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THE CRITICAL ROLE OF NEW MEDIA IN TRANSFORMING GAMERS INTO REMIXERS

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In the spring of 2012, the two of us gathered around a table with five other friends to embark on a strange and compelling adventure together. Our group still gathers regularly and our adventures have become legend, at least in our minds. In fact, of the seven of us, six are still playing and we have added an additional four players to our group. The resurgence of tabletop Role-playing Games (RPGs), and their explosion into new media, which we have participated in and enjoyed, invites us to consider their place in redefining remix culture in the twenty-first century. In this chapter we reify our observations as we:

1. Articulate the nature of RPGs as a site of remix.
2. Articulate the ways that tabletop role-players remix use the tools of the digital humanities. Access to diverse materials through digital technology turns role-playing gamers, *not only by scholars*, but also *by everyday people,* into remixers.
3. Demonstrate contemporary remix through narrative inquiry into the practices of a successful group of online role-playing gamers, broadcast on Twitch as *Critical Role*.

As such, this chapter widens our sense of who engages in remix, who uses the tools of digital humanities for remix, and how such practices are modeled and disseminated in digital environments.

As scholars and optimists, we hold out hope that remix, as modeled by *Critical Role*, will offer us a way to bridge political divisions, to collaborate in policy in the real world in the same way that we collaborate in our fantasy medieval campaigns.

Remixing in the Role-Playing Game in the Pen-and-Paper Era

Tabletop RPGs have long been a site for remixes. Mackay defines RPGs as "an *episodic* and *participatory* story-creation system that includes a set of quantified *rules* that assist a group of *players* and a *gamemaster* in determining how their fictional

characters' spontaneous interactions are resolved."[1] This definition includes everything from *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)* to Live Action role-playing to online role-playing platforms like Roll20, a "virtual tabletop" for geographically remote role-players.

Mackay's definition highlights two dimensions essential for reconceiving role-playing as a remix activity. Role-playing gamers (the designers, players, and Game Master [GM]) have engaged remix on two levels: Remix on the level of *story* and on the level of *rules*.

At the level of story, role-playing games have long been syntheses of different storyworlds. For example, the early *Deities and Demigods*[2] volumes of *Dungeons and Dragons* remixed the worlds of Middle Earth and Melniboné, the mythical pantheons of the Greeks and the Norse gods, and the fictional monstrosities of Cthulhu into a single landscape of imagination.[3] As the *Dungeons and Dragons* game expanded, it engulfed ninjas and shoguns (in *Oriental* Adventures),[4] gothic horror (in *Ravenloft*),[5] and more.

Other games remixed story elements. *Call of Cthulhu* integrated aboriginal mythology alongside Lovecraftian horror.[6] *Pathfinder*, which began as an alternative to *D&D* for medieval fantasy, developed a *Pure Steam* supplement to bring Steampunk into their game.[7]

Player creativity also became a resource for remixes. *Greyhawk*, one of the earliest campaign settings for *Dungeons and Dragons*, was born of player imagination. At tabletops across the country, players create complex backstories, while Dungeon Masters (DMs) are creating complex worlds, which become material for remix.

At the level of rules, players and game masters import rules from other games and "home brew" rules, bringing different rule systems into a remixed whole. Editions of *Dungeons and Dragons* (a relatively light, heroic fantasy game) published after *Call of Cthulhu* (a relatively dark, horrific game) introduced "sanity" rules, borrowing the mechanic from one game into another. What publishers did systematically in a new edition of the game, players and game masters do regularly, on an ad hoc basis.

Efforts to make mixing rules easier have followed. In 1986, Steve Jackson Games published the *Generic Universal role-playing System*, or *GURPS*, which allowed players to mix and match rules for science fiction, fantasy, horror, and more.[8] In 2000, Wizards of the Coast published an open-source game system, the *d20 System*, which allowed designers to meld and merge content, including rules variations, more seamlessly.[9]

Beyond published examples of rules remixing, game masters home brew rules mashups on a regular basis. Game Master (GM)[10] Phoenix Walker has been playing with first edition *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*, the basis for one of our local campaigns, for decades.[11] The venerability of this system (published in 1978) is a benefit and a liability. A familiarity with the system and with the adventure we are playing gives her the knowledge to lean on decades of accrued player experience—knowing where every door and path leads and what every player whim and random die roll will provoke. However, the original, hard copy materials for playing first edition *AD&D* are prohibitively expensive.[12] Working with a system of long-standing rules has produced continuity of play, with minimal need to modify for new editions. Modification takes place to accommodate varying levels of player experience, playing style, and party size, and a seasoned GM like Walker makes changes accordingly.

Differentiating the remix of rules from the remix of the theme is difficult and some players make remixing *both* their objectives. Jason Ford is a GM steeped in pen-and-paper gaming. Beginning his gaming in the 1980s with first edition *D&D*, Ford

progressed his GM experience almost immediately, expanding into other RPG systems like *GURPS*, *Paranoia*, *Call of Cthulhu*, and *Runequest*.[13] Ford home brews a game experience called "Dimension Stew," a multiverse gaming experience in the San Francisco Bay Area. Each player and their character was associated with a different gaming system/universe, and the game moved through each system in turn, the module in a particular gamer's universe being run by that gamer while their PC was piloted by another player as they GM'd that phase of the game. The central feature of the campaign, then, was a remix of rules and story alike.

For forty years, in the pre-digital era of role-playing games, the primary tools of the remixer included the imagination, the rule books, and possibly the Trapper Keeper and spiral-bound notebooks, of the gamer. In the imagination, the Hobbits of Middle Earth could wander the great city of Lankhmar, fighting cultists who worship the deities of R'lyeh. Whether in published, for-profit role-playing game systems and supplements or in home-brewed work of the game-master, tabletop role-playing gamers are constantly remixing rules to the games they play to suit their needs.[14] Metaphorically, the rules of a TTRPG serve as the percussion and bass, the rhythm of a song, while the settings, characters, and themes serve as the melody. These mashups, produced in a largely pre-digital era, serve as what Navas calls a "selective remix," which functions by adding or subtracting material from an original text.[15]

Tabletop Role-Playing in the Twenty-first Century: Remixing from the Perspective of Digital Humanities

Role-playing in the twenty-first century is no longer confined to the Trapper Keeper, the bookshelf, and the gaming table.

Online vendors like *DriveThruRPG* make sourcebooks available anywhere, anytime of day, in digital formats—role-playing games are now just as accessible in towns of 500 as towns of 5 million.[16] The range of texts is unimaginable to the tabletop role-player of the 1980s. As just one example: *Boy Problems* is a heist-style RPG inspired by the songs of Canadian pop singer Carly Rae Jepsen. *Boy Problems* was followed by *Black Heart*, the second release in the Carly Rae Jepsen RPG trilogy, this time with a cultist theme.[17] When role-playing games were primarily a printed mass medium, mashups like *Boy Problems* would have been unimaginable. Digital distribution has allowed projects like the *Boy Problems* series to find their audience.

Systems like "Dimension Stew" are now given much broader borders by available digital resources. GMs like Jason Ford still operate in the very traditional milieu of the pen-and-paper RPG with hand-drawn battle maps. Nonetheless, he draws heavily on digital resources from the wilds of the Internet. Ford currently runs a game based on the Dark Horse Comics *Hellboy*. Set in the 1980s, this gameverse is reliant on the GM's (and players') detailed knowledge of the history and technology of that era. In the gameplay, Ford explains: "I homebrew some of the game mechanics…well, I mix game mechanics from the *GURPS* system and the *Call of Cthulhu* percentile dice for skills." The story details he gleans from various sources, from historical (lost aircraft in the Bermuda Triangle) to popular culture (incidents "reported" in the *Weekly World News* of the era).

Digital distribution has made niche materials available nearly worldwide. Another GM, Wulf Gar runs a game based in the Savage Worlds system *Deadlands*—a weird West meets steampunk setting in the 1800s. While hard copies of manuals and modules exist

for *Deadlands*, the greatest volume of material exists in digital formats. Wulf Gar states that this proliferation of content has been "quite a boon." He explains,

> I have an extraordinary number of pdfs [most of which we] will probably never play, not because I don't want to give them to you or GM them, but simply because there's so MANY. I read game settings just like reading a book—there are some good and some bad [obtained online from many sources], and the breadth of knowledge, the width of knowledge is tremendous and I think it enhances my creativity. Because it's not just Gygax's opinion on how *D&D* should go, or it's not Shane Hensley's opinion on how *Deadlands* should go. I've now read background information about the Maze [a key location for *Deadlands* based on an alternative universe, post-cataclysmic Pacific Coast] from numerous authors now, one person fills in the gaps that another person left, and so I think it's a tremendous boon.[18]

Gar's GMing style, therefore, draws heavily from this available online content, and his remixing of such content is less a necessity and more an inevitability.

Walker discusses a disadvantage to the bounty of content, a phenomenon she calls "DM freeze"—being overwhelmed by the options. This is "one of the reasons I am choosing to run classic first edition [*D&D*] with limited books—the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, the *Monsters Manual*, and the *Player's* [*Handbook*] with the Greyhawk reference book, and that's it. Because [I have] over 200 books in second edition and it's just too much."[19] One solution to the cost for old-school, hard copy RPGs like first edition *Dungeons & Dragons* is digital facsimiles. She explains,

> "If I was to go buy an original paper module for *The Temple of Elemental Evil* [the focus of the current at-home campaign she runs], you're looking at $80-$150 depending on the quality, so that's cost-prohibitive for some people. So you go to [drivethrurpg.com] and download them, and they ARE the originals, I mean you can still see some of the coffee stains on some of them."[20]

The digital and the thrift store have converged.

Beyond the availability of sourcebooks, digital interfaces have made it easier for gamers to find each other and to play together. Platforms like *Roll20* (with more than 1.6 million users) allow gamers to role-play together from different locations, convening at an online tabletop. Games no longer need a critical mass of players within driving radius, and gaming groups do not need to dissolve when players move away. All three of our interviewed, seasoned DMs have had experience with this type of digital platform TTRPG. These innovations allow widespread dissemination of role-playing.[21] Observing and considering such developments are a step toward understanding contemporary role-playing within the digital humanities.

Digital technologies have changed the ways that players role-play. Wassink's analysis makes clear that social media socializes viewers who are geographically dispersed; our claims go deeper than that. In enabling new ways of "making," digital technologies have made remix a more ubiquitous and often deeply transformative act among tabletop role-playing gamers. The most significant social media influence on role-playing, *Critical Role*, has shaped the norms, behaviors, and the identities of players of TTRPGs, creating a culture of regenerative remix.

The force that *Critical Role* exerts extends across multiple platforms: From Twitch and YouTube channels, through Reddit, Facebook, Discord and Twitter, and into the unregulated, untamed spaces of the Internet, like the proliferation of fan art on Tumblr and the *Archive of our Own* fan fiction site.[22] This web of social media teaches the *norms* of gaming, the *values* typical of players, and the *practices* that cultivate those norms and values in a gamer's identity as regenerative remixers, empowered to become makers by access to digital tools.[23]

The Transmedia Phenomenon of Critical Role

Critical Role models the traditional habits of role-playing, including collaborative world-building, character development, and teamwork within the world of imagination. *Critical Role* is transformative, as well—it advances new practice, cultivating new norms and values. *Critical Role* models GMs in the construction of fictional worlds using remix and likewise models players in the creation of their own characters also through remix.

Critical Role (the web series) is created by Critical Role Productions LLC (the production company of professional voice actors). *Critical Role* was not the first major TTRPG conducted over social media[24] when it debuted via Twitch.tv on March 12, 2015. Matthew Mercer is the GM, with professional voice actors as the players. *Critical Role* is a colossus: As of 2020, the *Critical Role* Twitch channel had over 460,000 subscribers, while the YouTube channel had over 800,000 subscribers and more than 5 million views—the first episode of Campaign One has 12.6 million views as of March 2020.

"Campaign One—Vox Machina" ran for 115 episodes. In 2018, "Campaign Two—The Mighty Nein" began, still ongoing, having streamed its 97th episode in front of a sold-out, live theater audience of over 3800 at C2E2 in Chicago on February 27, 2020. A number of one-shots and live performances have aired, as well.

In mapping the relationship between remix studies and the digital humanities, we want to take the study of *Critical Role* further than the study of participatory culture (e.g., in Jenkins' study of fandom[25]) has gone. To do so, we divide the *Critical Role* output into two types—regressive remixes, typified by *Critical Role* one-shot episodes, and regenerative remixes, typified by their campaigns and the collaborative world-building that has developed around those campaigns.

One-Shots as Regressive Remixes

Perhaps more obviously, the one-shot episodes of *Critical Role* use pastiche, parody, and other forms of obvious remix in what Navas calls a regressive mashup: "common in music… Popular mashups in this category often juxtapose songs by pop acts like Christina Aguilera with the Strokes, or Madonna and the Sex Pistols."[26] The creators of *Critical Role* have mashed-up *Harry Potter* with the *Breakfast Club* and *Peter Pan* with the *Wizard of Oz*, and the results are entertaining, but they live and die within a single evening.

For example: "*Critical Role* and the Club of Misfits" blend parody of *Harry Potter* (as the scenario is set at "Shmogwarts") and parody of John Hughes movies (especially *The Breakfast Club*). Indeed, the scenario ends with Brian's essay, addressed to Professor Furbin, about who they are, stating that they are "a brain, an athlete, a honey-badger, a princess, and a criminal," in homage to the final scenes of the movie. One of the players in "*Critical Role* and the Club of Misfits" acknowledges that their primary source of

knowledge about *The Breakfast Club* was Wikipedia, instead of the film itself—a small recognition of the power of the digital in twenty-first-century remix culture. Access to the original text is not necessary to participate in a remix of it.

Remix happens within and outside the public domain: "Once Upon a Fairytale Cruise" placed the Scarecrow, the Hatter, Wendy Darling, Peter Pan, the Queen of Hearts, and Goldilocks aboard the Storybook Love Singles Cruise on the SS Public Domain. Meanwhile, the *Cinderbrush High* one-shot was based on the *Monsterhearts* and *Monsterhearts 2* RPG created by Avery Alder (a "Queer anarcho-communist game designer. Ready to imagine the worlds we need") and mashed together the works of an independent game designer.

These one-off adventures are remixes as parody and pastiche, typified by "the transposition of… sampled materials into a new relation."[27] However, these episodes are least interesting in the context of digital humanities because of their techniques and their rhetorical effect upon the viewer.

At the level of *technique*, the one-shots are remixes the way that *Sherlock Holmes in the 22nd Century* was a remix of Sherlock Holmes stories and pulpy animated science fiction, or the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* was a remix of several popular genres of movies and comics. This is a form of remix that predates the digital technologies of the twenty-first century that made richer, more complex remixes possible.

At the level of *effect*, the *Critical Role* one-shots are subject to Pigott's argument that some forms of remix function to "return the individual to comforting ground."[28] Navas explains, using Adorno's criticism of regressive listening: "As Adorno would argue, [these remixes] support the state of regression that gives people false comfort."[29] These *Critical Role* one-shots are unchallenging, uncomplicated. They achieve positive fan response because parts of our brain light up when we see echoes of favorite childhood media, but they do little more than that.

The one-shots are, as remixes, creative dead ends, or as Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear call them, "infertile hybrids." In "Remix: The Art and Craft of Endless Hybridization," Knobel and Lankshear compare remixing to the process of biological hybridization, noting that some hybrid plants and vegetables are rendered infertile in the process of hybridization, while others continue to produce seeds. Nowhere was the infertile hybrid of regressive remix more visible than in the *Feast of Legends* one-shot.

Critical Role received fees from Wendy's to play an role-playing game in which players enter the realm of "Queen Wendy, first of her name, breaker of fast food chains, defender of all things fresh, never frozen." According to the rules, available online as a PDF: "'The Clapback Queen' has been the ruler of Freshtovia since 1969, and defends the realm from the treacherous evils of those who practice the dark art of frozen beef." At one level, Freshtovia, as a campaign setting, is no different from integrating Lankhmar or Middle Earth into role-playing, with tongue firmly planted in cheek. The rules blend Wendy's intellectual property with the traditional fantasies of tabletop role-playing games. For example, the rules include a list of available armors, including "fresh baked bun" and "clamshell packaging." The game itself is hard to assess, critically—someone unfamiliar with tabletop role-playing games would probably find the rule book inadequate to teach them how to play an role-playing game. *Feast of Legends* is not a game for new gamers; it is a game designed to make current players laugh (or groan).

The session is hilarious; *Critical Role* is staffed by professional actors who make the most of any material. But neither the game itself nor the quality of the *Critical Role* performance was really at issue; it was the contact point between *Critical Role* as the

domain of escapist, apolitical fandom, and Wendy's as a corporation implicated in politics. Some passionate *Critical Role* viewers could not find a way to make sense of this combination of worlds.

Accepting financial support from Wendy's was read among some fans as a tacit acceptance of political positions held by Wendy's. Notably, Wendy's refused to be a cosignatory of the Fair Food Program, which asks suppliers to acknowledge that laborers have the right to shade and water in the fields, to work free from sexual harassment and more. Additionally, Wendy's ownership (through a hedge fund, Trian Partners, run by Trump donor Nelson Peltz) has significant connection to Donald J. Trump. According to Truthout.org: "Peltz personally gave $85,800 to Donald Trump in 2016 and 2017. This included three donations of $25,000 each to the joint fundraising committee Trump Victory and four donations of $2,700 each to the Trump campaign."[30] To bring *Critical Role* into contact with Wendy's was not just bringing professional voice actors into Freshtovia; a whole array of political issues were brought into the mix at the same time.

The *Critical Role* staff scrubbed nearly all evidence of the video from their official feeds and records. The community was significantly jarred by the mashup, not of D&D and fast food, but escapism and politics. The *Feast of Legends* controversy reminded both the creators and the viewers of *Critical Role* of the power and the limits of remix to make sense of the world.

If the most *Critical Role* aspired to were simple fantasies like "Once Upon a Fairytale Cruise," the *Critical Role* project would be a footnote to the series of video RPG shows like *I Hit it with my Axe*. If they were producing only pastiche, only regressive remixes that are infertile as creations, *Critical Role* would not be worth our time and effort. But in their campaigns, the *Critical Role* project creates something more valuable.

Campaigns as Regenerative Remixes

In its multiyear campaigns, *Critical Role* also exemplifies what Navas calls "regenerative remix." Navas defines a regenerative remix as "a recombination of content and form that opens the space for Remix to become a specific discourse intimately linked with new media culture. The Regenerative Remix can only take place when constant change is implemented as an elemental part of communication, while also creating archives."[31] Navas imagined regenerative remix to be the product of technology, where algorithms bring data together (one of his examples are RSS readers, which create a kind of remix every time the user logs in). Regenerative remixes are built upon digital archives; in that sense, regenerative remixes are a signature phenomenon of the digital humanities, which grounds the production of knowledge in digital tools that utilize digital archives.

There is something powerful about differentiating remixes generated by algorithms from remixes generated by the human hand. Navas has also discussed the processes of human speech as a form of regenerative remix (in "Regenerative Culture"). We build speech from phonemes, from a common storehouse of words, in something like the regenerative process that Navas identifies as the next stage in remix culture. In the ways that Navas saw speech as analogous to, and so informative of, regenerative remix, we want to restore the human; we assert that digital media create opportunities for regenerative remix that is created by role-players and fans of *Critical Role*.

Critical Role embodies the constant change (necessary in a regenerative remix) through the evolution over the campaign and across platforms. Because its sessions are stored (and searchable) on their YouTube channel and on their own website, *Critical*

Role embodies the construction of an archive necessary for regenerative remix, with supplemental archival materials (for example, transcripts, analytical statistics of gameplay, and more) being provided by fans and feeding further, regenerative remixes.

We view each campaign as a megamix, as Navas describes it, designed to "present a musical composition riding on a uniting groove"[32]—often pulling together beats, melodies, and sounds from multiple songs and sources. These multiple sources are "sequenced to create what is in essence an extended collage: an electronic medley."[33] The campaign (a series of narratively interconnected gaming sessions over weeks, months, or years) gives players a chance to create such a collage from their own imagination and from the wealth of cultural and gaming information available online through the "logic of the database." Navas describes the power of the database in constructing fictional worlds as well as our shared reality: "the archive becomes the field of knowledge to be accessed; it is the archeological ground to be explored by sophisticated researchers and lay-people alike."[34] Mercer, as Game Master, consults the archive of fantasy and mythology, of literature and film, of anime and manga, too, to create the world of *Critical Role*; his players draw similarly deep to construct their own characters.

We will discuss each *Critical Role* campaign in turn, outlining the narrative of the campaign, the work Mercer does as Game Master to craft a remix, the work his players do to craft a remix in their responses. As those three, significant forces act at the gaming table, a regenerative remix is created, featuring elements that are "constantly updated, meaning that they are designed to change according to data flow."[35] We will end with an acknowledgment of the many participants who utilize the archive created by *Critical Role* for their own remixes, via fan fiction and other creations.

Campaign One—Vox Machina as Remix

Game masters (like Mercer) use what Neal Baker calls secondary world infrastructures to bring their worlds to life: Maps, timelines, genealogies, charts, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other related materials.[36] Mercer invented Exandria as a setting, leaning heavily on historical, geographical, and geopolitical resources to craft a believable world. For example, Mercer integrated facets of medieval European history with the familiar worlds of *Dungeons & Dragons* fantasy, setting the Elven city of Syngorn (with its defensive ability to shift from the material plane into the Feywild) on the same continent with the largely human cities of Western (similar to a midsized medieval city like York) and Emon (the capital city of the continent of Tal'Dorei and parallel to a medieval Prague, complete with castle).

The first story arc of the campaign takes the players into the Underdark, beneath the busy mines of the Dwarven city of Kraghammer, the industry-and-economy-fixated local government of which ignores the foment of potential disaster literally under their feet.[37] The medieval reference might be the Peasants' Revolt against an economically clueless Richard II in the London of 1381. A wearyingly accurate contemporary parallel exists in the persistent move toward industrial deregulation in the face of obvious global climate change. In these frames, Mercer is engaging remix as allegory.[38]

The second story arc involves the personal history of one of the party members, Percival Fredrickstein von Mussel Klossowski de Rolo III of Whitestone (Percy), whose surprise encounter with the villainous Briarwoods leads to a quest of personal revenge and the eventual liberation of Whitestone. Were Sylas and Delilah Briarwood not, respectively, vampire and sorceress, their ruthless assassination of the de Rolos and

subsequent subjugation of the country would closely parallel Lord and Lady Macbeth. The ultimate adversary of the campaign and the focus of the final story arc is an even deeper pull from *D&D* lore, the third and fifth edition villain built up from two first edition artifacts, the Hand of Vecna and Eye of Vecna.[39] That villain planned to ascend to godhood, plunging the entire gameverse into disaster of apocalyptic proportions.

The skills at acting and improvisation of the entire company make *Critical Role* as a whole possible. Taliesin Jaffe's fascination with and knowledge of historical firearms fueled his creation of Percy (a steampunk-style tinker) and the resulting creation of the Gunslinger class, now a formally published part of the *Dungeons & Dragons* rulesets. Liam O'Brien's classical stage training informed the tragic subtext of Vax'ildan's journey toward the Raven Queen.[40] Sam Riegel's musical theater and Acapella background enabled the bardic inspirations of Scanlan Shorthalt.[41] Each of these is a defining element of the collaboratively generated remix that was Campaign One. Joe Manganiello reprised his player character from another streaming game DM'd by Matthew Mercer (remixing beats from one campaign to another). This moment created an open ending to the campaign that provides an opportunity for future players (and fan fiction writers) to remix Manganiello's moment into the backstory of their own heroes' quests.[42]

The narrative of the campaign begins with the remixing efforts of the game master, the players bring their own knowledge into the regenerative remix of the campaign, which grows and transforms in unexpected ways (especially as the guest players participate), and which leave digital traces for further fan creativity in more unexpected, joyful, regenerative remixes.

Campaign Two—The Mighty Nein as Remix

In creating the backdrop for this second campaign, Mercer determined that there would be minimal-if-any crossover from the previous campaign. Beginning twenty years after the end of the previous campaign, this game also takes place on a completely different continent—Wildemount.[43]

The central preoccupation of the world surrounding the characters is an open war between the Dwendalian Empire and the Kryn Dynasty of Xhorhas. The Xhorhasian culture is a departure and significant extension of *D&D* lore surrounding drow, or dark elves. In early editions of *D&D*, drow were almost invariably evil, subterranean worshippers of the evil spider god Lolth.[44] In Mercer's gameverse, Xhorhasian drow religion surrounds the physical manifestation of light itself, the Luxon, and the pursuit of immortality. Their leader, the Bright Queen Leylas Kryn, has lived thousands of years over many lifetimes due to the cyclical nature of Xhorhasian immortality.[45] The Dwendalian Empire looks very much like the Holy Roman Empire or the empire of Charlemagne in medieval European history, complete with religious suppression and repression. The empire is helmed by a tyrannical Emperor who may or may not be the puppet of a group of powerful, Illuminati-reminiscent mages called the Cerberus Assembly.[46]

Real-world events disrupted game elements. Ashley Johnson, whose work on NBC television drama *Blindspot* took her away from the game, was leaving again. Laura Bailey and Travis Willingham, who had already been in discussions with the DM about family leave, had their baby arrive early. Mercer wrote a kidnapping by traffickers into the story to explain the sudden absence of Yasha, Jester, and Fjord, and the party's subsequent recruitment of guest player characters, notably Ashly Burch's dwarf fighter Keg and Sumalee Montano's firbolg druid Nila. During a failed rescue attempt, one of the other

player characters, Mollymauk Tealeaf, was killed.[47] The urgency and desperation of the party to rescue their teammates parallels another Tolkien touchstone, the kidnapping of two hobbits by orcs and the subsequent chase to Isengard.[48] At the end of episode 30, "The Journey Home," the party is reunited.

Later episodes are remixed from pop cultural piracy icons like the luck-driven incompetence of Captain Jack Sparrow in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series and a Cthulhu-like entity, Uk'otoa, and its allies. The party spent several sessions exploring jungle temples and uncovering powerful artifacts and also fleeing from the consequences of their findings in similar fashion to *Indiana Jones*.[49] Remix in Mercer's campaign, most often the invocation of narrative structures that are allegorical with other narratives, provides a comfortable structure, a familiar structure, against which rich character development is possible.

The contributions of the regular cast/players to Campaign Two differ somewhat from Campaign One, which reflects the very different characters they have created. Taliesin Jaffe's experience with and knowledge of carnival and Renaissance Festival culture heavily informs the character of Mollymauk Tealeaf and the circus in which the opening conflicts of the campaign take place. The found-family relationships among the circus folk model the group dynamics that the newly fledged Mighty Nein began to emulate and improve to the extent that this became a subtheme for the entire campaign, one brought in a new and regenerative way, unanticipated by Mercer.

Critical Role is deeply collaborative, perhaps even more so than most television or film productions because it is unscripted and improvised. It would be tempting to call the remix of the campaigns a product of Mercer's architecture, as a game master—it would be tempting to call Mercer the remixer. But the allegorical structures infused into his game world and game narrative could, in the wrong hands, be as infertile a remix as the one-shots. Instead, each campaign is the product of a polyphony of creators, integrating a multiplicity of voices, and so produces a regenerative remix. The second layer of creativity arises when we consider the fan culture.

Regenerative Remix and the Moment of the Mollymauk[50]

The *Critical Role* fan base has been energetic as a creative force within remix culture, using multiple databases, accessing multiple archives of information about the world of their favorite podcast. In this way, *Critical Role* fans go further than some fan cultures. Studies of fandom owe an immense debt to the work of Henry Jenkins, who built an initial model for "participatory culture" among fans of popular culture in *Textual Poachers*.[51] He followed that work through the study of media across platforms: Convergence culture. To the extent that the *Critical Role* community advances across books, websites, video platforms, and fan fiction and art, *Critical Role* exemplifies *Convergence Culture*.[52] The diversity of creative works by fans, including remix works, within a convergent media property is explored, finally, in *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*.[53] We are carrying that work forward here, as we look at the convergent media culture and remixed creativity among the Critters.

Among these are the *Critical Role Wiki*, *CritRoleStats*, *Critical Role Transcript*, and *Critical Role Translate*.[54] Fans are not limited to living inside the world expressly created in the podcast.

In their own creations, and at the direct invitation of Mercer and the cast, fans expand on the universe of *Critical Role* in any way that seems good to them. One particularly fruitful direction for this expansion is in the fan fiction written around the relationships between

Figure 22.1 Twitter feed screenshot: Morgan Luthi, *Nott a Locksmith*, digital art, July 28, 2018. (Posted by the artist to https://twitter.com/morganluthi/status/1023338326764400640?s=11)

the characters, both canonical and noncanonical. "Shipping" or fan discussion around perceived romantic relationships among the characters provides a popular outlet of speculation for fans, cast, and crew alike.[55] All of the cast members have been vocal about their support for shippers and have invited fans to speculate freely beyond the canonical reality of the live-streamed game. Their attitude embraces the creativity of fans and the utility of the characters they have created to inspire story building outside the game. One active platform for fan fiction is the aforementioned *Archive of Our Own* (AO3).[56] Fans are remixing the campaigns and the characters and plots within them, remixing the megamix.

Fans are also remixing *Critical Role* content with their favorite elements of popular culture. Morgan Luthi's art (Figure 22.1) is one exemplar of such creativity.

The character pictured here is Nott the Brave. She and Jester, another C2 player character, often partner with ineffectual and frequently hilarious results as "Nott the Best Detective Agency." In remixing *AD&D* fantasy, film noir era private eye imagery, and Scooby-Doo title card animation style, Luthi brings together three very inside jokes (and a direct quote from the livestream Twitch chat for episode 2×28 "Within the Nest") in one image.

The creative power of fan remix has been studied for decades; in the case of *Critical Role*, the complex archive created for the show makes near-infinite variations of remix possible. The creators encourage it. In one of the pivotal narrative moments of The Mighty Nein campaign, the sudden, unexpected, and brutal death of a player character (Mollymauk) rocked the players and the fandom.[57] In the *Talks Machina* after show for that episode, Mercer, Ashley Burch, and Taliesin Jaffe took questions from the fans and made an effort to guide the response in a positive and creative way. Jaffe offered: "Other people can put Mollymauk in their games—he can do all sorts of crazy things." Looking directly at the camera, he continued: "Please, please do that. You have my permission. Please."[58] Mercer agreed,

> Any of you folks playing any Wildemount campaigns, or planning to go there, please, by all means, continue that thread as you see fit. You know, that's part of our big thing with playing this game and releasing the last campaign guide, and helping present this information to the community. As much as it's our game, we

> want it to be a gift and an invitation to others to come play in that space, and invite [the fans/viewers/gamers] to take elements of the story and run with it.[59]

For many novice and seasoned gamers and GMs alike, *Critical Role's* invitation to participate in regenerative remix represents a golden opportunity to do just that.

Conclusion

Our goal has been to expand the definition of regenerative remix, in this document, to include the forms of remix that are 1) enabled by digital distribution and database access to impossible volumes of information, text, visual, and audio materials, but 2) produced by a genuine and powerful openness to collaboration with others. Algorithmically generated regenerative remixes are powerful and pervasive in our culture, but in an era that the World Health Organization has characterized as suffering from "infodemic," algorithms are as likely to produce narrower and narrower pictures of the world. Our Twitter feeds, Facebook feeds, and RSS readers, shaped to our interests and narrowed to the sources that will guarantee that we log in again to experience their remix (and their advertising), are as likely to circulate comfortable, affirming disinformation as they are likely to open us up to new perspectives from people unlike ourselves.

We are reopening consideration of regenerative remix to include the vast networks of collaboration exemplified by the interactions between game master and players at the role-playing game table. We are reopening consideration of regenerative remix to include the work that the digital archive created by game master and players online makes possible at other tables. We are reopening consideration of regenerative remix to include the work that the digital archive makes possible among fan fiction writers and fan artists. There is a radical openness in the *Critical Role* project that cultivates a spirit of collaboration, and an ethical responsibility, that we want to wed to the creative powers of the regenerative remix.

As scholars and optimists, we hold out hope that regenerative remix theory will offer us a way to bridge divisions and to collaborate in the real world in the same way that we collaborate in our fantasy medieval campaigns—with the genuine openness to the power and contribution of others, in a way that promises open and ethical participation in our shared, regenerative forms of culture.

Notes

1 D. Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (London: MacFarland, 2001), 4.
2 James M. Ward, Robert J. Kuntz, Lawrence Schick, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Deities & Demigods Cyclopedia* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1980).
3 Those early editions also taught creators the complications of intellectual property law, as traced by David Hartlage in the DMDavid Blog.
4 Gary Gygax, David Cook, Francois Marcela-Froideval, *Oriental Adventures*.
5 Tracy Hickman, Laura Hickman, *Ravenloft*.
6 *Terror Australis* by Penelope Love; Mark Morrison; Lynn Willis; Larry DiTillio; Sandy Petersen. For scholarly discussion of *Co*C, see Hite, Kenneth. 2007 "Narrative Structure and Creative Tension in Call of Cthulhu."
7 Pathfinder: Pure Steam Campaign Setting by ICOSA Entertainment.
8 Among the earliest Steve Jackson GURPS projects were GURPS Fantasy: Fantasy World and Magic Rules for the Generic Universal role-playing System by Steve Jackson; *GURPS Japan: Role-Playing in the*

World of the Shogunate by Lee Gold; *GURPS Swashbucklers: Role-Playing in the World of Pirates and Musketeers* by Steffan O'Sullivan, Michael Hurst, Sharleen Lambard, and other supplements for Conan, Witch World (based on Andre Norton's Witch World books), Robin Hood, and others.

9 Wizards of the Coast made the basic *D&D* rules freely available to the general public, called *d20*. The *d20* System is published under an open gaming license that allows anyone to use, distribute, or change these rules for private and commercial use. For a critical discussion, see Dormans, Joris. "On the Role of the Die: A Brief Ludologic Study of Pen-and-Paper Role-Playing Games and Their Rules."

10 Game Master is the generic term for the central storyteller in a role-playing game; in *D&D*, the GM is referred to as a Dungeon Master, or DM.

11 Walker credits her start in gaming with a direct convention encounter with the great Gary Gygax himself. She has GM'd professionally and extensively at gaming conventions, using a wide array of RPG systems, in addition to her decades of recreational experience. She currently runs a first edition *Advanced D&D* campaign for ten players in Duluth, Minnesota.

12 One pre-owned, 1978 first edition *Player's Handbook* was offered on eBay recently for $299.99, before shipping fees. We will discuss solutions to this barrier later in the chapter.

13 Ford's association with *Runequest* creator Steve Perrin resulted in Perrin's running his own game for a local Duluth, Minnesota, gaming convention "Berserkon" in 2014.

14 A strangely apt detail in the rhetoric of tabletop gaming is the aspect of "rules-as-written" or RAW—a gaming methodology often reserved for competition or convention gameplay, when a game consists of a party of players unused to each other or to their erstwhile GM. This approach to gaming contrasts strongly with a long-term game campaign where the players participate regularly and over a long period of time, and in which the GM is more at liberty (and is expected) to adapt or improvise "home-brewed" encounters, game mechanics, and details.

15 Eduardo Navas, *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling* (Birkhäuser: Amber Verlag, 2014), 76.

16 For a critical discussion of the widespread availability of digital tabletop role-playing game materials from the perspective of a library, see Sich, Dan. "Dungeons and downloads: collecting tabletop fantasy role-playing games in the age of downloadable PDFs." *Collection Building* (2012) Vol. 31 No. 2, pp. 60–65. https://doi.org/10.1108/01604951211229854.

17 See Colin Cummings, *Boy Problems* (2019) and *Black Heart* (2019), available at https://boyproblems.ca/boyproblems.

18 Wulf Gar (active Duluth, Minnesota, game master), in discussion with the author, February 2020.

19 Walker also talks about the difficulty of working with, or DMing for, some players who come to a convention game armed with the minutiae of every possibility for their specific character class and that for the sake of players who come for the fun of the game, it is necessary to put limitations on this behavior.

20 This is reminiscent of digital facsimile medieval manuscripts consulted in bygone projects of a strangely parallel kind.

21 Premeet Sidhu and Marcus Carter measure this new dissemination of tabletop RPG culture in "The Critical Role of YouTube and Twitch in *D&D*'s Resurgence" (*Proceedings of the DiGRA [Digital Games Research Association] Australia 2020*, Queensland University of Technology). Sidhu and Carter noted that "17 of our 20 participants mentioned the impact of various new media platforms on their play of *D&D*..." One participant iterated that *D&D* was "being swept up in this greater cultural trend of things becoming more accessible" through new media.

22 A simple search for "Critical Role (Web Series)" in the Archive of Our Own site yields 14,563 individual stories (some of standard novel length or longer) as of July 22, 2020.

23 They also help to facilitate this through mini web series like *Pub Draw*, in which professional comics artist Babs Tarr coaches prospective fan artists in use of digital artists' resources and techniques to produce their own artistic content not only about the show but also about their own characters and creations.

24 Perttu Vedenoja traces earlier shows like *I Hit it with my Axe* through *Tabletop* on the Geek and Sundry network.

25 For example, in *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

26 Eduardo Navas, *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling* (Birkhäuser: Amber Verlag, 2014), 93.

27 Mark Nunes, "Parody," *Keywords in Remix Studies*, edited by Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, Xtine Burrough (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 93.

28 Michael Pigott, *Joseph Cornell versus Cinema* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 37.

29 Eduardo Navas, *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling* (Birkhäuser: Amber Verlag, 2014), 96.

30 Derek Seidman, "Wendy's Owner Gives Big to Trump While Refusing Farmworkers' Demands," Truthout, April 4, 2019: https://truthout.org/articles/wendys-owner-gives-big-to-trump-while-refusing-farmworkers-demands/, accessed June 19, 2020.
31 Eduardo Navas, "Regressive and Reflexive Mashups in Sampling Culture," In *Mashup Cultures*, edited by Stefan Sonvilla-Weiss (Vienna: Springer, 2010), 157–177.
32 Navas, *Remix Theory*, 95.
33 Navas, *Remix Theory*, 94–95.
34 Navas, "Regressive and Reflexive," 173.
35 Navas, "Regressive and Reflexive," 162.
36 Neal Baker, "Secondary World Infrastructures and Tabletop Fantasy Role-Playing Games." *Revisiting Imaginary Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
37 It is very difficult not to reference the internationally inadequate response to COVID-19 in this context, although that parallel did not exist when the campaign started.
38 This reflects the pattern described in Navas' discussion of "Allegory in Remix." *Remix Theory*, 66–67.
39 Gary Gygax and Brian Blume, *Dungeons & Dragons Supplement III: Eldritch Wizardry, Ancient and Powerful Magic* (New York: TSR Games, 1976).
40 The intermingling of personal grief and grief in-narrative is recorded in Daniel Mazzacane, "How *Critical Role* Uses Role Play to Explore the Burden of Grief."
41 Courtney Kraft "Critical Role's Sam Riegel."
42 In the new campaign guide, there is an indirect reference to this situation and the unresolved issue of Vecna's remains in a brief description of one of the cults of Wildemount called "The Remnants." Mercer, *Explorers Guide to Wildemount*, 57.
43 There is an expansion volume for fifth edition *D&D* based on Mercer's setting. The *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount* contains over 300 pages of content, including geopolitical features of the continent, the pantheon and how religions function and clash across the region, maps, details on the aforementioned Vestiges of Divergence, and three subclasses of magic user based on Mercer's own invented class of magic—Dunamancy.
44 Drow were also, from their first appearance in print in 1977, described as dark-skinned humanoids. The persistent association of drow with monstrous or malevolent intent has been one of the more problematic reflections of racist bias in the game. Mercer's take on this culture is part of a larger shift in D&D to course correct these portrayals and representations of difference. See *The Drow of the Underdark* by Ed Greenwood.
45 This extensive life span, as the players learn in-game, is more similar to reincarnation and involves varied physicalities, gender identities, and sexualities. The Xhorhasian military leader and the Empress, for example, are both female in their current lifetimes and have been life partners for many centuries.
46 The ominous nature of the name is entirely intentional.
47 This was a pivotal moment in the evolution of all of the characters and of the party as a whole. It also serves as a nexus point for fan investment in the story. See later in this chapter.
48 Tolkein's story moment of the loss of Boromir trying to prevent the abduction and the emotional fracturing of the party survivors is also mirrored in this instant of phase two as Beau, Nott, and Caleb steel themselves against the loss of Molly in order to function through the rescue of the others.
49 Mercer drops in several direct callbacks to the *Indiana Jones* movies, *The Goonies*, and the *Mummy* series.
50 Long may he reign—a paraphrase from the character himself that has become a touchstone for the fandom at large.
51 *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture. Studies in Culture and Communication* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
52 *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
53 *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
54 These resources are at https://criticalrole.fandom.com/wiki/Critical_Role_Wiki, https://www.critrolestats.com/, https://crtranscript.tumblr.com/transcripts, and https://crtranslate.tumblr.com/, respectively. It is important to note the emphasis on improved accessibility (beyond the joy of obsessive fandom) with which the fan community themselves undertook both the transcription and translation projects. An additional resource that will prove invaluable to further scholarly work on the content of the show is the searchable database version of the transcripts built by Stuart Langridge at https://kryogenix.org/crsearch.
55 The term "shipping" has long been an integral part of fandom shorthand, far before the advent of Critical Role, being a cornerstone of fan fiction in every online fan community and going back into the pre-Internet days of print media fanzines. Works based on this concept can be found in the homage and

pastiche literature of Trekkies and, still earlier, Sherlockians (the most popular of these "ships" is the one known simply as "Johnlock").

56 See note 22. It is worth noting that the numbers for the site have ballooned even more rapidly since the COVID-19 lockdown. Despite the livestream of *Critical Role* being on an extended hiatus from March 17 to July 2, 2020, the site went from 12,472 *Critical Role* entries on March 1 to 14,575 on July 23.

57 Jaffe's character, Mollymauk Tealeaf, had become for many fans the representation of Queer in the show, and losing him after over 7 months of weekly games (January 11–July 12, 2018) hit particularly hard.

58 The vivid and varied afterlife of Mollymauk Tealeaf has embodied Jaffe's good wishes for the character. Two of the most amazing pieces of fan art for the character are by Jessica Nguyen: https://twitter.com/jessketchin/status/1146515627097542656?s=21 and by Emi Linders: https://twitter.com/jesttothenines/status/1018011185478815744?s=21.

59 *Talks Machina*, 2×26, 45:04-45:38.

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