

# "How Do You Want To Do This?": Us, Role-Playing Games, and The End of the World

**Abstract:** As role-playing games become popularized through the advent of role-playing game actual plays, we must better seek to understand their implications both in terms of the relationships they build and the narratives they propagate. More specifically, the paper uses *Critical Role*, one of the most prominent actual play series, as a case study for both the parasocial relationship between audience and livestreams as emerging media, as well as the assertion that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. This study examines how high fantasy narratives consistently rely on apocalyptic events to create stakes, particularly those in tabletop roleplaying games. By analyzing *Critical Role*'s storytelling, parasocial dynamics, and capitalist-realist conventions, this paper argues that the specter of capitalist realism persists even in a medium defined by collective storytelling. The paper uses *Critical Role*'s show *Exandria Unlimited: Calamity*, which ostensibly critiques power and corruption but ultimately reinforces capitalist logic, arguing ultimately that despite its progressive ethos, *Critical Role* inadvertently perpetuates capitalist ideology through its storytelling structures, audience engagement, and economic model. It highlights how role-playing games, even in their most communal and imaginative form, remain constrained by the ideological frameworks of the real world.

**Keywords:** *Critical Role*, role-playing game actual plays, role-playing game livestreams, Mark Fisher, capitalist realism, depictions of the apocalypse

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

As Hitchens and Drachen point out, though narrative has long been seen as recognized as critical in many facets of the human experience, its role within gaming has long been debated (2009). Modern narratology is poorly suited for the dynamism of role-playing games, which they suggest is devoid of a passive audience (2009, 54). Cover also suggested conventional narrative and linguistic parameters are ill-suited to analyze role-playing games due to their participative nature, similar in setup to ergodic literature (2010, 21), requiring an altogether new vocabulary. Cover's explanation of tabletop narrative is based on Fine (1983), dividing the role playing game experience between narrative, gameplay and social frames, each with specific rules and developments. Cover's work portrays the way the player-as-audience might interact with the text of a role-playing game.

During the 2010s, "actual plays" became popular — where the player-as-audience is no longer the only one perceiving the story unfold, but rather functions as a narrative vessel. This phenomenon brought role-playing games into the mainstream.

"Actual play" means broadcasted recordings or livestreams of gaming groups playing a particular tabletop role-playing game (Torner 2021, 30). Actual play does not adhere to the usual parameters of a role-playing game's interactive narrative, devoid of outside influence. Actual plays reposition role-playing games as a product with an emphasis on performativity, a turn which might encourage its re-integration into discourse analysis following a critical theory framework.

### 1.1 Media Analysis of Actual Plays

Before the advent of actual plays, discourse analysis of any tabletop role-playing game story or play group using critical theory would have been impossible — with each group's story being

deeply subjective and far too limited in scope to provide any applicable information on what problems critical theory could address. But actual plays have transitioned into conventional media, garnering audiences large enough for worldwide tours (Espinosa 2021). What once was a strictly autotelic narrative has now become a media product, with certain products proving more popular than others. One cannot analyze the narrative of role-playing games without also including an analysis of its extradiegetic context, i.e. the social frame. When examining the social frame of actual plays, considering actual plays are primarily distributed through digital markets such as Twitch or Youtube, the issue of parasociality naturally arises, as Torner points out (2021, 29).

## 1.2 The Mutations of Actual Play

Through the lens of the actual play, notions of audience and narrative are altered. Audience includes passive viewers of the material, as well as an active, participative audience-player hybrid, creating its own understanding and personalized experience (Hitchens and Drachen 2009). Narrative is also divided, balanced between improvisation and Western narrative structure following a linear, easy-to-follow plot. Deaths are often narratively unsatisfactory (Cover 2010, 35). Both player and game master must weigh the importance of play-as-game and play-as-product. When the death of a crowd favorite can deter viewers and put the creator's livelihood at stake, that death is much less likely, regardless of ludo-narrative setup.

These two mutations become interesting when used to explain the appeal and structure of particular actual plays. The ways in which they garner, entertain, and maintain their passive audience, as well as the ways in which they construct their narratives, all ultimately point us toward the capitalist ideologies hidden behind both actual plays, and our societies as a whole.

## 2. CRITICAL ROLE

No show is as relevant to the analysis of actual plays as *Critical Role*. The most successful actual play show to date (Hope 2021, 57), *Critical Role* began in 2015 on Twitch as a Geek & Sundry production. Over time, the show grew in both scale and production values, leading the team to depart Geek & Sundry and establish Critical Role as a stand-alone company. Today, the Critical Role Twitch channel has streamed over 3,300 hours of content to more than 1.3 million followers, ranking it among the top 600 channels on Twitch (Twitchtracker 2025). A leaked 2021 document revealed that Critical Role topped subscription payouts on Twitch for 2020, earning over \$9.6 million (Espinosa, 2021) — no longer just “a bunch of nerdy-ass voice actors, who sit around around and playing Dungeons & Dragons” (Mercer 2025).

Critical Role is both a *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax 1974) live-play broadcast starring by well-known voice actors, as well as an LA-based production company specializing in high production-value online broadcasts of tabletop role-playing games, with separate entities focusing on both boardgame creation (Darrington Press) and charitable funding (Critical Role Foundation) that also fall under the Critical Role umbrella. Notably, *Critical Role* serves as an interesting case study also, in part, for the ways in which the game stimulates parasociality, as well as the peculiar gestural anticapitalism present in many of their stories, fitting in perfectly with a Fisher-centric deconstruction.

## 2.1 Critical Role's Parasociality

The first point of great importance in establishing *Critical Role's* parasocial dominance over its audience resides within the partially misleading definition Matthew Mercer imparts at the start of each episode. By portraying itself as an approachable group of “nerdy” friends, not as the multi-million-dollar enterprise it has become, *Critical Role* plays into the parasociality that has by now become custom to livestreaming, the “one-and-a-half-sided parasocial relationship” (Kowert and Daniel 2021).

This relationship is characteristic of interactive storytelling. The players are as much a part of an audience as the passive viewers. This dual nature is a mix of traditional media-related parasocial relationships (Turner 1993, Giles 2002) and modern-day fandom culture.

The actors switch between the three frames of tabletop role-playing: the narrative frame, the gameplay frame and the social frame (Hope 2021, 56-72). Through professional yet simplistic staging, *Critical Role* captures the look and feel of an ordinary game, while the cast elevates both narrative and relatability. Seamless transitions between frames are pivotal to *Critical Role's* relationship with its audience, in a similar vein to Brechtian theatre, Hope suggests.

## 2.2 The Parasocial Dyad

Though the frames function independently of one another, it is together that they engage audiences. *Critical Role's* main appeal is its “parasocial dyad”, a parasocial relationship between fictional character and cast member giving the viewer a sense of relatability and belonging. Not only can one relate to the power fantasy of each independent character, but also to the ordinary-looking people experiencing the story alongside them, akin to audience members. The show is both a work of art in-and-of-itself and a commentary on said work. This feeling is only enhanced by the cast's constant partaking in the livestream's live chat, even after the show has switched to a pre-recorded model. In earlier episodes, the cast would even receive food ordered by viewers (Hope 2021, 63).

The narrative frame, as a consistent, long-form, purely imaginative and communal piece of work, heightens its relatability. Every episode of *Critical Role* is roughly 4 hours in runtime, with each of the three seasons running for over 100 episodes, meaning over 400 hours of character development. Since prolonged exposure to a piece of media has long been shown to increase parasociality (Green et al 2008), the audience becomes heavily invested.

This slow pacing allows for detailed and relatable character building, which, with the absence of a script or traditional production elements, allows for natural changes, better matching the audience's desired outcomes. The potential for retroactive continuity is much higher than in a show with an ordinary production schedule. Lastly, since the medium is inherently built for collaborative storytelling, the fandom is encouraged to participate via their home games or even in-universe streaming, strengthening the connection.

Players are encouraged to narrate their characters' actions and describe their thought process, which, in turn, allows the cast to better establish or justify certain actions and establish familiarity. Rapport is built for both cast members and characters. Unlike in conventional media, such as TV or movies, where the line between a character and an actor is rarely blurred, granting the actor very little time to establish themselves, *D&D's* extended duration provides enough time for both without shifts that might alter the familiarity towards one or the other.

As an example of the parasocial dyad, consider the relationship viewers make with Travis Willingham and his character Cerrit. Throughout the story of *Calamity*, Cerrit splits time between mystery solving and being a father figure for his young son. At the story's climax, Cerrit heroically defies death and fulfils the oath made to his son to return to him. The emotional effect and relatability of Cerrit's story is evident, further enhanced by Travis Willingham's public role as a father — he and fellow *Critical Role* member Laura Bailey announced Laura's pregnancy live, on air (Bailey 2018). Thus the first prong of the relationship (audience-character) and the second prong (audience-player) are stimulated by the emotional relatability of fatherhood through the narrative and social frame. The two separate frames carry meaning from one to another, in a perfect example of immersion bleed (Bowman 2015).

There are, however, instances where, even though character and player are not in synchronicity, the parasocial relationship is strengthened still. In the climactic finale of *Critical Role's* first campaign, Scanlan Shorthalt, the party's bard, played by Sam Riegel, successfully prevents the villain's teleportation, marking a significant shift towards the party in the tides of battle — a gameplay frame success. Yet, in the social frame, Sam had used Scanlan's most powerful magic, rendering him unable to enact a plan to save another player character, Vax'ildan (Liam O'Brien), causing him to tearfully apologize. Thus, as one frame can be cause for cheer, another stirs reactions through the display of friendship between actors.

As united as fans might find themselves in the face of this spectacle, even to the point of attributing it to personal growth (Lasley 2022), one must consider that while the group of actors are participating in a game they enjoy, that does not undermine the economic aspects, often hidden in plain sight to support the parasocial paradigm. *Critical Role* has long since shifted from a play group broadcasting their games by happenstance and has become an enterprise. This often forgotten distinction becomes especially jarring once *Critical Role's* minimal reliance on sponsors or ad revenue (Svelch 2022) indicates voluntary audience subscriptions as *Critical Role's* main source of income.

### 3. CONTENT & CONTEXT

The context of actual plays borders on the avantgarde; they stumbled on marketability by chance, not careful market manipulation, as declared even by *Critical Role's* creators (Spangler 2021).

*Critical Role* is freed from the limiting factors one might encounter in television or cinema. When designing their setting, narrative beats or fight scenes, TTRPG creators are only limited by their imaginations, providing near infinite possibilities for developing story (Hergenrader 2022). Since its departure from Geek & Sundry, *Critical Role* has been the exclusive producer of their show, unhindered by outside executives that could argue for a change in the show's direction.

In the absence of studio regulation and budgetary restrictions, they are limited only by the creators' vision. Such limitations might serve as indicators of broader socio-political values.

Reflecting on modern culture, including everything from music to narrative forms, Fisher (2009) points out the capitalist mindset embedded in everyday life, naming it capitalist realism. This does not require active propaganda or censorship, but functions through a soft closure of the imagination, in which alternative systems, structures, or futures appear unthinkable or naive. Within narrative media, this reproduces capitalist values (competition,

individualism, private property, corporate power) even when stories outwardly appear critical of them.

*Critical Role's* productions, though liberated from economic censorship or institutional oversight, often replicate the very ideological baseline that other media forms are structurally compelled to uphold, remaining within the same horizon of capitalist realism that haunts contemporary fiction (Fisher 2009, 2).

### 3.1 Exandria Unlimited: Calamity

In this section I examine capitalist realism in the *Exandria Unlimited: Calamity* mini-series (Critical Role, 2022). *Calamity* is a prequel to *Critical Role's* main campaign, set at the close of the Age of Arcanum, a period of unmatched progress heralded by mageocratic city-states, apocalyptically ended by corruption and godly influence.

*Calamity's* is a self-contained and thematically coherent actual play, with under twenty hours of content. Its disaster movie theme positions it as a potent carrier of the ideological signs of its time (Keane 2006, 16). Disaster movies showcase a society's main anxiety and desire to rethink the world (Keane 2006, 59).

*Calamity* centers on the Ring of Brass, a collection of mages and government officials which have integrated themselves into the fabric of the flying city-state Avalir, wherefrom the world-shaping event known as the Calamity is said to have begun.

Avalir is loosely defined other than its hierarchy, at the top of which sit the Septarion, a collection of seven archmages of unmatched power, directly supported by the Ring of Gold, their apprentices. Though a longer deconstruction of Avalir's power structure is made difficult by the fragmented worldbuilding available to an ordinary audience member, its similarities to modern-day, oligarchy-led late-capitalist structures are flagrant. The only stark difference is partial replacement of economic capital with magical capital. Monetary gains are not abandoned altogether, serving as an integral part of *Calamity's* final episodes.

#### 3.1.1 The Ring of Brass

*Calamity's* protagonists are the Ring of Brass: Architect Arcane Laerryn Coramar-Seelie (Aabria Iyengar); Zerxus Ilerez, First Knight of Avalir (Luis Carazo); Patia Por'co, The Keeper of Scrolls (Marisha Ray); Loquatius Seelie (Sam Riegel); Cerrit Agrupnin, Guardian of the Seventh (Travis Willingham) and Guildmaster Nydas Okiro (Lou Wilson). It is implied the six party members have known each other a long time, forming deep interpersonal connections.

Each member is also part of Avalir's capitalist mageocracy, as shown by introductory vignettes. Most are shown in the middle of Avalir's processes, such as Laerryn in charge of the city's infrastructure and energy source, and Patia Por'co shown preparing to host a party at her Pallazzo on the eve of the unforeseen apocalypse. From urbanism, to finance, to intelligence, the Ring of Brass is deeply rooted into every facet of Avalir's society and power structures, partaking also in its corruption.

#### 3.1.2 The Apocalypse of Calamity

Warned of an imminent apocalypse, the Brass Ring tries to understand "The Tree of Names. This single ecological presence within the floating city is related to several visions regarding

the incoming end. It is revealed that the tree is a vein through which the city pays the “Drashari Tithe”, 25% of its annual magical intake, to the planet, to keep it healthy and constrain the Primordial Lords, the source of all natural disasters. Shorting the tithe has weakened the tree’s magic. Frustrated to learn that the tree is limiting her magic, Laerryn destroys it completely.

The Tree stands for ecological and climate awareness in the face of late-stage capitalism, maintaining planetary health and requiring the reinvestment of capital. Laerryn’s destruction of the Tree represents the capital’s abandonment of sustainability for endless growth and profit. The technological breakthrough that demands the severing of the Tithe is a form of “growth fetish” (Fisher 2009, 18).

The allegory is problematic because the characters, acting within and benefitting from the system, are unaware of the system’s role within ecological collapse. In this narrative, a small group is to blame for the eco-disaster.

In this way, *Calamity’s* decaying tree is a sudden tragedy, not the predictable result of systemic neglect. It is not the endgame of late-stage capitalism, but an aberration created by corrupt individuals.

### 3.1.3 Corruption & Capital

Performers’ characters are openly corrupt: nepotism, sidestepping regulation, and bribery.. “Far from being isolated, contingent problems, these are all the effects of a single systemic cause: Capital.” (Fisher 2009, 77). Social, financial and magical capital all passes through the Ring of Brass. Despite being dominated by capital, each performer finishes by removing themselves from the cycle of oppression in favor of building a new, post-capital existence.

As an example, Patia, heir to generational wealth and magical power, controls information both herself and the city in an effort to maintain order. It is implied she has altered the memory of those around her (Mulligan 2022b). When she remembers her grandfather arguing in favour of the dreamer, not the dream, she abandons her legacy, handing the source of her magical power to a working-class family.

As each character sacrifices something essential, their acts of corruption are cleansed away. Individual failure is blamed, not the capitalist system.

### 3.1.4 Divine Will

When Laerryn destroys the Tree, *Calamity’s* twist is revealed. Her ambition was manipulated by “Betrayal Gods”, vengeful deities who hate humanity. One such god hidden in the tree will starts the apocalypse. The Ring of Brass responds by trying to stave off ecological disaster.

Rather than interrogating the underlying logic that led to the destruction: the exploitation and the unchecked pursuit of innovation, the narrative pivots toward salvation through the mechanisms that caused the collapse. Once a symbol of ecological betrayal and technocratic hubris, Laerryn’s creation becomes the tool of salvation, removing the threat of ecological collapse, despite its obligations to land and people. The issue is not that progress came at the cost of everything, but that the progress wasn’t reached without human error. Laerryn’s creation wasn’t inherently antisocial and detrimental to human society, as much as it was a thwarted success.

This final act is “gestural anti-capitalism”: a critique of the system that never escapes its criticism (Fisher 2009, 13). It is an illusion – signifying collapse and guilt, but placing that guilt

on the individual, reasserting the absence of an alternative. It is not that the magical-industrial complex was flawed, but that it was misused. The utopia of Avalir is still true, as shown in Nydas' dying moments: his "dream was real" (Wilson 2022). *Calamity* is capitalist realism: the only viable future is one where we innovate our way out of catastrophe without addressing its structural causes, hoping innovation alone will be enough to sustain a problematic system.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

*Calamity* appears initially as a successful deconstruction of capitalism. Yet, on closer examination, *Calamity* is another product of capitalist realism. This is not to say *Critical Role* consciously defends the status quo. Even the most imaginative of narrative forms cannot escape the limits of a system that frames freedom in individual, rather than systemic, terms.

How is it that even a medium so open-ended, so reliant on communal imagination and collaborative worldbuilding, still reproduces hierarchies, upholds state structures, and imagines apocalyptic futures more readily than transformative ones? If the scope of possible worlds in a role-playing game is endless, why return to the same political and economic assumptions? Both the cultural positions of its players and the narrative grammar of role-playing games are factors. In creating a system where violence is an integral mechanic (Albom 2021) and enemies are faceless (Warpefelt 2016), the destruction of those adversaries is justified. Without mechanical foundations for reform and discussion, the only conflict resolution is combat. Similarly, a system where the player is encouraged to wander into an enemy's territory, destroy said enemy, then acquire gold and is unlikely to afford criticism of capitalism. Though they may not be powerful forms of protest in-and-of-themselves, it is possible actual plays, be they centered on the apocalypse or not, function as an emerging and potent direction for the broader discourse analysis of role-playing games.

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