**Setting/Scene.** SETTING: The actors sit in a small room at a square table. The DM is at one corner, and the players sit at the sides opposite that corner. From left to right we have Ashley, Taliesin, Laura, Sam, the corner, Liam, Marisha, and Travis. There are cameras pointed at either side of the table and at the DM, so the video has 3 panels. It’s easy to tell the direction of eye contact and gestures within any of those panels, but harder to tell the direction of eye contact and gestures between panels. There are microphones hanging above each of the players. The DM has a DM screen in front so rolls, notes, etc. can be secret. The screen is not very tall so it’s still easy to see gestures, facial expressions, etc. Players all have their own dice and dice trays. Most (if not all) players have beverages. Snacks come out later. All players have notebooks for taking notes. All players have tablets, I think for character sheets. There are various props players pull out to enhance the storytelling. The time is 2018-01-11 (A Thursday) at 19:00 PST.

SCENE: The actors are playing D&D, and they are also acting since Critical Role is a livestreamed (and recorded) production. This scene of sharing with an audience means there are references to the audience (e.g., “The internet’s running with that now”). The scene of playing a roleplaying game means that it is possible to go through many different in-game scenes quickly, since the actors have control over the passage of time. For example, Marisha suggests “if we just montage through a beer tour, we’ll quickly get to the circus”. Players need only make references to the passing of time, and if the group agrees then the time passes.

**Participants.** The DM establishes the setting and has final say on the rules. Each of the players plays their own character. We could think of the characters as figures (since they don’t actually exist), or we could think of them as voicing boxes, since the game is roleplay and the characters have direct lines of dialogue. Ashley plays Yasha, Laura plays Jester, Liam plays Caleb, Marisha plays Beau, Sam plays Nott, Taliesin plays Molly, and Travis plays Fjord. The DM creates various characters to establish the world and the story and provide opportunities for the PCs (player characters) to interact with those characters. The DM is the author since the DM composes the words and message. Sometimes the DM is also the author for PCs when he adds on detail to continue the story and transition to the next point (e.g., saying the PCs were like “Oh, Jesus. I didn’t realize” about the brewery names).

Something interesting about playing D&D is that it can be easy to forget about bystanders; we can’t see the scene itself so if bystanders aren’t talking or being talked about it’s easy to forget their presence. Sometimes, a participant that may have been forgotten about reminds people that they are/were present. For example, Rinaldo says “I would hope that is the case” after Jester, Beau, and Fjord have been talking amongst themselves about how it’s rude not to accept a gift. In this case I think the purpose of the DM saying this is to provide a sense of immersion in the game world. Another example is when Beau says “‘cause I was totally on your shoulder, heard you talking about my friend, Jester”. My interpretation of the social move here is that Marisha is trying to be funny and maybe also trying to introduce a romantic subplot. Ashley forgetting (or not caring) that Beau was present gave Marisha this opening. Players are also bystanders; not every scene involves every PC. When players are bystanders, they sometimes comment on the action.

**Ends.** There are some shared ends for the actors here: having fun and telling a story. Related to the end of fun, some players have the end of getting/keeping the group together so they can all interact; for example, Jester asks “Do you guys want company?” to Caleb and Nott, and Caleb supports the idea. Jester later says “I miss those two people” (about Molly and Yasha).

However, player ends, character ends, and DM ends can conflict. A good example of this is the scene where Beau, Fjord, Jester, Caleb, and Nott are entering the carnival and have to give up their weapons to Yasha; they want to keep their weapons and Yasha wants to enforce the rules. Jester starts out with stating the goal of keeping weapons, Yasha clarifies the rules, and Jester states the added goal of wanting to see the show and comes up with a counter-proposal (we could act as security). Beau jumps onto this and adds on her goal of wanting to keep money (you can pay us to be security guards), Nott asks “like deputy bouncers?”, Beau and Jester agree, Jester reiterates the request, Yasha refuses, Beau comes up with a new argument (“Have you ever wanted to be a boss?”), Yasha refuses, then Jester adds in another detail “We could ask you for days off sometimes”. At this point, the group is laughing a lot, and the DM steps in as a character to say that they still have to give up their weapons. The characters argue in an attempt to achieve their conflicting ends, but this also plays into the players’ ends of humor. For example, “We could ask you for days off sometimes” is not a convincing argument (so it conflicts with the character’s ends to keep their weapons) but it is funny. The DM intervenes because he has an end of moving the story forward.

**Act sequence.** The following is an act sequence that demonstrates attempts to save (and threaten) face. Nott is a goblin, which is a minority race that people are prejudiced against in this campaign setting. She is wrapped up so that it’s harder to tell she is a goblin. Beau asks if Nott is cold, presumably trying to find an explanation for why Nott is wrapped up. At the same time, Laura asks if Nott has the mask on. Sam answers yes to the mask and then the DM provides more detail about the mask. Then, Caleb says “I mean, I’m sorry, not to be blunt, but, you know. It’s pretty obvious goblins are not welcome strolling about.” This is a face-saving act, explaining why Nott is wrapped up. The first sentence in particular is indicative of that; there’s a lot of language to soften the blow. Jester whispers “She’s a goblin?!” Nott asks them not to make a “big thing of it” and points out that there are other people here. Caleb reiterates that request and says Nott is his friend. Jester gets defensive (she interprets the request as a face-threatening act) and replies that “I didn’t ask why she was wrapped up”. That statement is true, but it’s also a face-saving act; she’s denying the wrongdoing of making a “big thing of it”. Beau backs up Jester’s face-saving and threatens Caleb’s face with “I know, we're not making a big deal out it. You're making a big deal out of it.” Then Liam insists that somebody asked why Nott was wrapped up. This explains Caleb’s earlier face-saving act; somehow Liam heard the face-threatening question “why are you all wrapped up?”

**Key.** The DM has to convey a lot of information in a short period of time, which can be difficult for people to process and remember, so he employs several methods to help. He pauses between concepts (e.g., “jagged terrain [pause] and political powers”). He speaks at a slower pace for concepts where players need to take in the details. He also uses gestures, for example, when he’s talking about a cloth hanging from the sides of the tent, he uses his hands to show what that looks like.

The actors use a lot of gestures, which makes people feel more immersed in the action. For example, as the DM mentions that Mollymauk is juggling scimitars, Taliesin uses hand gestures for juggling. Gestures can also be helpful for selecting speakers (e.g., an NPC says “What can I get you” while the DM gives a hand gesture to Nott). In general, the actors are very visible and audible with their reactions (gestures, gasps, facial expressions, laughter). Some of this is a natural reaction, but some of this might also be acting to show how the characters are reacting. For example, when Jester (who just got her fortune told) says she’s not superstitious, Marisha and Travis have skeptical expressions (which is probably the expressions that Beau and Fjord have in that situation).

The DM uses rate of speech and volume to shift the mood. He speaks slowly and calmly as he describes a man who seems to be moved by beautiful music, pauses after the man clutches his chest, and gradually increases rate of speech and volume as more and more concerning details are revealed of this man transforming into a monster.

**Instrumentalities.** The players use character voices. This serves two purposes. 1) distinguishing between what dialogue or action is in-game (when the character voice is used) versus out of game (when the non-character voice is used). For example, when there is gambling, Jester says “I give you three cards” but Laura says “So you use 3d6”, so we know the dice are part of the mechanics on the table and not part of the gambling in the game. 2) establishing aspects of character identity. For example, Caleb uses a German accent, and I can see a few features of his character that could be associated with German stereotypes (in which case the German accent indexes these character traits): not wanting to reveal too much personal information (e.g., not wanting to share about his magic ability), being risk-averse (e.g., being concerned about Nott drawing too much attention). Nott has a Cockney accent, which is used to index a humorous character (Sam says “Yeah, I'm sticking with this fucking accent for the next two years.” and everyone laughs). It may also index criminality. Cockney is associated with lower class, which is associated with criminality. Nott is a thief. The DM also uses character voices. The DM acts as many roles so people need to be able to distinguish between them, and for many NPCs there’s not a lot of time to establish character, so the voice used can give players a quick idea of some key features of the characters (e.g., talking like an old person for the librarian character).

**Norms.** The following are some examples of broken norms: When Nott is talking to Caleb while the two are watching the money at Jester, Fjord, and Beau’s table, Laura suddenly interrupts with a line from Jester “Are you guys staying here?” The two groups haven’t met each other yet at this point. There’s a broken norm here of not interrupting, but there’s also a broken norm of not introducing yourself so abruptly. The DM responds to the broken norm with a descriptive sentence to ease the abrupt transition: “The blue-skinned tiefling suddenly leans over to you at the table”. A little bit later, Jester breaks a norm of interaction again: she tells Caleb he should take a bath because he smells bad. It’s unusual to say something like this to a complete stranger. He points out that “I’ve only just met you”. She responds to that and repairs the broken norm by transitioning into introductions with “Hi! I’m Jester.”

Another situation of broken norms has to do with the rules of D&D. Nott and Beau drink a lot of beer, and the DM starts to describe the results of that: “All right, well that being the case--”, but Liam interrupts with “you are poisoned” (probably as a joke). The DM responds with “No, make a constitution saving throw”. Liam breaks the norm that the DM decides the rules (in this case, the outcome of drinking), so the DM repairs the norm with “No” (rejecting Liam’s idea and interruption) and continues on with establishing the rules.

**Genre.** In the game, many genres are represented. Different genres have different turn lengths and turn allocations. For example, gambling involves short turns as short actions are described and the DM frequently explains rules. For the sales pitch, Molly has longer turns and the other players have shorter turns; they respond with comments and questions. The DM doesn’t speak much in the sales pitch. When the PCs are watching the carnival, the DM has long turns describing the action. The PCs sometimes make comments, but they speak for much shorter than the DM. There is an interesting distinction here as well that this difference in duration is necessary for format of the game; it takes much longer to describe what is happening when there are many sensory details to convey than it does to just say a line of dialogue.

D&D has many elements that can be complicated to manage, including player agency (players want to be able to make informed decisions for their characters, and they want those decisions to have consequences) and a distribution of turns such that everyone gets to act and nobody is stuck waiting for too long. D&D is played through communication (the players say what they want their character to do/say, and the DM handles the setting and the rules of interaction). The following descriptions show some features of communication this group uses to help achieve player agency and turn distribution; these communicative events can help outsiders understand how D&D is played, how DMs manage the game, and how Critical Role in particular plays D&D.

**Asking questions.** Players will ask questions to ensure they understand what’s happening in the world (e.g., “Those coins went all over the floor?”) and what their characters know (e.g., “Do we notice them whispering?”). The DM will answer these questions, sometimes calling for additional action such as a perception check. These questions help players understand the situation and establish what the characters know, so the questions help achieve agency. The DM will also ask questions (e.g., “so you prepare yourself with your mask set over?”) to ensure that he is understanding the character actions correctly. This ensures that the decisions that players make are correctly interpreted by the DM and thus the DM is able to appropriately determine consequences, so this helps achieve agency as well. Players can also ask the DM if they can do something, and the DM will respond with the results (and any additional actions needed). For example, Ashley asks “Can I give him [Caleb] a pat-down” and the DM tells her to roll an investigation check with advantage. This kind of interaction ensures the players make decisions for their characters and it also provides the mechanism for determining the consequences of those actions, so it addresses player agency.

**Turn-selection for simultaneous action.** Because action happens through communication (which is generally one speaker at a time), simultaneous action must be done through turn-taking. A player can self-select by interrupting description of action to say how their character reacts (e.g., Liam says (in Caleb’s voice) “I’m putting my hand on my purse”). This sort of self selection addresses agency; the players want a chance to respond to action as it happens. The DM can self-select and use transitional phrases to describe another part of the action and select another speaker. This is particularly common when something happens that can take the players a while to do. (e.g., “While you’re counting this out [while the players are counting out money]… Fjord, you glance”). This addresses the distribution of turns. Other players can also use self-selection to address the distribution of turns. A player whose character is present in a scene but hasn’t acted in a while can describe what their character is doing, and when they do so they start with a transitional phrase (e.g., “While everybody’s watching this shit happen”, “While he was talking to the shopkeeper”).

**DM selects players as next speaker through description.** The DM can select players (as next speaker) by describing a situation in which the characters can act (e.g., “you have a brief bit of privacy to discuss”). The DM can also select players by listing options (examples: “if you’d like to find a seat” and “decide to continue your conversations or go about your business for the day”). These methods of selecting the next speaker directly address player agency. When the DM did introductions, he would select a particular player as next speaker by describing that player’s character and some action that brings them into the scene, and then asking the player to describe their character (e.g., “Two shadows step into the doorway of the nearish-noonday sun” … “You notice one of them begins to step from table to table” … “Taliesin, if you'd like to describe your character please”). In this case, the players are denied the agency to decide how their characters enter, but the players are given the agency to share more specific details about their character (they can choose what to say and how to say it).