form between content creators and fans, leading to a sense of intimacy and trust. Even though Amazon Studios' and Critical Role Productions' partnership might be praised for reaching a mainstream audience, the change in distribution practices will cause passionate fans to be left behind.

Critical Role is a unique show that could only be born on the Internet. The cast may be professional voice actors, but even with this experience, a live, unscripted, role-playing show with 4-hour long episodes is incredibly niche. To adapt it for mainstream audiences, Critical Role needed to produce a pilot to convince studios to consider the project. *Legend of Vox Machina* will be an animated series, which is a creative endeavor too big for a small production company like Critical Role to make entirely by themselves. Without funding from a large study, and to

ensure “the actors and animators who work on the series will receive SAG and Animation Guild pay scale” (Spangler Mar. 2019), funds had to be raised. Critical Role chose to pursue fan-financing. Suzanne Scott defines fan-financing as “the direct, monetary contribution by fans to support the production of a text that would otherwise remain unproduced within the media industries. Part of what’s being sold is the project’s unproducability (whether real or constructed)” (Scott p. 170). The *Legend of Vox Machina* special was pitched to fans as something that could only be made with their support. On the official Kickstarter page, the creators emphasized crowdfunding is the best way to “stay true to our beloved characters and tell the stories you want to see [...] we decided to give the power back to our amazing community, roll up our sleeves, and make this special with YOU” (Critical Role). This message was written directly to fans, singling them out as the reason the special could exist. However, as Mel Stanfill explains, “just because fans have access to the means of media production does not mean they control them” (Stanfill p. 133). Fans are team members as producers, not as creative consultants. Fans may be informed of decisions made, but they can not make decisions themselves. This is especially frustrating when fans communicate with Critical Role through online platforms.

David Craig and Stuart Cunningham point out in the introduction to their book on social media entertainment “social media communication and entertainment content and is structured by a level of interactivity and viewer- and audience-centricity that is radically distinctive in screen history” (Craig and Cunningham p. 13). This communication between creator and audience can cause fans to feel a personal connection with the creator, in addition to the content. This is acknowledged even in comments on Kickstarter, with commenter D¹ stating “I don’t

¹ All Kickstarter comments cited in this paper will be under pseudonyms

personally know them, but we know them to some extent, we know they aren't bad people" (Critical Role). For Critical Role, the live Twitch chat and YouTube comments offer forums for fans to interact with each other, while the cast can respond to questions and share fanart on Twitter. During live shows, there have even been moments where the cast asks the audience watching if they know the answer to in-game questions. The Critical Role team is dedicated to respecting fan content, answering fan questions every Tuesday night on a talk show, holding a weekly contest for both fanart and cosplay, and featuring all art submissions on their official website with links to artists' social media. It is through this technology honest reactions from the Critical Role team can be seen as well. The evening after the Kickstarter launched, Matthew Mercer, Travis Willingham, Marisha Ray, and Sam Riegel answered questions on a Twitch livestream (an archive of which is available on YouTube). With the Kickstarter already far past its initial goal, the first 30 seconds of the video is stunned silence from the cast that dissolves into shocked laughter. Multiple times throughout the video, the cast expresses their surprise and deep pride in the community. Mercer comments that he's "been in shell-shock all day..." and Critical Role Productions CEO Travis Willingham responds "What can you say? We... we love you" ("The Legend of Vox Machina Kickstarter Q&A"). Critical Role is thankful for every way their fans support them and do not take the impact of the Kickstarter lightly. Through the intimacy of live video reactions on the Internet, fans trust these responses are genuine. However, this empathy shown by Critical Role is lacking from statements issued by Amazon.

The difference between online content and a company like Amazon is its focus on finance. Craig and Cunningham clarify that although Amazon is an online company, it is "Hollywood-like content distributed, and in some cases increasingly produced, by the major

‘Internet-distributed television’ portals [...] largely specializ[ing] in mainstream long-form premium content supported by sophisticated algorithmic feedback” (Craig and Cunningham p. 5). This opposes the niche, amateur content found on YouTube and Twitch, which, although owned by Amazon, operates similarly to YouTube. Not anyone can upload content onto a curated portal like Amazon Prime Video. Jennifer Salke, head of Amazon Studios, said in a statement “Critical Role blazed a new trail for original digital content, with fresh new voices and humor that earned devoted fans around the world, as evidenced by their wildly successful Kickstarter campaign” (Spangler Nov. 2019). This statement focuses on the accomplishments of the Critical Role team and credits them as the reason for a partnership, mentioning fans as more of a byproduct. However, if all Amazon cared about was Critical Role’s original content, it would have made a partnership before fan-funding was needed. These “devoted fans” and their millions of dollars are the reason Amazon is paying attention to Critical Role’s content in the first place. As Stanfill explains, the Kickstarter was a form of “selling the size and desirability of the audience” (Stanfill p. 141). Amazon isn’t the only industry to gloss over the impact of fans; press reports were also guilty of this act. The record-breaking impact of the Kickstarter made Critical Role legitimate enough to get reports in CNBC (Whitten) and Forbes Magazine (Wieland), but Forbes made no mention of fans and CNBC used the money-based term “backers.” Variety is an outlier, mentioning the fans even by their self-given name, Critters. These Critters have a voice equally important in this conflict.

Although negative comments on the Kickstarter announcement of the Amazon partnership are in the minority, they are still present enough to analysis. These worries include concerns of copyright, paying for content, corporations interfering with content, and

geoblocking: worries associated directly with a platform like Amazon. Looking at these public reactions, many commenters complain about paying for the series, including Commenter B who explains “i don’t have an Amazon Prime for twitch and i got Ad Blockers up to block ads on Twitch.” French Critter Commenter J mentions, “I shouldn’t be worried about being blocked. Relying on the Critters kindness (which is greatly appreciated) or being forced to use VPNs is not an acceptable situation.” Looking at cast statements, streaming services were always the end goal for the project. Before the Kickstarter went live, Critical Role promised fans in the Frequently Asked Questions section, “ALL Kickstarter backers will be the first to watch the animated special (we’re looking at streaming options at the moment)” (Critical Role). Although this means fans who contributed will see the first season no matter what, the second season will be locked behind Amazon’s country-specific paywall. Amazon’s subscription fee is the opposite of what fans are used to. It is also important to note this statement is one of the few cases Critical Role uses the term backers rather than fans, an indication that for this series, money is what allows access to content. Despite this published statement, some Critters expected Critical Role to remain independent in its entire production. Commenter M is among them, stating “I did fund this project exactly for the reason that you do not have to partner up with third parties to fund this project. Deliver what you promised, preferable in a DRM free way.” Amazon does not allow viewers to screenshot or record its content for copyright reasons, a practice in conflict with the fandom practices of fan video compilations and memes. Commenter G states “I’m worried that Amazon may try to censor and/or force you guys to change certain parts of your original version to suit THEM, and that’s not something that should be tolerated, no matter how much money they give you.” Comments like this come from a place of love and protection for the content and

creators of Critical Role. Although Critical Role will continue to have creative control, fans are not used to Amazon's system of production and have reason to worry. Commenter S explicitly states they "assumed that [Critical Role would] stream the episodes on Twitch, much like they do with CR, and then put them on YouTube a week later." Some commenters point out that there are unauthorized routes to access the content outside of Amazon, but when fans are used to easy access through YouTube and Twitch, this is a frustrating solution.

This conflict has yet to be resolved. As of this paper, Critical Role's last official statement on the series was on November 5th, announcing the partnership with Amazon. There have been no responses from Critical Role on negative fan comments to offer solutions to geoblocking or accessing the series without Amazon, a disappointment after the promise to be transparent. There is still so much for fans to learn, and I'll admit I wait with hope and excitement. Part of Amazon's partnership was "a first-look deal with Critical Role to develop new series to premiere exclusively on Prime Video worldwide" (Spangler Nov. 2019). As a live roleplaying game, Critical Role can explore complex themes and real emotions in a safe space of fantasy; it is both an escape and a catharsis. Critical Role has tackled the death of family, emotional abuse, racism, and war, alongside the puns and silly hijinks. By moving to Amazon, a new mainstream audience will have access to these stories otherwise kept to a niche corner of the Internet. In an interview, Mercer explained, "far above [Critical Role] being a business is that it's important to so many people and it's something we truly enjoy" (Kuchera). Sam Riegel promised, "Critical Role members aren't trying to enrich themselves from the project" (Spangler Mar. 2019). Mercer and the rest of the team continue to tell these stories solely because they enjoy the process of storytelling. They are still a group of friends playing a game of Dungeons and Dragons, just with

more people lucky enough to watch along. However, access to their animated content will not be universal. Fans without access to Amazon Prime Video and who didn't contribute to the Kickstarter will be without authorized access to the series. In the desire to tell more stories, sacrifices have been made. In a capitalist society, money has become necessary even for the pure pursuit of art, and multi-million dollar companies like Amazon use this weakness to its advantage. One day I hope we can live in a world where creators can share their stories with everyone without the need for a subscription fee.

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