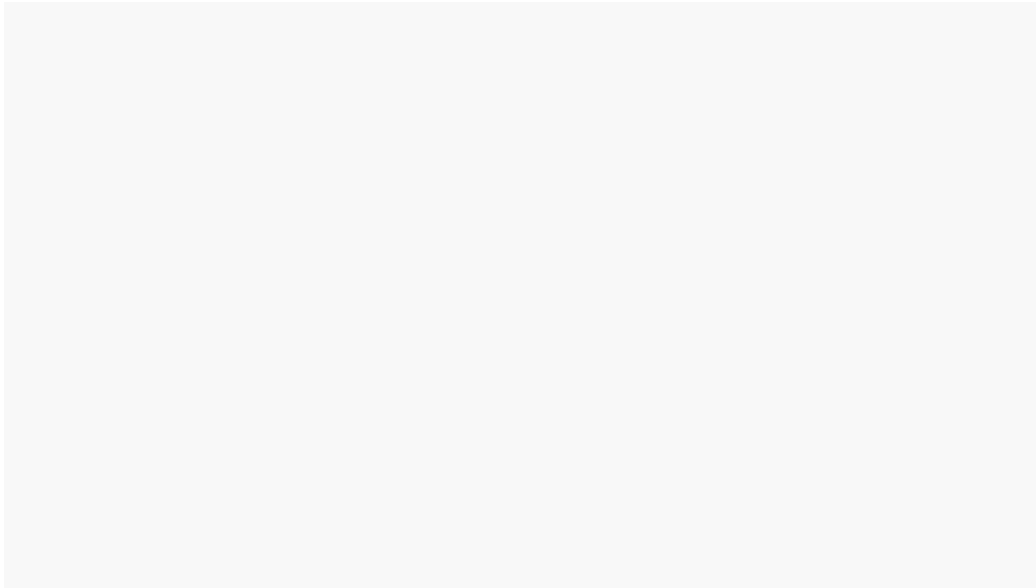


How 8 nerds playing 'Dungeons & Dragons' on Twitch sold out an arena

Cheryl Teh Oct 8, 2023, 7:42 PM EDT



The cast of "Critical Role." Courtesy of Critical Role

"Critical Role" is a wildly popular live stream on Twitch with more than 1.3 million followers.

That fame has translated to the real world: They sold out an arena for their London live show.

Here's how — and why — these eight people became the rock stars of nerd world.

INSIDER TODAY NEW LOOK

Sign up to get the inside scoop on today's biggest stories in markets, tech, and business — delivered daily.

[Read preview](#)



By clicking "Sign Up", you accept our [Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy](#). You can opt-out at any time.

Advertisement

In the center of an imposing throne room stands Caleb Widogast, a disheveled young wizard. In his hand, a sparkling beacon. Surrounded by enemy soldiers, with his life and the

lives of his friends at stake, he hands the sacred object over to the queen of a country that's warring with his own.

Liam O'Brien from "Critical Role" seems to remember this moment from 2019 — when he changed the course of over a year of meticulously planned storytelling with one split-second decision — like it was yesterday.

Now, he's speaking to me from Los Angeles, in a room that looks like nerd heaven, the shelves behind him brimming with books, miniatures, and figurines. His brown eyes glitter when we talk about Widogast, a character he plays on that little show he does, a "Dungeons & Dragons" game on Twitch with his seven best friends.

"I was terrified. I wasn't sure if it was the worst decision I've ever made," O'Brien says. "I could tell that not everyone at the table was jazzed by the idea when it was happening. But it felt right to Caleb and me, and in that moment, I was trying to save everybody's lives."

Advertisement

"Critical Role" has more than 1.3 million followers on Twitch. Not only has it made them a top earner on the platform, but on October 25, they'll be playing live in front of a 12,500-strong crowd at London's Wembley Arena.

"Tabletop was waiting for its big moment," O'Brien tells me. "And, we kind of held on to the roller coaster real tight, and got good at steering it as it went."





The cast of Critical Role, from left to right: Matthew Mercer, Marisha Ray, Taliesin Jaffe, Laura Bailey, Sam Riegel, Ashley Johnson, Liam O'Brien and Travis Willingham. [Jon Kopaloff/Getty Images](#)

I'm acutely aware that most people likely have no idea who this man is. But O'Brien is geek world royalty: One of eight self-professed "nerdy-ass voice actors" who have aired three of their live "Dungeons & Dragons" campaigns on Twitch in the form of weekly shows that can stretch for five hours per episode.

O'Brien says he thinks the Twitch stream likely appeals to people because it tells the stories of a bunch of "heartfelt assholes" finding their way in the world.

Advertisement

"We have really brilliant, lovely moments. But we also kind of eat dog shit, occasionally, and those mistakes are completely real," O'Brien tells me. "So, in one second, you'll have a really poignant moment between two or three people at the table. And then everyone cannot stop laughing because someone pronounced a word in a goofy way."

The empire business

O'Brien's characters have been woven into the tapestry of Exandria, the sprawling fantasy world of "Critical Role" game master Matthew Mercer's creation. In "Dungeons & Dragons" games, players choose their own adventure, within reason and at the game master's discretion. What happens to each character, however, isn't all up to the player: Their fates depend on the rolls of a 20-sided die.

In the real world, O'Brien is one of the co-founders of Critical Role, the company — alongside Mercer, Laura Bailey, Ashley

Johnson, Taliesin Jaffe, Marisha Ray, Sam Riegel, and Travis Willingham.

The eight co-founders, all voice actors who've worked in video games and animated series, have leadership positions and responsibilities within the company, but Willingham is their CEO, and Mercer is their chief creative officer.

Advertisement



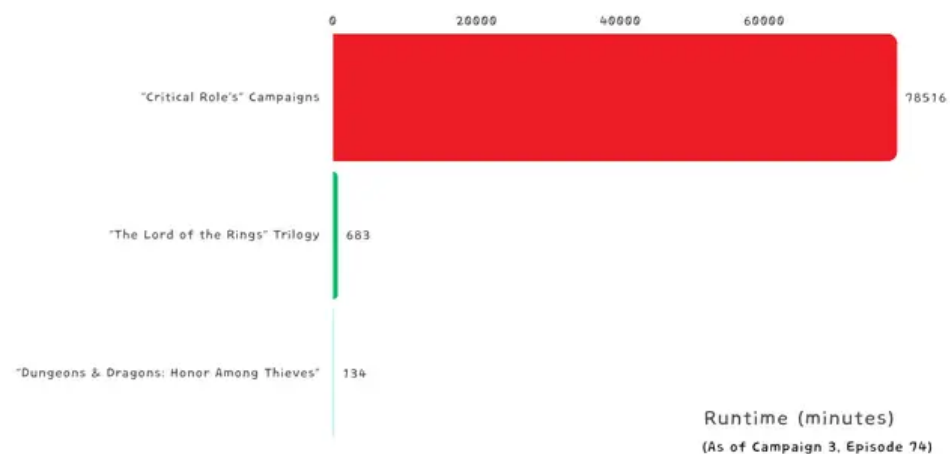


From left to right: Taliesin Jaffe, Liam O'Brien, Marisha Ray, Travis Willingham, Ashley Johnson, Sam Riegel, Laura Bailey, and Matthew Mercer Robyn von Swank

The stream has carried on for eight years, apart from a three-and-a-half-month hiatus during the COVID-19 pandemic. The cast has told the stories of three separate crews of fantasy-world heroes now — Vox Machina (Campaign One) and the Mighty Nein (Campaign Two). They're now winding their way through Campaign Three, a tale of the adventurers known as Bells Hells.

At the time of writing, Critical Role has aired 330 episodes over three campaigns, with a runtime that's exceeded 1,300 hours. That means I could've watched the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy 114 times instead of watching these people role-play their way through a multi-layered fantasy universe — and roll dice some 31,420 times.

CRITICAL ROLE IN NUMBERS



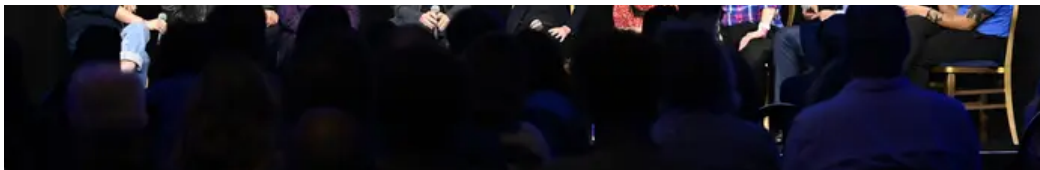
That's a lot of minutes. Numbers courtesy of CritRoleStats.

I asked Willingham if he feels like Critical Role is moving into the major leagues — or, to quote "Breaking Bad," if they're in the "empire business" now. After all, they did raise more than \$11.3 million for the Kickstarter crowdfunding project they organized to produce their animated series, the "Legend of Vox Machina." The company's now working with Amazon on the third season of that show, a continuation of their epic battles with the Chroma Conclave, an alliance of ancient dragons seeking world domination.

"Largely for the most part, Critical Role is profitable and growing and really shows no sign of slowing down," Willingham said. "One thing we are very conscious and aware of at all times is to grow responsibly, and that usually means slowly as well."

Advertisement





Eight years on, the cast of 'Critical Role' is now working on two animated series with Amazon. Jon Kopaloff

Critical Role also announced in January that the Mighty Nein campaign is getting the animated series treatment, too. (O'Brien teased that he — as his Campaign Two character Widogast — will have quite a few lines in German, so you sad wizard boy fans out there have that to look forward to.)

Willingham added that the company is investing heavily in its cache of intellectual property via its publishing arm, Darrington Press.





Queen by Midnight (left) and "The Chronicles of Exandria: The Legend of Vox Machina II" are new offerings from Darrington Press. Darrington Press

Lindsay Grace, a professor at the University of Miami's School of Communication and vice president of the Higher Education Video Game Alliance, says he sees Critical Role as "evidence of a shift toward cross-media experiences in games."

"While the best streamers understand the value of performance, the cast's professional history amplifies the experience for the audience," Grace told me.

Advertisement



'The Breakfast Club'



The cast of Critical Role in their studio. Chris Lockey

"Critical Role" has definitively broken the stereotype of "Dungeons & Dragons" being a game that "four 35-year-old men play in a shed," said Jacob Kenton Smith, a PhD student and research affiliate in UNC-Chapel Hill's communications department.

"You see somebody who's like, charismatic, cool, funny, and in 'The Breakfast Club,' so to say, and they're playing D&D. And you're like, 'Oh, this game isn't just for those people who I imagined it to be for,'" Smith added.

Amanda Cote, an associate professor of media and games studies at Michigan State University, told me she thinks "Critical Role" is arguably the best-known actual-play show out there now.

What it has going for it, Cote said, is an entire crew supporting their production outfit and the many branches of their business, including their comic books, and partnerships with other companies.

Advertisement



In terms of revenue, Smith and Charles Pratt, a game designer and assistant professor at NYU, believe most of where the

show makes bank likely comes from revenue streams other than Twitch, including merchandise and sponsorships.

Willingham recognizes Critical Role's expansion into animation and other aspects of gaming means they're competing in a crowded and increasingly saturated market.



Willingham, at the San Diego Comic Con in July 2023. [Chelsea Guglielmino/FilmMagic](#)

"Eight actors running a company is a very rare thing, as we've come to learn. And I think a lot of us knew going into it, that can be very fraught with peril," Willingham says.

"It's almost like the eight of us getting stuck on a rocket ship to Mars. It's really just not supposed to work. They're dead. They are floating in deep space. They're frozen somewhere," he jokes. "But for some reason — in this analogy — our little rocket ship just keeps going."

Advertisement

The cast is aware, however, that the popularity they enjoy now could be a "finite thing," Willingham tells me.

"None of us have ever had the conversation about how long we get to do this for," he added. "But as long as people want to see the show, we will be there to put one on."

Making magic

Eight years ago, however, the idea that any of the eight co-founders would be main cast members on a "Dungeons & Dragons" Twitch stream was a distant and altogether ridiculous suggestion.

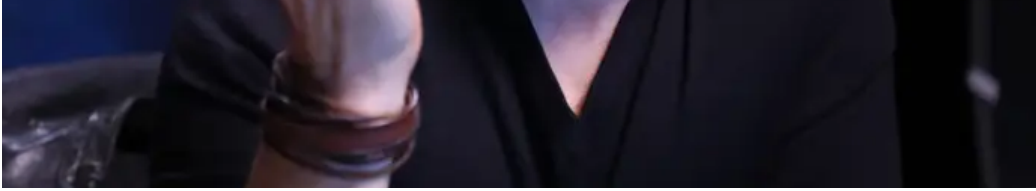
O'Brien hadn't even started playing the game regularly yet. On a December 2012 episode of their sporadically updated podcast, "All Work No Play," he and Riegel described being invited to Mercer's home to play the game together for the first time.

Advertisement

They got hooked on the game, and continued with their private sessions at home until March 12, 2015, when "Critical Role" aired its first episode on the Legendary-owned Geek and Sundry's Twitch stream.

Now, O'Brien's played many characters through the show's campaigns and side stories — including Vax'ildan Vessar, a (slightly) emo half-elven assassin; Widogast, the wizard with a tragic backstory and a penchant for fire; and lately, a tiny sword-wielding fighter named Orym.





Liam O'Brien Critical Role

Part of the magic of the stream, O'Brien says, comes from how the cast has lived in their characters' head-spaces for "hundreds and hundreds of hours."

"With Vax'ildan, Caleb, and Orym, they are very lived in, and there are huge chunks of who I am as a person in all three of them," O'Brien says.

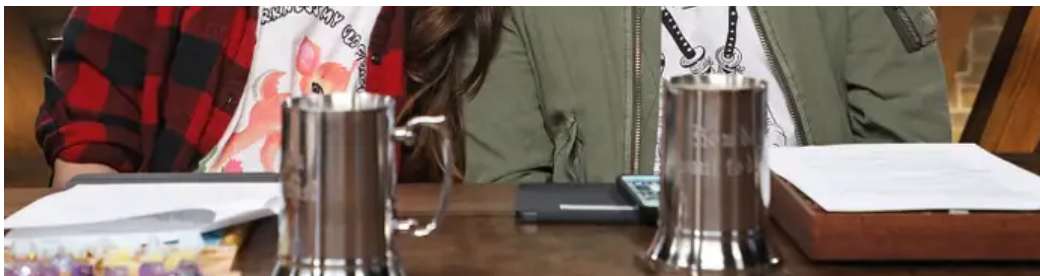
Advertisement

I point out that all three of his characters have wrestled with grief in their own ways. O'Brien tells me that Vax'ildan watching his sister Vex'ahlia (played by Bailey) die — albeit temporarily — coincided with a turbulent period in his own life.

"In Campaign One, what Vax'ildan went through was happening at a time in my life when I was very much at odds with losing someone over a period of a year," O'Brien says.

"It was weighing on me heavily," he adds. "And then to suddenly have this game of make-believe that we're playing somehow fall in that same direction — I was wading through the same thoughts, feelings, and emotions. It really made Vax feel like a second skin to me."





Liam O'Brien and Laura Bailey. Critical Role

Widogast, meanwhile, feels like looking at a "funhouse mirror" version of himself. He's playing a new character in the show's current campaign now — but he tells me he's "dying to know" what's happened to the poor wizard, who went missing in action during a major battle. (He'll find out the answer to that question very soon — the Wembley live show stars the cast's Campaign Two characters.)

Advertisement

But playing the game, O'Brien says, has helped him understand himself better, too.

"Caleb as a character was a vehicle for me to sort of ask questions and understand human beings in a way that I needed help with, at the time," O'Brien said. "And Orym does that, too."

Sam Rea, a Los Angeles-based fan of "Critical Role," has watched all the main campaigns. Campaign Two is her favorite, and Widogast is her pet character.

"I love that he's flawed. That he knows his flaws, and that he ultimately works past them to be a better person, the one his parents would be proud of," Rea told me.

Advertisement

She tells me that her father passed away when she was watching Campaign Two.

"Having identified with someone who had gone through the grief of losing parents helped to make it easier to grieve," Rea said.

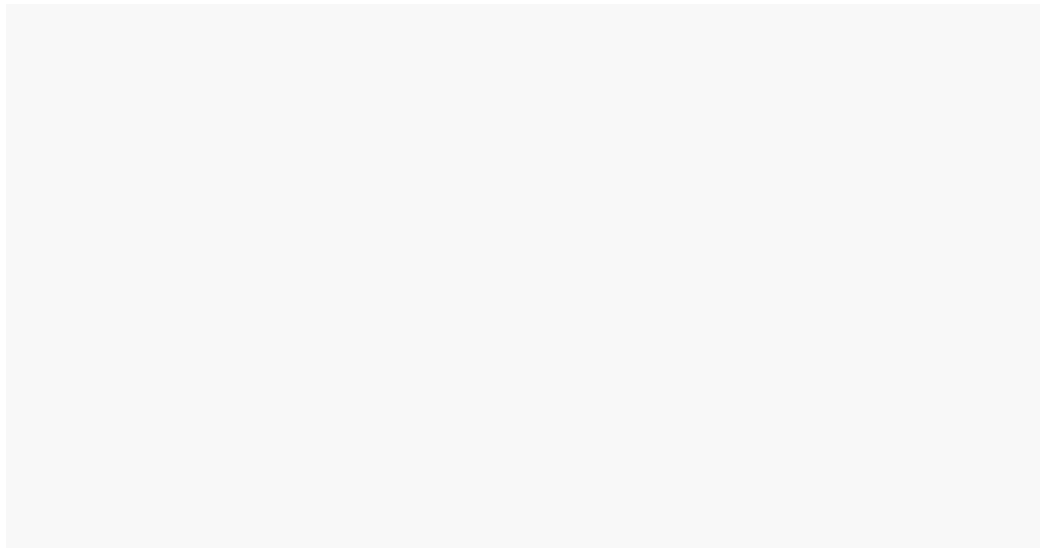
"Liam showed the way how to and Caleb made me feel safe to do it," she added. "I may not have fire and magic at my fingertips, but I can make peace with myself and what I can and can't change in life."

Onward to Wembley

Critical Role has held live shows at concert halls and theaters in the US, but those were in venues with 2,000 to 3,000 audience members. Performing on October 25 in an arena where the likes of Queen, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones have played, however, is a different league.

Advertisement

For this show, people told me they shelled out more than \$80 for tickets in the cheapest category to over \$330 for VIP seats. It's not quite the thousands of dollars others have coughed up to get Taylor Swift Eras Tour tickets, but this is also something people could view for free on Twitch.



The first Mighty Nein reunion livestream saw the crew battling Uk'otoa, a leviathan demigod. [Screengrab/Critical Role YouTube](#)

Suzy Dickens, a fan artist living in Northern England, looks forward to seeing the live show. Watching the campaigns, she says, inspired her to start making art — which she says has helped with her mental health. And Jenny Finch, a UK-based fan, says they've been following the show since 2020, and that they've found a sense of community in the fandom.

Finch is now arranging a meetup with their friends from a fan Discord server, and coordinating a mini giveaway of badges, stickers, and photo cards for other fans.

"This might be our only chance here with a live show, it really feels worth making an event out of," they said.

Advertisement

Marcela Cruz, a fan from Portugal, told me they're flying into London for the live show.

"Part of the reason why the show is so riveting is because the cast pours so much emotion and dedication into these stories, you can't help but become attached to the characters, even the NPCs," they said.

Willingham says the cast and crew have some "great surprises" in store for Wembley but it still "doesn't make any sense" to him that the show's reached the scale it has.

"We're doing a tabletop game. In an arena. Those two things, they're not supposed to go together," he tells me. "I think the instant response for most of us was that not many people are gonna show up, that this can't be possible. To see this response is so humbling, and we want to bring people a show that they will remember forever."

Advertisement

O'Brien predicts that the crew's first live show since the COVID-19 pandemic is going to feel like "surfing on a tidal wave of adrenaline."

"When we play at our home studio, we've got this intimate connection between all of us as friends, which is unbeatable," he said. "But there's nothing quite like the energy that you take in from an audience."

But the Wembley live show doesn't mean that the cast will be hitting the road, BTS-style, for a series of stadium tours.

"We have two different animated series that are in various stages of production. And then we have personal careers and family lives and all those things," Willingham tells me. "But if live shows are something that we can start to add back into our

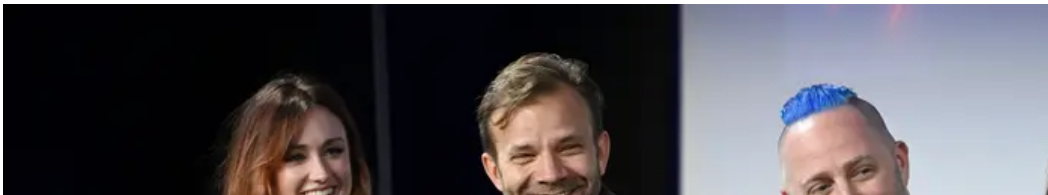
programming every year, we would love to go to other locations where maybe some fans think they might be too far away to ever come to see us."

Advertisement

I tell Willingham that they should consider coming to my neck of the woods, out here in Asia, for a show.

He doesn't say no.

'Not one regret'





Johnson, O'Brien, and Jaffe at an event in May 2022. [Jon Kopaloff/Getty Images](#)

Back in Los Angeles, O'Brien's telling me about Widogast, the wizard, and the moment he sunders a ship with a wall of fire. Widogast's story isn't finished yet, and he and I both want to know what happens next.

He tells me, too, that he thinks the stories they have told are about finding people you love — and building a world people wish they could live in.

Advertisement

"We've created characters and societies and stories that we'd like to see in front of us in the real world, in some ways," he adds. "But maybe not the five ancient dragons."

O'Brien says he would be "thrilled" if Critical Role ends up being what he and his friends are remembered for.

"I have nothing but love for everything that came before and for things outside of 'Critical Role' that I still work on," he said. "But this is our life's work. It's my life's work, and I'm so damned proud of it, and I have not one regret."

Before we go, I ask him what he'll treasure most when Mercer signs off with the tagline, "Is it Thursday yet?" for the last time — whenever that may be.

Advertisement

"When I look back at the stories we created around the table, I don't think, 'Yeah, that's where we rolled dice, and I came up with a funny little speech, and we performed well, and it was a nice show,'" he said. "No — I saw that happen. I thought I was going to lose my sister. I fell in love. I found redemption. I risked everything, and gained the world."

"All the moments together with my best friends are just burned into my brain, and I will remember memories with them as much as I remember holding my children for the first time, and spending time with my father in his later years," he adds. "The rest of Critical Role — they're my family. I love them, and I'm proud of them."

For now, they'll roll the dice, and see where the road takes them.

"Sometimes we take really big swings, and it comes out dumb as shit, but occasionally, magic happens," O'Brien said.
"Brilliant moments happen."