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■ **Katherine Castiello Jones, Sanna Koulu, and Evan Torner**

Playing at Work
Labor, Identity and Emotion in Larp

Introduction: Playing at Work

Most of larp can only take place thanks to an enormous investment of volunteer and fan labor. Organizing a larp event is almost self-evidently a non-profit pursuit: larps frequently lose money or barely break even, and only a handful of individuals worldwide are able to claim that they make a living from larp design. Yet labor is what gives these experiences any value. A larper's labor power – what Karl Marx (1847) defined as one's mental and physical capacity to do work that has use-value to others[1] – remains fundamentally under-theorized.

  In order to analyze cultural phenomena such as larp, a number of assumptions about the nature and meaning of the phenomena are essential. One of the core conceptualizations in studying larp, or other games, relates to the nature of the endeavour as play. Play is often seen as distinct from non-play, specifically from work. Bernard Suits defines work as "technical activity … in which an agent seeks to employ the most efficient available means for reaching a desired goal" (Suits 2006, 173). In Suits' schema, play is simply technical activity that uses inefficient available means, "voluntary obstacles." On the structural level of Suits' theory, the lines between play and work blur into a conti-

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1   Marx's own definition raises questions about who has the excess labor-power to commit to an activity like larp. See also Kirk and Wall (2011) where the authors highlight the gradual change into more positive conceptualizations of work, from a grind into an issue of dignity.

nuum of voluntariness. Both play and work are required for enabling larp.[2]

In this article, we argue that while game studies frequently conceives of larp as a site of play and playfulness, much can be gained by framing larp as a site of labor and work. Just as fandom and social media constitute forms of digital labor (Scholz 2013; Stanfill and Condis 2014), so do core larp activities – playing roles as supporting characters, pretending to dig ditches, putting up with off-putting players – involve labor during the game's runtime. Recognizing these activities as labor allows us to analyze them from new perspectives, such as with a view to political economy or the sociology of work, and reach a more robust understanding of larp as a cultural and social activity.

A thorough analysis of larp as a site for work would be a rather ambitious project. In this article, we have a more modest goal. We would like to present examples of labor at larp; formulate a taxonomy for understanding those forms of labor; and analyze labor especially in terms of character identity and emotional labor. Finally we suggest areas relating to larp as a site for labor that we see as meriting further research. We focus on labor carried out by the participants during a larp event, while acknowledging that larp as a cultural practice has connections with many other sites for labor and consumption.

Drawing on examples from *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011–), *Revived* (2014), *College of Wizardry* (2014–), and other larps, we look at how we create a sense of character self, and how we might see ourselves as laborers as well as players at a larp.

Labor at Larp

Larp as a site for labor

Larps usually require a sizable commitment of time and resources. Depending on context and community, this commitment might be evenly distributed across a large group of participants, shouldered by only a small cadre of organizers, or some mixture of the two. Efforts for the larp might be perceived through the lens of art, or perhaps community, or even customer relations. Regardless of the framework by which we appraise those efforts, however, the work of a larp does not end when the event starts. We would say that for the purpose of understanding larp, the work undertaken during the larp is especially interesting, as it illuminates a little-discussed side of the role-playing activity.

Examples of labor during a larp are many and varied. Labor during a larp can involve taking care of actual, "real-life" needs of players, such as participants cooking food or making a fire in the camp. Or perhaps a player breaks down, and another player has to comfort him; or a player has an injury, and someone must provide medical care. However, the work is not always so tangible. Labor at larp might include therapy counseling at zombie larp (*Revived*, where this counseling is a large part of the game); players researching material in the game; or an engineer of a starship "working" on the engine for 10-15 minutes.

Below, we bring up some anecdotes from our own larping experience, and the labor involved. In the first, the labor closely resembles non-game-related work:

"When I signed up for the 2015 Danish run of Just a Little Lovin', I wanted to play the former organizer character Tony, because Tony is a DJ and I work on the side as a DJ in real life. The job involved playing three consecutive nights of parties as a character in the game, as well as playing the music for the drag show. In order to maintain my in-character credibility as a decent DJ, I had to listen to and prepare proper set lists

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[2] One current understanding of play relies on the notion of the "playful mindset", elaborated by e.g. Sicart (2014) and Stenros (2015). Although this line of thinking with regard to games and playfulness in general is persuasive, in this chapter we have chosen to focus on activities instead of mindsets.

out of over 300 tunes from the 1970s and 80s. But when I arrived at the larp itself, I realized that no one served as an intermediary between the drag performers and me, so I found myself also working as a stage manager, arranging the order of performances, and making sure the sound on the mics worked. In short, Just a Little Lovin' was what I call a "working larp experience" for me: in the real world, I might've gotten paid for what I was doing. Instead, I paid money to do it in game. And if I didn't do a good job of it during the game, it might have negatively affected my fellow players' experience. Or at least the drag queens would have thrown me some shade." —Evan Torner

The anecdote also brings up a sense of responsibility for the whole game, and for providing a necessary resource. This responsibility is not wholly unlike that of directors or organizers. Larp communities sometimes refer to "run-time game-mastering", the active shepherding of game narrative and plot. This work can be taken on by player-participants as well as organizers, as in the following example.

"I first heard of College of Wizardry a bit before the ticket sales for the first run in late 2014. I had the option of signing up as a teacher, and jumped at the chance. My day job is as a researcher and university teacher, and I wanted a chance to play at subverting the professional role of my day-to-day life. It turns out that being a fictional college teacher brings with it many of the same responsibilities, of preparing classes and exams, of working out scheduling conflicts and curricula, and making sure students knew what to study. I was also prepared to manage the structure and flow of play for students I came in contact with: in numerous small encounters sprinkled throughout the event, I kept track of plots and narratives and did my best to distribute them to others. However, due to in-game events I also needed to step up and give twice-daily speeches for the whole group of participants, tracking information from players and organizers alike, and delivering it with some semblance of brevity and narrative coherence. In the end, I rather enjoyed being able to contribute to the event in these ways, but the practical demands of the work put a damper on my plans for an emotional arc for the character." —Sanna Koulu

In the previous *College of Wizardry* experience, labor came to be a source of satisfaction but also an obstacle to the experience that was planned. However, labor at larp can also provide a way to enjoy the larp in a different way, or access a character more fully:

"When I played in the 2012 U.S. run of Mad About the Boy, my character, Zahida, was a medical doctor who'd been unable to practice medicine in the U.S. before the disaster. Throughout the game my character became more and more frustrated by the denial of this important aspect of her identity. When the Last Man finally appeared, it was my character who was asked to provide medical attention for him. Though I lack any sort of medical knowledge myself, I suddenly had the experience of being thrust into an episode of ER. My character finally got the opportunity to prove her capabilities as a doctor. As a character who had spent much of the game feeling hopeless and uncomfortable, these actions allowed her to shine. By performing this medical "work" – even though it was completely faked—I was able to access a different piece of this character. Zahida's experience of feeling capable and recognized for her medical training gave me some of the most intense and memorable moments of the game. Though it came late in the game, doing this work was integral to solidifying my character's identity. It impacted my relationships with other characters, as well as the way my character felt about herself. Had I not gotten the opportunity to do this work during the game I would have had a completely different overall experience." —Katherine Castiello Jones

A three-fold taxonomy

Human work becomes labor when it has a use-value to others, with this use-value determined by the needs of other humans and their systems. This use-value is of course contextual, depending on

the current needs of the individuals involved. To study human motivation, Abraham Maslow (1954) famously suggested envisioning these needs as a hierarchy, since one's need to do one's homework might be superseded by one's need to sleep or stay hydrated.

Although Maslow's hierarchy has been soundly criticized for its lack of empirical evidence and broad assumptions about all of humanity (Graham and Messner 1998), his framework is nevertheless helpful in two ways. One is that it simply reminds us that our larp experiences are actually structured not only by a game's design, but the material conditions of the playsite itself (Torner 2013). The framework also helps outline the needs that larp designers and organizers potentially have to minimally fulfill: When will the players' meal breaks be? Will the scenery and props convince players that they are in the diegesis? At what point will players help each other get the most satisfying play experience? Maslow's hierarchy of needs permits designers to set priorities.

However, the contradictory nature of role-playing as a constantly-negotiated social activity (Montola 2008) in which character actions can bleed over into player emotion and decision-making (Montola 2010, Bowman 2013) means that it is not always clear what needs take precedence when. Larpers in *Dystopia Rising* (2008–) willfully deny themselves sleep in order to enhance the experience of being attacked at random by zombies and boost their in-game advantage. In larp, we regularly prioritize fictional needs over real-world needs. Nevertheless, all labor is not created equal in terms of real-world use-value and exchange value. Thus we have created our own hierarchy of labor in larp:

First-order labor in larp addresses the most basic of needs in Maslow's hierarchy, namely anything that helps keep the larpers alive beyond processes of valuation and exchange: cooking, cleaning the bathrooms, and safety. First-order labor may be done in character. One of the best examples is Pepper's Diner in *Just a Little Lovin'*: Pepper and his crew are in character, but the players also have to work 16-hour days to make sure that the entire group is fed. Organizer characters may be in a tunic and carry a foam sword, but they also have their cell phones handy in case of medical emergencies or security threats. First-order labor is work that generally everyone agrees must be done, would definitely be remunerable in other settings, and may or may not be completed in character.

Second-order labor in larp involves doing a real job that would be ordinarily compensated with money, but which is otherwise not required to survive. Instructors in the *College of Wizardry* preparing and teaching lessons would be an example of second-order labor. DJ work at *Just a Little Lovin'* would be another. Major leadership roles such as serving as a commander on the *The Monitor Celestra* (2013) or as a head of a household in *Fairweather Manor* (2015) would be others. Second-order labor serves the game experience at the cognitive and aesthetic levels, but would otherwise be remunerated outside of the larp context. These may or may not be completed in character as well.

Third-order labor is for purely diegetic purposes and diegetic rewards: pretending to dig a ditch, dishing fake food onto a plate, etc. Some servant positions at *Fairweather Manor* qualify as this. In the Intercon game *Expedition: Riders on the Storm* (2011), one of the jobs was to pilot the ship, meaning one player could choose to sit in a chair and stare at the wall. These third-order tasks are usually only completable in character. Third-order labor is meant to serve the fiction itself: helping a game and other players' play appear more "real." In some situations, it is not always clear whether completing these tasks adds actual value to the larp: rather than enhancing the player experience they may be viewed as busywork or as mindless tasks.[3]

The above hierarchy sees larp as a medium that, rather than merely enabling play, exposes the

messy nature of work itself. Doing work for the larp, after all, frames the overall experience. Players and organizers perform work for a variety of reasons beyond seeking excitement or "fun" (see e.g. Montola, Stenros, and Waern 2009a, 107). Whether or not larp work appears to be vital to the success of a larp cannot always be determined from the design of the larp. The hierarchy above goes so far as to disavow the already-spurious distinction between a "player character" and a "non-player character" (Stenros 2013), letting us instead break down the activities of each individual participant and how they meet the needs of the larp.

Interactions between Labor and Other Modes of Larp Engagement

Labor enabling the larp experience

One of the most immediately fruitful aspects of a hierarchy of work is that making distinctions between different kinds of labor lets us see that labor more clearly. Of course, a perspective emphasizing labor in larp does not supersede other approaches, but rather complements them. For instance, this perspective allows us to inquire into how second-order labor is used in enabling larp; or how third-order labor might be experienced by players when it is pure make-work; or how first-order labor is divided between different participants and how the commercialization of larp might affect that division. This article merely marks the beginning of those inquiries. In this respect, we would like to highlight two issues: first, the usefulness of second-order and third-order labor specifically in enabling larp, and second, a tension that can result from engaging in work in a larp.

There are indications that second- and third-order labor can both enable more rewarding larp experiences. But, labor that is at odds with the experience that a player desires from the larp may make the event less rewarding. From anecdotal evidence, it seems that second-order labor can be an important resource in creating and sustaining a character identity. For the DJ in *Just a Little Lovin'* as well as the lecturer in *College of Wizardry*, the occupation is a fundamental part of the character's social setting. Interacting with others as the character may or may not require performing second-order labor. In many larps the professional activities of the characters take place off-camera as it were: the criminal gang's accountant is not expected to file a tax return in a cyberpunk game, and the elven hunters of a fantasy larp will usually not hunt game. (Indeed, it might be considered one of the key design features of *College of Wizardry* that nearly all player characters are engaged in second-order labor such as studying or teaching, during the game.[4])

Yet some forms of second-order labor are specifically brought in as parts of the game and form a key part of characters. Photographers, for instance, often take pictures in character, and are sometimes deliberately given "non-player character" roles. Engaging in these kinds of second-order labor might require the players to "steer" their character (Montola, Saitta, and Stenros 2015) in that direction. A photographer character may have to abruptly leave a scene to take pictures at a scheduled event that the player knows will happen at a specified time. Players may need to be aware of the labor their characters need to perform, and expend effort in making it happen.

However, players can also engage with second-order labor as a way of sustaining their experience of the character, or aiming for a specific character identity (Pohjola 2004). Here it can be difficult to distinguish between second-order labor and other effort expended in character. We hold, however,

3   Despite its sometimes unclear use-value as labor, third-order labor can still be analyzed in our schema, as choosing to do it constitutes performative support of the larp itself and its proposed diegesis. Fake guards standing around with foam swords are not simply "playing guard," but also performing on behalf of the non-quantifiable gestalt larp experience. Interestingly, then, the value of the third-order labor being performed becomes distinct from the use-value of the labor that it represents.

4   Effectively all the participants had access to two of the elements that Waern, Montola and Stenros highlight with regard to immersive play: authentic activity in combination with immersive play (Waern, Montola, and Stenros 2009b, 2-3). The game offered an inner experience of a character that fit well together with the social setting. The social context also acknowledged and recognized the activities performed by the character, reinforcing the individual experience of meaning in a somewhat similar fashion as Kirk and Wall discuss with regard to constructions of identity in general (Wall 2011).

that the distinction can be a useful one. Second-order labor often requires the player to draw on additional skills beyond role-playing, such as putting together a lesson plan, assembling a playlist, or staging a burlesque performance. If we return for a bit to the concept of a playful mindset, we can say that a player engaging in second-order labor may have a playful mindset, but that the character usually does not. The distinction becomes blurred when we note that a character's labor can also be invisible, for example because of its nature as emotional or caring work.

It is worth noting here that using character labor as a way of constructing identity is not specific to larp or role-playing. Instead, as Kirk and Wall (2011) emphasize, work can be an important source of identity and meaning. Thus it should be no surprise that in-character work or a character's occupation can be an important resource for character identity and for situating the character in a social setting. A number of larp-specific questions rise up, of course: for instance, the distinction between second-order and third-order labor in enabling the play experience, or the role of first-order labor in creating meaning for the larp participant.

Labor as a source of tension

To some extent, labor is necessary for the larp experience, but the larp activities are not coded as work outside the game even when they involve a noticeable amount of effort. The labor that they require is, if not exactly glossed over, at least re-interpreted in terms of fun. However, as labor in various forms is required for the larp to take place at all, and often for creating specific kinds of content, the amount of labor undertaken by different players can become a source of tension or discomfort in social contexts.

The experience of labor at larp may become a source of ambivalence on a personal level for a player. It seems safe to assume that as different players are looking for different experiences at larps, some players are more motivated to do labor at larp than others, and some players experience labor as more, well, laborious than others. Insofar as labor at larp provides richness to the experience of a character, or a way of creating and sustaining character identity, this labor may be experienced as necessary or meaningful, but other forms of labor might detract from the desired larp experience.

This dimension of meaningfulness is perhaps the most essential factor in engaging in in-character labor. On a personal level, it helps make a player's contribution in performing as a DJ or as a teacher more legible: these contributions are not purely selfless, or effortless for that matter, but a way of creating personal as well as communal meaning in the larp context. On a more theoretical level, focusing on meaning-creation in labor helps us conceive of larp as a meaningful cultural medium – a paradigm that creates a bridge towards other, non-fun modes of play. Here it is worth noting that understanding larps in terms of effort expended to create shared meanings is not only limited to "art-house" larps, but that the paradigm also covers "entertainment" larps such as the afore-mentioned College of Wizardry series or the *Dystopia Rising* franchise.

Case Study: Emotion Work

Focusing on meaning may help re-conceptualize work as enabling rather than diminishing playfulness, but a certain tension remains. This tension might be especially visible in terms of emotional labor (Hochschild 1983). Hochschild's conceptualization of certain forms of service-sector work as emotional labor is over 30 years old, but emotional labor often remains less visible in conceptualizations of work. Yet, as larp often focuses on offering emotionally significant experiences to participants, the issue of emotional labor is especially topical for larp. Emotional labor also ties into identity, highlighting the connection between the character experience and a player's out-of-character self.

During games both players and organizers may find themselves managing their own emotions, along with the emotions of others. As Hochschild argues, socially determined "feeling rules" determine not only the emotions that one should feel in a given situation, but also how those feelings should be expressed. For instance, feeling sad and crying at a funeral are common "feeling rules." A failure to obey feeling rules can result in social censure or even being ejected from a given social situation. Thus individuals find themselves performing emotion work wherein they manage and shift their emotional expressions through "surface acting" or their emotional states through "deep acting."

The concept of feeling rules translates easily into larp as an activity. Role-playing is largely made possible by participants choosing to manage their emotional states, and the "feeling rules" of a larp enable players to share their emotions as fuel for playful activities. There are then two aspects of emotional work that map easily onto player activity during a larp event: the management of one's own emotions and the management and care for others' emotions.

The management of one's own emotions is not often recognized as work[5], but it is pervasive and necessary for smooth social interaction. For instance, if a male player makes a sexist remark to a female player during a boffer battle, she may engage in surface acting to mask signs of distress, anger, or sadness. She might brush off his remark with a clever rebuttal or pretend she didn't hear the comment at all. Yet, if she is still feeling negative emotions that she doesn't want to or feel able to express during the game, she may engage in "deep acting" in an attempt to change her emotions about the encounter on a player level. She might tell herself that the other player was just tired or hungry, she may think of other more positive interactions she has had with the player, she may throw herself harder into the battle, or focus on the feelings of her character in order to change her emotions as a player.

While it might be easy to see all larp as a form of emotion work, there is an added layer to the emotional labor in question. This extra layer is characterized by the fact that it takes place on the level of the player's emotions, and that it adds to the work involved in evoking or experiencing the emotions that a character should, or is expected to be, feeling. Of course, both layers of emotional work may expand outside the timeframe of the larp itself. Emotional work in its different dimensions is necessary for the larp to be connected both temporally and socially with its context.

Current scholarship also highlights the fact that emotional labor is disproportionately done by women. Whether this remains true in the case of larp requires further research. Yet it raises the question of whether certain types of players or organizers do different amounts of emotional labor, as Lassila (2009) suggests. While this labor might on the surface seem "voluntary", it does not alter the fact that some individuals may experience playing and organizing larps as more draining, leading to potential burnout or frustration with the hobby (e.g., Stark 2014).

This also raises questions about who has the resources to do the labor required of larp. While this work may be "fun", it still requires time, energy, and effort. In play cultures where it is expected that players will communicate with each other prior to the game, read play documents and memorize important details of character and setting, or even do additional research to more fully embody their character, these aspects of larp may be overlooked as labor. Yet these activities undoubtedly take time and effort, as well as adding substantial value to the play experience.[6] The ability to do the required labor may tax an individual's reserves of time, energy, or emotion. This is particularly dangerous if the expectations are not clearly communicated by organizers, if a player is new to the hobby, or if the player comes from an alternate play culture with different expectations.

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5   Indeed, the management of emotion is a factor in many occupations, but it is rarely renumerated as work. Hochschild uses flight attendants and bill collectors as examples, showing that while emotional work is not often considered as adding value, it is crucial to the performance of many jobs (Hochschild 1983).
6   For some very rough estimates on the effort included, see Montola's survey on *College of Wizardry* (forthcoming).

Incompetence and emotion work

One of the tensions of labor in larp is the threat of failure or incompetence. While first-order or second-order labor is often done by professionals, it may also be trusted to volunteers who are performing their tasks in a new context. The pressures to create a successful play experience may lead to this type of work becoming onerous. Even third-order labor may produce a similar pressure. Doing jobs in-game, even when other players are not truly relying on them for food, safety, or aesthetic experience, can produce negative emotions such as stress, frustration, or sadness.

Players doing jobs that they are unfamiliar with, but that their characters are supposedly experts at, may feel pressure to perform competently. Incompetence at first-order or second-order tasks especially may provoke negative reactions towards the player. Even when these reactions take place "in character" they may still be experienced negatively by the player taking on the incompetent role. For instance in Jason Morningstar's game *The Dream* (2015) players attempt to make their own silent film while portraying the actors and crew members of the real silent film *The Dream*. The Director, the character put in charge of directing the film, is written to be incompetent and treated as such by the other characters. Yet, *The Dream* requires a real film to be made during play. So while the incompetence of the director enhanced the play experience with regard to some of the characters, some of the players taking the roles of the film crew found this incompetence added to their stress. Similarly, in the game *Revived* the two game masters take the roles of the slightly incompetent facilitators of a support group for recovering zombies. While this incompetence is sometimes used to provide play and steering, it can also raise feelings of guilt or other negative emotions when characters express their frustration or anger with the facilitators. Managing these emotions and the conflicts of identity and social connections may also require additional emotional work.

Conclusion

Larps are created through work, and this work should be acknowledged. This article suggests that a framework for examining larp as labor and work is as useful as frameworks that understand the activity as game and play. It also offers a reflection on the distinction of larp as fun, or larp as art, insofar as artistic work is often conceptualized as relating to the highest levels of Maslow's hierarchy only. In many ways, a labor and work perspective qualifies and validates the efforts exerted by so many players and organizers to make a larp function.

Larp may encourage specific meta-motivational states such as playfulness that permit players to re-prioritize their needs according those of the character and game (Stenros 2015), but one still steers play to make sure basic needs of others are being met (Montola, Saitta, and Stenros 2015). If a player has medical training and applies real first-aid in character, she is performing medical work without charge, with all the legal and ethical implications thereof. If there is an in-game character conflict and the players then meet privately afterward to debrief, they are performing emotion work. Whether or not this work is pleasant, or considered part of the game, does not obviate its need to be done and recognized.

When designing a larp, most organizers place the first-order labor under their jurisdiction: players should be fed and have access to proper facilities, and they should feel safe and have the opportunity to take care of their own needs. But second-order labor is often what secures players' mid-level needs of belonging, competence, understanding, and aesthetic experience. Larpers playing vampire princes and magic-school professors may have to hold extensive meetings outside of game or prepare lessons and materials, which in turn help coordinate plotlines in game. Players who put in 70 hours into a costume may be adding to the larp's aesthetic experience in ways that players who spent less than three hours on theirs are not. Third-order labor is effectively labor-as-play, but we should be mindful of when it slips into first-or second-order. And above all, first-order and second-order laborers are likely to feel the need to be openly recognized in some fashion for their vital roles.

Designers of larps should attend to – and prepare one's players for – what types of work will be necessary to make the larp run as planned. What skills are required of certain character roles? Are certain players more valued because of their talents and abilities? Who might be asked to clock unusually large hours of emotion work? Will professionals be performing in the game, or will volunteers need additional training to complete their tasks? Such questions have no right answer, but should be addressed by the larp design and organization, perhaps as another set of faders on the Mixing Desk of Larp (Andresen and Nielsen 2013). Many organizers already think in terms of the efforts required to deliver an entertaining experience. As we formalize the larp medium, perhaps "entertainment delivery" does not quite adequately appraise what organizers and players actually do in a game. Perhaps we also need to call our play – as much as we wish to transcend the term and its requirements – "work."

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