

## Home Games: Actual Play and the Rise of the Tableside Aesthetic

### Abstract:

Early researchers of Dungeons and Dragons often found it difficult to secure access to play sessions due to a widespread culture of deep privacy in tabletop communities that stemmed in part from the exclusionary tactics of white male nerd culture. In the current moment however, tabletop games have never been more visible or diverse, with millions tuning in to shows such as *Critical Role*, *Dimension 20*, and *The Adventure Zone* each week. This paper argues that the massive popularity of actual play shows is in fact continuous with the closed doors that used to greet researchers and journalists; these shows and others like them have succeeded in large part due to the production of what I call a 'tableside' aesthetic that positions the viewer neither as voyeur to a private moment nor audience to a public performance but rather as silent participant in a domestic activity. Actual play shows attempt to foster a sense of inclusion within a nevertheless private space such that the viewer might feel at home with the performers. Drawing on theories of queer domesticity and participatory fan culture, this paper argues that the tableside aesthetic allows for both the queering of the domestic space through a radical multiplicity of perspective and for the suppression of voices perceived to be violating the domestic space, most often those calling for an explicit engagement with political issues. I trace these questions back to 20th century radio dramas as an example of the uneasy migration of performance and politics into the home, considering Orson Welles' infamous radio performance of *War of the Worlds* and the resulting media coverage alongside modern examples of this tension such as the McElroy Family's "No Bummers" policy. Finally, I consider *Dimension 20*'s talkback show *Adventuring Party* as rejecting the perceived separation between politics and domesticity.

### Keywords:

Actual Play, Queer Domesticity, Participatory Culture, Aesthetics, Media History, Radio Dramas

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