PRODUCING PLAY:

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF “ACTUAL PLAY” MEDIA

ALEX CHALK

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Abstract

"Actual Play" (AP) is a recent genre of online videos and podcasts focusing on unscripted play of tabletop roleplaying games (TRPGs). Its most popular exemplars, such as *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone*, account for large revenue streams and are important cultural actors in TRPGs' recent surge in popularity. However, despite widespread monetization, only a tiny fraction of AP producers earn enough to make a career of AP. This dissertation approaches AP from a political economic perspective, analysing its composition as a field of cultural production, and exploring its producers' practices in relation to questions of creative labour and what David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker term "good working lives". Building on Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and in-depth qualitative interviews with 24 AP producers, it maps out relational networks with key actors that give shape to AP, including the TRPG industry, major brands like *Critical Role* and *Dungeons & Dragons*, online distribution platforms, co-production networks, and audiences.

This account of the field undergirds an analysis of AP production as labour. The analysis indicates that AP producers are aware of the structural economic limitations of their craft, and underscores the importance of non-economic values, such as cultural participation, enjoyment, and community, in motivating their work. Despite AP's deep imbrication in processes of commodification and neoliberal structuration, this research speaks to its embeddedness in parallel economies of affect and play. The concluding chapter connects AP to broader evolutions in the creative economy, namely ubiquitous commodification and platformization of cultural production, and argues for the necessity of multilayered analyses of labour that are sensitive to questions of pleasure, community, and coping, as significant dimensions in the political economy of cultural production.

Keywords: roleplaying games, Actual Play, political economy, creative industries, cultural production, labour, platforms

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As a perennial catastrophist it is very easy for me to see where things have gone wrong but much harder to see where they have gone right. Yet what that optic shows me right now is a look back on a five-year journey riddled with personal upsets and global calamities in which one thing, at least, seems to have worked out. It is my pleasure to devote a few paragraphs to thanking those who have supported me through the completion of this dissertation for their role in that success.

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List of Abbreviations

ANT: Actor-Network Theory

AP: Actual Play

D&D: Dungeons & Dragons

NPC: Non-player character

PC: Player character

TRPG: Tabletop role-playing game

UGC: User-generated content

VTT: Virtual tabletop

WotC: Wizards of the Coast LLC

Chapter One: Introduction

In February 2018, a channel on Twitch.tv called *Saving Throw* broadcast a special episode of their ongoing series. *Saving Throw* specialized in "Actual Play" (AP) streams — video streams where performers would play unscripted sessions of a tabletop roleplaying game (TRPG) like *Dungeons & Dragons,* or in *Saving Throw*'s case, *Pathfinder RPG*. Today, they were putting on a special Valentine's Day episode, using custom character rules published by the deodorant brand, Old Spice. Players could use the rules to generate *Pathfinder* characters stylized after Old Spice's particular brand of fragrant machismo — the "old spice gentleman" (see Trammell 2018).

Gathered around a gaming table in a Los Angeles studio, the cast of *Saving Throw* had put on elaborate formal dress to set the mood for an adventure blending traditional TRPG hack-and-slash adventure elements and comical roleplaying which would ham up the "gentleman" trope. As usual for *Saving Throw*, live audiences could donate money as the game unfolded to "unlock" benefits for the players and story events, which today included Old Spice-branded swag courtesy of the company.

As an avid TRPG player myself and a participant in online TRPG communities, I was already aware of the growing prominence of AP and the breakout success of series like *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone*. Recent years had also seen a TRPG campaign adapted to an animated series with celebrity guest stars in the form of Dan Harmon's *HarmonQuest.* And now, a deodorant brand was tipping its toes in *Pathfinder,* with a group of streamers carrying its message.

Not long after the Old Spice stream, I contacted *Saving Throw* for an exploratory interview. Their

producer and Referee, Dom Zook, graciously assented. During that conversation, I began to dig into the questions that would eventually form the core of this dissertation: How do you monetize your play? What's your relationship with companies like Old Spice? Is this, like, a *job* for you?

Key Terms: Actual Play and Tabletop Roleplaying Games

Over the course of my work on this dissertation, the perennial challenge of explaining what it is I'm working on has been eased somewhat by a growing recognition of my object of study. AP is a relatively new media format focused on the historically niche hobby of tabletop roleplaying games. When I began investigating this topic in early 2018, any endeavor at a 3-minute thesis contest would have been thwarted by the sheer amount of subcultural terminology I would have to define. Now, as I write these words in early 2021, the contest still seems unlikely, but casual responses to my object of study are less along the lines of "what's a roleplaying game?", and more along those of "oh, like *Critical Role*! I love *D&D*." The lingo, it would seem, has taken hold. And yet, while the number of people who know about my object of study is growing, they still make up a minority of those who hear about my research. So, in frank recognition of those demographics, I'll define those terms here as well. And for once, I'll allow myself to define them thoroughly, rather than trying to keep my explanation under a meager three minutes.

Tabletop Roleplaying Games

Tabletop roleplaying games are a form of analog (that is, non-digital) gaming where players assume the roles of characters in a fictional world and interact with the world by narrating and acting out their characters' actions – in other words, by roleplaying. Their roleplay is scaffolded

by rules and game mechanics, which guide, constrain, and enhance the action. TRPGs usually include one player who does not play just a single player, but instead controls 'everything else'; they describe the situations and non-player characters (NPCs) encountered by the player characters (PCs) and act as rules arbiter and referee. This individual bears a title designating their special role – something like "Game Master", "Dungeon Master", "Judge", etc. – according to the rules they are using; In this dissertation I'll use the term "Referee" to refer generically to this role. The term "system" is often used to designate the assemblage of rules, tools, mechanics, and roles, that comprise a TRPG title. The first published TRPG title is *Dungeons & Dragons* (abbrev. *D&D*). Originally released in 1974, *D&D* puts players in the role of heroic adventurers in a fantasy world, who explore dangerous locales (eg. dungeons) and take on terrible monsters (eg. dragons) for fortune, glory, and sometimes the greater good.[1] *D&D* is now in its 5th edition[2] and remains the most popular TRPG.

The in-person observer of a TRPG session would witness something like this: a number of players, generally 3 to 5, sitting around a table, describing what their characters do, asking questions about the situation, and occasionally referring to rules or drawing on mechanical terminology. They probably have dice, the usual six-sided variety often supplemented with a variety of other shapes, including 4-, 8-, 10-, 12-, and 20-sided dice, and perhaps some other, more outlandish ones as well.

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1. This is a more or less fitting description of *D&D*'s early editions. However, its focus has shifted significantly over the last few decades, in ways that will be discussed throughout this dissertation.

2. 5th edition in name, anyway. *D&D* has had at least eight distinct iterations, or more, depending on how you count them. (Original, Basic/Expert a.k.a. BECMI a.k.a. "Rules Cyclopedia", Advanced, 2nd edition Advanced, 3rd edition, 3.5 edition, 4th edition, and 5th.)

They may also use tokens, chips, or cards. The players probably each have sheets of paper describing their characters. These sheets might look something like spreadsheets, with detailed statistics and carefully kept lists; or they might look like forms, their fields filled with descriptive notes; or they might be as simple as a nametag or a few details scrawled on an index card. The players may also use figurines to represent their characters, and hand-drawn maps or model terrain to visualize the imagined space. The Referee may have notes, maybe just a few post-its or maybe a binder or more. These notes can cover a range of topics, from describing places, characters, and scenarios the players might encounter, to records of play, to agendas for managing the session or campaign. If the game uses a system where it is important to preserve an air of mystery, the Referee may hide their notes and dice behind a small folding screen, which itself may be inscribed with rules references. Players may be taking notes as well, to help remember certain details or keep track of ongoing situations. There are likely also books at the table: at least one copy of the rules text, although some or all players may have brought their own copies if regular references are needed. Books containing add-on rules or special statistics might also be present, and the Referee may have a "module" at hand containing a published scenario through which the players are playing. Finally, there may be in circulation some "handouts", printed or handmade documents acting as quick references for rules or representing entities in the game (for example, a letter from an NPC). This detailed snapshot contains a lot of "maybes"; this speaks to the range of TRPG systems in publication, but also their adaptability: in most cases, the only strict necessities are character sheets and some dice, and many experienced TRPG players can recall instances of making do without even these.

What happens when we set this snapshot in motion? Mostly, the players continue talking. They

clarify the fictional situation and what possibilities it affords. They narrate actions. Sometimes, they will roll dice, and use the rules to interpret the results. Dice rolls may decide the success or failure of an action, or they can be used to select items from lists. Players alternate between speaking as their characters and as themselves. They may mark the transition by adopting a "character" voice. As the GM plays numerous secondary characters, they may have an entire repertoire of such voices. In addition to vocal mimicry, players might use body language and pantomime to embody their characters and convey their actions. If using figurines, they may reposition them. When players narrate actions, they may do so in the first person ("I examine the door"), the third ("my character examines the door"), or alternate seamlessly between the two. The second person is rarely employed, as players are generally forbidden from narrating each other's actions, but the GM may use it to narrate what PCs experience in response to their actions ("the door looks ordinary and you can't tell if it's locked. You hear muffled voices talking on the other side"). All this game-talk and game-action is interspersed with jokes, asides, and maybe even chatter between players who are less involved in the current action. In addition to their rich language for talking about the game, the talk might incorporate references to things outside of it, both to enrich and explain the action and as commentary on it. While this extraneous talk lies outside the system, it is common to TRPG sessions, and it is rare to encounter one where it is entirely excised; indeed, it stands for many as one of the social pleasures of TRPGs.

This provides a good enough picture of what TRPG play looks like in person. Throughout the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, a much smaller portion of TRPG sessions have worked this way. In the last decade, a great deal of TRPG play has moved online. Videoconferencing software and a range of bespoke applications and handy expedients have made it possible to reproduce all the

functional components of TRPGs in a virtual environment. Indeed, TRPGs have been hailed during the pandemic as a low-tech and accessible way to enjoy some imaginative distanced play with friends. In my own biography of play, I once started a campaign while living in Montreal, continued it online while on exchange in France, resumed it in person when I returned to Montreal, and then moved it back online after relocating to Toronto.

Actual Play: Two Examples

Over the last decade, tabletop roleplaying games have seen a massive growth in popularity and visibility alongside the emergence of AP. AP is a new genre of media, encompassing a range of forms but especially podcasts and live video streaming, where performers play unscripted sessions of tabletop roleplaying games for an audience. It is a serial genre, released in episodes that can range in length anywhere from a tight half-hour to three hours or more, echoing and generally following the episodic format of a TRPG "campaign" – a long narrative played out over multiple sessions and broken down into smaller scenarios. Some AP series, such as the *The Adventure Zone* podcast and the livestream series *Critical Role,* have garnered large fan followings and remarkably large profits. However, these are far from the genre's only exemplars. For each major success in the format, there are dozens if not hundreds of series produced in relative obscurity. AP's most visible representatives are highly professional, and indeed, sport impressive production values, charismatic players with extensive training and/or experience in performance, extensive logistical supports and professional networks, and sophisticated and robust monetization. Nevertheless, most AP is produced in a hobbyist mode, the success of more professionalized peers standing well beyond the reach of most practitioners.

To provide a clearer image of what AP looks like, I will briefly describe two AP series: the podcast *Friends at the Table* and the live stream series *Critical Role*. Both series are long-running for the genre, *Friends at the Table* having launched in late 2014 and *Critical Role* in early 2015. They both have relatively large followings, as measured using *Critical Role's* approximately 33,000 active Twitch subscriptions, and *Friends*' roughly 4,000 Patreon subscriptions at time of writing.[3] In both cases, these numbers reflect only a fraction of the series' total audience size, but more robust quantitative data remains out of reach to the public, and what is available complicates comparison due to differences in infrastructure and consumption patterns between the two formats. Both are also popular AP series, though the gap in subscriber counts does speak to a difference in scale: For an AP series, *Friends*' 4,000 patrons (contributing roughly $US 26,000 a month) represents a substantive following for the genre, but they are utterly eclipsed by *Critical Role*'s massive cultural reach.[4] A closer look at the content, structure, and social apparatus of these series will help the reader develop a baseline understanding of this unique media genre.

Critical Role

Critical Role is a wildly popular AP stream starring a cast of veteran voice actors playing a weekly *D&D* game, refereed by Matthew Mercer. To date, they have played through two multiyear campaigns and embarked upon a third, all set within Mercer's fictional world of Exandria. The series is lauded for its complex, epic plots, and memorable characters enhanced by players who

3. Statistics gathered from TwitchTracker.com and Patreon.com on 31 January 2022.
4. More on this in a later section in this chapter.

use their acting and improvisation talents to bring the action to life and engage in entertaining banter. *Critical Role* streams weekly, taking one week off out of every four, with each stream lasting three to four hours.

Each stream begins with a welcome message from Matthew Mercer, and is followed by a round of channel updates from members of the cast (many of whom also hold administrative positions in Critical Role LLC), as well as shout-outs to the episode's sponsors. These latter are performed by cast member Sam Riegel, who in addition to acting as a player, produces bespoke, comedic copy for each sponsor, often accompanied by flourishes such as props, costumes poems, and even musical numbers. Thereafter the game proper begins, with the players acting out scenes, rolling dice, chatting, and consulting rules and notes, all on camera.

A hallmark of *Critical Role*'s visual composition is its juxtaposing of multiple camera feeds into a single frame, such that all the performers are visible at once (see screenshot below), as well as an information panel used alternatingly to display sponsor callouts, character information, or additional camera feeds displaying prop terrain, miniatures, and dice.[5] The edges of the table are also visible, allowing the viewer to see the players' game memorabilia. As is traditional for TRPGs, players alternate between speaking and acting "in character", and out of character as players of the game. These layered views capture non-verbal acting by players not currently in focus, as well as

5. The screenshot also illustrates the prominence of white and masculine bodies in what is likely the most widespread representation of TRPG play. The series' whiteness in particular has been the subject of critical and popular discussion (see eg. van Os 2021; Yow 2022).

reactions by the entire group to in-game events.

Figure 1: Screencap from an episode of Critical Role. *Multiple camera views of the table are juxtaposed, providing a simultaneous view of the Referee and all 8 players. Player Robbie Daymond (top, third from the left) poses extravagantly as he acts out his character's speech while the other players watch, some evincing amusement. The table is strewn with mugs, water bottles, character sheets, notebooks, and dice. Behind the performers is an elaborate set resembling a fantasy tavern or the hold of a ship, strewn with lanterns. In the bottom-left, a panel sometimes used to display character information or a feed of figurines, displays a message from a* Critical Role *sponsor. Bottom-right, the logos of several more sponsors, including a collaboration between the deodorant brand Old Spice and Netflix's* Witcher *series, are overlaid.*

Due to the collaborative narrativity of TRPGs and the role of dice in injecting an element of chance, these games can never be fully planned out in advance. Traditionally, the Referee will have some plan for guiding the session, including NPCs and challenges they might present to the players. However, the exact manner in which these elements are engaged with, and the outcomes of those interactions, are left to a combination of the players, the Referee, the rules, and the dice. As such, when the characters of *Critical Role* engage, for example, in a fight against some monster, there is always the possibility one of their characters will die – or at least be taken out of the action for

some time. The Referee might introduce surprises and major twists to the story, without warning the players. Part of the joy of playing TRPGs – and of watching them – is witnessing the alchemy of these narrative, social, and ludic elements coming together in unique and unexpected ways. *Critical Role*'s elaborate cinematography, combined with a sophisticated filming and editing apparatus, help capture those multiple levels of experience, from narrative action, to social reaction (Decicio 2020).

While *Critical Role* episodes are no longer filmed live – they have been pre-recorded since the beginning of the pandemic – they are broadcast "live" during the show's weekly streaming slot and viewed by a live audience of thousands of fans, or "Critters". Twitch broadcasts incorporate chat rooms that run alongside the stream, allowing viewers to react to and discuss the action in real time. *Critical Role* employs a team of professional moderators to monitor this chat, enforce standards of good conduct, and intervene in bad behaviour (such as spamming, inappropriate language, or brigades of online trolls). This participatory liveness of *Critical Role* is an integral part of its brand; Critters engage in a cycle of eager speculation about forthcoming episodes, posting their reactions as they air, and unpacking the outcomes of recent streams. The use of professional moderators, then, serves to facilitate an integral part of the series' overall package.

Critical Role is a giant in the AP space. It will appear throughout this dissertation as the biggest success story in the genre, but also as an impossible standard with which other AP series must compare. Despite *Critical Role*'s runaway popularity, part of the aim of this research is to better understand how and why other series are not *Critical Role*, and the overall implication of those differentials to producing AP. While the shadow of *Critical Role* looms large, and I will return to

an analysis of its strengths and positioning in Chapter 6, the majority of the dissertation aims to focus on other series.

Friends at the Table

Friends at the Table is a podcast series hosted by games critic, journalist, and developer Austin Walker. Like *Critical Role*, *Friends at the Table* has run through multiple, long-term campaigns with different characters and settings. Yet *Friends* differs in its approach to conceptualizing campaigns: Unlike *Critical Role*, which has consistently featured *D&D*, *Friends* uses its platform to explore other, lesser-known TRPG systems and through them, a variety of genres, settings, and themes. For instance, their first campaign used *Dungeon World*, a system that emulates the tropes of *D&D* while shifting some authorial control away from the Referee and onto the players. The second season, titled "COUNTER/Weight", initially featured a modified version of Dream Machine Productions' *Technoir*, an investigation game set in a science-fiction setting. After a few episodes, the group collectively decided the system was not producing the kinds of story they were interested in, and switched over to Hamish Cameron's *The Sprawl*, a system with a similar setting but a thematic focus on technology and corporate power. The group has played out two more seasons in the world of COUNTER/Weight, using four additional systems.

Friends' commitment to mixing up systems distinguishes it among AP series. While it is not uncommon for series to switch systems in between campaigns, the decision to do so mid-campaign is. Moreover, *Friends* foregrounds its relationships to both systems and the narrative and thematic considerations they engender to a degree most other series do not. Players will discuss, on-air, their critical responses to game mechanics and concepts, and actively deconstruct and modify the

system to suit their needs. This means up-front conversations about the overall shape and direction of the story, and sometimes spontaneous modifications to the rules in order to better support the desired style of play. This focus stands in stark contrast to *Critical Role*, where performers rarely acknowledge the system except when engaging directly with the rules, and critical discussions of the rules are rare.

Friends also renders visible the construction of its fictional worlds. This occurs in part through the use of systems that structure collaborative worldbuilding over the course of play. Moreover, seasons of *Friends at the Table* are punctuated by short runs of world-building games where the cast collaboratively construct a setting or develop an extant one. These episodes highlight the way the world, in dialogue with the system, will illuminate certain themes and support certain narrative arcs. This, again, stands in contrast to *Critical Role* (and the traditional assumptions of *D&D*), where the Referee has exclusive authorial control over the fictional world, carefully managing the balance of what players "know" about the setting. That Matthew Mercer is credited in *Critical Role*-branded TRPG products as the author of its world of Exandria, underscores its distance from the collaborative and iterative worldbuilding on display in *Friends at the Table*.

Friends at the Table's production is far removed from the site of consumption. As a podcast, it consists mainly of audio of the players captured from digital conference calls. Beyond some introduction and background music produced by one of the cast members, Jack de Quidt, the show's presentation is spartan. It is staged and edited to focus on one speaker at a time to minimize extended silence. Compared to the animated performances of *Critical Role*, the range of expression in *Friends at the Table* can seem quite muted.

The asynchronous nature of podcast distribution means that the live chatter supplementing *Critical Role* is replaced by extensive and detailed show notes – a term for the blurbs of text displayed on podcast feeds to accompany episodes. While show notes traditionally provide a short synopsis of the episode's content, credits, and/or links to things references in the show, *Friends at the Table*'s show notes include detailed descriptions of the setting, as well as characters, locations, and other fictional constructs relevant to the episode. These help to contextualize the action but put the onus on the listener to make sense of relevant details rather than on the players to bring them to light.

Actual Play in Perspective

Throughout this dissertation, I maintain both that TRPGs have become vastly more popular over the last decade, and that AP has become an influential force in the TRPG market. A thorough analysis of the relationship between AP and TRPGs' popularity lies beyond the present scope, as is a complete account of TRPGs as a global market or cultural force. Moreover, market statistics on TRPGs are scant, fragmentary, opaque (Marks 2019), and generally limited to a North American context. There are no high-level statistics collected on AP. I can, however, offer some provisional support for these claims.

First, there is ample evidence that the North American TRPG market has been growing rapidly and steadily over the last few years. According to the geek culture market data firm ICv2, TRPG sales have seen consistent year-over-year growth since 2009 (Griepp 2021a). This includes 2018, the only year of the last five or more in which the overall market for hobby games has shrunk (Griepp 2019). The TRPG market is estimated to have more than doubled in size between 2013 and 2016, from $US 15 million to $35 million (Morrissey 2017). 2020 sales are estimated at $US

105 million. In brief, TRPGs' year-over-year growth has been consistent and, in recent years, staggeringly rapid.

TRPGs have also more than doubled their share of the US and Canada hobby games market, from 2.4% in 2016 to 5.2% in 2020 (Griepp 2021b). Nevertheless, it bears noting the relatively small size of that market overall: Hobby games were valued at $US 1.19 billion in 2015, up to $US 2.03 billion in 2020 (Griepp 2021b). As one industry commentator put it, "the hobby games market as a whole is the size of one major movie blockbuster" (Morrissey 2017). Measured another way, annual TRPG retail revenues amount to about one eighth of the sales of *Cyberpunk 2077*, a game that released with quality issues so severe it was pulled from the online shelves of a major distributor (Spurlin 2021). Market statistics like these are a poor measure of play culture or post-purchase activity, but they do indicate that TRPGs are outpacing the steady growth of their own market context. Furthermore, reports that revenues for *D&D* are primarily driven by purchases of starter sets and "Essentials Kit[s]" (Whitten 2020), suggest that many consumers are taking up *D&D* for the first time, and by extension an expanding player base.

Growth in AP is harder to measure, but it is possible to extrapolate from a few key indicators on which data is available: the prominence of *Critical Role* and its relationship to the *D&D* brand. In later chapters I will discuss how *Critical Role*'s unique position reflects its special relationship to industry and other important actors, and how its success stands as an exception that proves the rule; As such, it is problematic to take it as a microcosm for AP in general. However, considering how the most popular AP series interacts with the most popular TRPG brand does provide some insights.

D&D sales have continually broken their own records since the release of the game's 5th edition in 2014. WotC does not publish breakdowns of its profits by brand, but the company has enjoyed ongoing growth and regularly reports year-over-year growth of the *D&D* brand by substantial margins – 31%, for example, in 2020 (Whitten 2021). That same year, WotC's Nathan Stewart told CNBC that "for the first time in our research, it used to be that friends and family were the number [one] reason someone joined *D&D*… Now, the number one reason is, 'I saw someone playing online and I joined'" (Whitten 2020). In November 2017, an informal Twitter poll by TRPG author and publish Mike Shea indicated that 781 out of 1149 (68%) respondents found "*D&D* streamers (like *Critical Role*) to be more inspirational" than intimidating in running games, with only 149 (13%) respondents indicating streamers were neither inspirational nor intimidating. These speak to streamers exerting a widespread cultural influence among TRPG players, even at a time when *Critical Role* was relatively unknown.[6] It is reasonable to speculate now, when *Critical Role* plays an integral role in the TRPG market, that its cultural influence is likewise greater than ever.

In this dissertation, references to AP's influence and popularity are always couched in this context: it is a big fish in a very small, largely anglocentric, and predominately white pond. Its value as an object of study lies not in its status as an economic mover, but as a case study in how technology, labour, media, and play, contribute to the formation of modes of working lives in the context of a

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6. The month of Shea's poll, *Critical Role* accounted for some portion of the Geek & Sundry Twitch.tv channel's 2481 average concurrent viewers. *Critical Role* surpassed that number in August 2018 after launching its own channel, averaging 10 490 concurrent viewers. Its average concurrent viewers for December 2021 (the last month of data at the time of writing) is 59 816.

niche media ecosystem.

Background and Context

After decades of relative obscurity, TRPGs' return to the spotlight of geek culture has been buoyed by AP, which leverages the game's innate performativity, narrativity, and imaginativeness, as well as the accessibility and parasocial personability of new media technologies like video streaming and podcasts. While the recent boom in TRPGs can be attributed to a number of factors, including a renewed taste for board games, the mainstreaming of geek culture, and *D&D*'s rebranding as a polished, creative and social experience, accessible media representations of play also appear to be drivers of its growth (Chalk 2018; Sidhu and Carter 2020).

AP has thrived on the fusion of TRPG play, pop culture, and web-based distribution. Its most successful series, *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone*, leverage the popularity and talent of their performers to deliver charismatic productions of play. *Critical Role* features a cast of well-known voice and TV actors, with guest appearances including *Daredevil*'s Deborah Ann Woll and *True Blood*'s Joe Mangianello. *The Adventure Zone* podcast builds on the online celebrity of its hosts Justin, Travis, and Griffin McElroy, from extant podcasting projects and work in the gaming press. Less popular but still quite successful, *Friends at the Table* draws on the elevated profile of its host, Austin Walker, as a game critic and media personality; the podcast foregrounds its cast's intellectual orientations and showcases play suffused with their artistic and critical skills, education, and politics. Not to understate AP's impact, a public data leak from Twitch.tv in late 2021 revealed that *Critical Role* was the platform's highest-earning channel, bringing in over $9,000,000 in stream revenues in two years (Espinosa 2021; Pesce 2021).

AP is integrated in an economy of geek celebrities and generates its fair share. Matthew Mercer, already an established voice actor, has become one of the most visible faces of D&D for his role as Referee for *Critical Role*. The success of the series has made him a kind of unofficial spokesperson for the game, generating mainstream press coverage, videos, publications, and extensive fan discussion aimed at emulating his technique; and an appearance on *The Late Show* to run a *D&D* session for Stephen Colbert. Mercer's colleague Satine Phoenix has also emerged as a kind of *D&D* guru, appearing in various guide videos, hosting games on the official *D&D* Twitch channel, and launching a career as a Referee for hire. More recently, performer Aabria Iyengar has become a new rising star in the AP scene (Friedman 2022). Alongside AP has emerged the phenomenon of the "star GM", the Referee whose virtuosic technique is held up as exemplary, generating cottage industries and fan cultures devoted to following their example (Langum 2020; White 2019).

AP evidences not only transformations in the culture and production of TRPGs, but the fusion of new media technologies and forms of labour with a deeply analog form of gaming. Game and labour scholars alike have argued for decades that digital technology is blurring boundaries between work and play. This blurring gives rise to new forms of both, and engenders new social relations between individuals, corporations, and media technology. As mediated play for an audience, AP resembles eSports and video game streaming in its leveraging of user-generated content (UGC) platforms and generation of professional, industrial, and commercial structures (see Johnson and Woodcock 2021; Postigo 2016; T. L. Taylor 2012; 2018). Indeed, AP and eSports are not unique in this regard. Online content platforms multiply opportunities to convert one's leisure activities to profit across the cultural economy, even as they capture the value of that

activity and shape horizons for production and profit (Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2022). As such, AP stands as an example of broader transformations in contemporary culture and capitalism. (As Winseck (2011) argues, the two are hard to separate.) Its ambiguities are characteristic of a new and growing reality of precarious, entrepreneurial, and informal work emblematic of digital capitalism in general (Huws 2014; Lorusso 2019) and creative work in particular (Bulut 2015; Duffy 2017; McRobbie 2016).

Yet insofar as it is work, AP's playfulness merits consideration. Indeed, its genealogy lies in noncommercialized cultures of play. "Actual play" used to designate a type of writing employed on an TRPG forum called The Forge, where accounts of play sessions were written up and analyzed to fuel discussions on TRPG design and practice (Torner 2021; White 2020). Nevertheless, these practices were widespread in TRPG communities in general. The name "Actual Play" escaped the Forge and came to encompass audio and video recordings, the latter of which were becoming easier to produce thanks to the availability of software that could capture (and sometimes upload) video conferences, digital distribution networks for video and podcasts, and the growth of virtual tabletop (VTT) applications. Earlier still, campaign records were written up and circulated in hobbyist magazines.In brief, the emergence of AP as business is a recent development in a longer history of play. It is a product of historical processes of structuration and commodification; examining those processes, and the wider political economy of AP, offers insight into how work and play become intermixed (Mosco 2009). Attention to how producers experience these processes reveals their agency in preserving its playfulness.

Aims and Objectives

The objective of this dissertation is to situate and orient AP in scholarly conversations on labour and gaming, and to contribute to a more nuanced theoretical understanding of what it means to play and work in an environment structured by the interests of commercial actors. Accordingly, this dissertation addresses three questions: First, how is AP constituted as a field of cultural production, that is, as a site of creative and cultural work? Second, how is AP practiced by its producers, and why? Third, what can AP production show us about contemporary interweavings of play and labour?

The decision to highlight the question of *labour* in AP is important for two reasons: First, by focusing on labour and the process of production, this dissertation contributes a detailed, behind-the-scenes account of what creating AP entails. These processes are concealed by the product which, as entertainment, naturally highlights its playful and enthusiast elements. My research thus explores facets of AP that are not necessarily visible in the object itself. Second, by adopting an Actor-Network approach to describing labour (more on this in Chapters 2 and 3), I highlight critical matters of how production is structured, and whose agency comes to bear in its practice. My account thereby captures relations of access and influence in AP and TRPGs.

But my interests in this project are not limited to AP. Rather, I analyze AP in the context of a wider economy (or econom*ies*) of cultural production and creative work. Inasmuch as I am interested in AP as a form of labour within TRPG culture, I am also interested in what it reveals about wider developments in labour. As my analysis will show, AP is tied up in structural evolutions of capitalism, including the platformization and casualization of creative labour. Yet it provides an

interesting counterpoint to research on many similar industries — online video and eSports for example — in its extremely limited financial prospects. Indeed, once one looks beyond the big names like *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone,* one finds an industry largely populated by hobbyists and part-timers. Few of these individuals expect to make a living from AP, despite a culture of hustle and ubiquitous monetization. As such, AP foregrounds the importance of alternative (that is, non-monetary) economics in understanding the motives and energies driving its production. The need for such a multi-layered analysis reflects changing social relations between the institutions of work and leisure, technological articulations of an ever-expanding cultural capitalism, and mediated ecologies of information, communication, and affect.

There is, finally, a normative dimension to my research in its concern for what Hesmondhalgh & Baker (2011) term "good work". In brief, I want to bring my analysis of labour into dialogue with questions of whether AP produces creative outcomes that align with the values of its producers, generates adequate returns, and under appropriate or at least tolerable conditions. Yet the economic casualness and ambiguity of AP resists evaluation in the traditional lexicon of creative industries research, or indeed political economy. The former tends to focus on questions of access to something resembling a career in the conventional sense, or at least the benefits thereof. The latter is often concerned with questions of exploitation, alienation, and equitable access to the fruits of one's labour. Both have obvious pertinence to AP, but the shifting sociological ground on which it stands makes it hard to discuss in these terms as they are usually understood. These discourses tend to frame labour and culture in terms of resistance to or oppression by structural conditions of capitalism. These, in turn, risk casting the individual who does not fight back as a dupe, a slave, or a victim of false conscience — figures which fail to capture the complexity of motive and

practice at work in AP. I therefore advance normative interventions for discussing AP and similar forms of production around concepts of adaptation, social recuperation, and "coping" (Garnham 1997, 67).

Structure of the Dissertation

This chapter has provided an overview of TRPGs and AP, and outlined the context and aims of this dissertation. Given the dramatic growth of AP, its significance both within TRPG culture and as a public face for TRPGs, and the high volume of creative effort going into it, it merits serious investigation as a field of cultural production. This dissertation seeks to understand how AP is made, and what it can tell us about the status of work and play.

In Chapter 2, I situate AP in relevant academic discourses and develop my theoretical framework for studying it: While there is a growing literature on AP and TRPGs, no one has yet undertaken a systemic study of its production such as this. I position the contributions of this research to conversations on the political economy of creative industries and game studies, exploring the significance of AP as a form of platformized, game-focused media. My theoretical framework draws upon Bourdieu's (1994) cultural field theory, Actor-Network Theory (abbrev. ANT; Latour 2005), and scene studies, towards an understanding of AP production as situated within a field of positionalities and practices, and structured through the influence of key agencies. Finally, I examine concepts of labour to inform a notion of production as practice.

Chapter 3 lays out my methodology. I begin with a discussion of "realist" epistemologies in political economy (Mosco 2009), segueing back into ANT to clarify how I operationalize the latter

in interventions in Bourdieu's schematization of cultural fields. Next, I reflect on the methodological implications of my positionality as an insider-outsider researcher and an aca-fan. The remainder of the chapter summarizes the processes by which I gathered data for this dissertation through interviews with AP producers and documentary research.

In Chapter 4, I map out relations of production in AP through thick description of the production process. This amounts to a loosely chronological account following AP producers through acts of planning, play, performance, recording, editing, distributing, promoting, distributing, and monetizing AP. I then present an analysis of key actor types in AP – groupings of actors whose agencies have the significant mediating effects on the producers' practice. I close the chapter with some reflections on the high-level influence exerted by these actors upon the field, and what practical constraints these impose upon production.

Chapter 5 complements the analysis on structure in the previous chapter with a discussion of labour. I approach labour as the mode of practice by which AP is produced, and seek to explore the forms of labour present in AP. I begin with an exegesis of the concept of "playbour", a neologism often passed around in discussions of new labour forms but rarely defined. I find that playbour has descriptive purchase for describing the sociological status of play in recorded TRPG sessions. However, it fails to account for the large amounts of non-play labour it involves. I then turn to Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2011) conceptualization of "good work" to explore production's broader context. This necessitates a distinction between professional and amateur production; My analysis finds that despite AP producers' general passion for their work, professional production is characterized by wage and labour scarcity, whereas amateur labour is

characterized by a kind of ambivalent professionalism paired with a focus on pleasure, community, and care in the work.

Chapter 6 seeks to connect the observations made in the previous two chapters to some higher-level consideration of AP's place in the evolving cultural economy. I open with a brief analysis of *Critical Role*'s relationship to the key actors discussed in Chapter 4. This clarifies the nature of vast gulf between the field's most successful professionals and those in less extensively corporatized practices and underscores the challenges professionals face in securing sustainable jobs. I then reflect on what the differences between amateur and professional AP reveal about the changing nature of work and play; here, I highlight an ambivalence in the modes of labour capture at work in AP, noting the ways they both engender dependency on platform capitalism and give rise to sites of coping and care. Finally, I close the dissertation with a discussion of further avenues for research on AP production.

Chapter Two: Why Does Actual Play Matter?

Actual Play stands among a range of new media products emerging through encounters between passionate amateur producers and user-generated content (UCG) platforms, giving rise to new industries. In her book on live game streamers, T. L. Taylor (2018, 135) connects her subject to research on gig workers, musicians, and eSports athletes. She notes that these new types of workers are alike in approaching precarious work as "something they want to pursue as long as possible but concede that it is no sure bet". Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) see work conditions in the cultural industries as a measure of the degree to which the dominant political economy makes good on its claims to value self-expression, self-determination, entrepreneurship, and creativity: the more potential for good work that is well-paying, secure, balanced, and gratifying ("good work"), the more secure those claims. They ask how the realities of creative work stack up against both romantic narratives of a creative career and the degree to which such careers are attainable. As Taylor (2018) notes, convergences of UGC and gaming technology have produced a generation of ambitious yet precarious creative workers, hoping to turn their love of games into livelihoods. However, the novelty of these industries makes long-term career outcomes difficult to gauge.

Taylor also remarks that a focus on "those who continue to work … and are still trying to carve out a professional identity" (2018, 135) closes the way to insights on what it looks like for such efforts to fail. I would add that the focus on (aspiring) professionals also omits amateur and hobbyist producers, who make up the long tail of AP production and large chunks of similar industries (see eg. Törhönen et al. 2019). To reckon with the broader social impacts of these new technologies and modes of social expression, and to fully understand their functions within the

political economy of culture, it is necessary to recognize how they extend economic activity beyond the spatial and conceptual limits of the day job. These questions are particularly pronounced in AP which, as I argued in chapter 1, remains a niche industry despite TRPGs' growing popularity. This context highlights, on the one hand, the curiousness of runaway successes like *Critical Role* or *The Adventure Zone* and, on the other, the matter of what is left to everyone else. In this chapter, I assemble a framework for understanding AP that encompasses a broader range of practices and practitioners and advances an open-ended focus on production as a process through which to map out working lives in AP.

I begin this chapter with a review of the literature on AP and TRPGs and consider relevant theories in creative industries research and game studies. Here, I demonstrate that despite a burgeoning literature on AP and TRPGs, research on the production of AP media remains scarce. Noting gaps around discussions of production, I turn to two other research areas examining the relationships between digital technology, emerging career structures, and passionate work: game studies and creative industries research on UCG. The second section lays out my theoretical framework: As I discuss in Chapter 3, this dissertation operates through iterative analyses using multiple theoretical lenses. However, uniting these analyses is a realist epistemology operationalizing ANT, Bourdieu's theory of cultural fields, and scene studies, to describe AP production as a process mediating between networks of individuals, institutions, and technology. An analytical layer founded in Marxian concepts of labour informs the normative concerns that motivate the latter half of this dissertation.

Literature Review

Actual Play and Tabletop Roleplaying Game Studies

AP is a recent phenomenon, and the research on AP is in its early stages. Nevertheless, a number of papers, chapters, and even an edited collection (S. Jones 2021b) on AP have been published in recent years. This literature roughly breaks down into two areas of focus: Cultural studies of AP audiences and fans, and media studies of AP content and structure. The cultural research explores the relationships between audience communities and producers, demonstrating how interactions between the two influences producers' play and social identities, and audiences' communities and play culture (eg. Apple 2021; McMullin and Hibbard 2021; Hope 2017). Media studies on AP investigate how it constructs meaning, highlighting the genre's unique layering of media logics (eg. Decicio 2020; White 2019). A second strain of media research explores the relationship between the rise of AP, TRPGs' recent surge in popularity, and AP's impact on gaming culture (Chalk 2018; Hope 2017; Sidhu and Carter 2020). These works contribute to understandings of how AP is consumed but not much insight on the people and processes creating it.

Sociological and political economic perspectives are still new to this research area; Marsden & Mason elaborate a theory of "consumable play" (2021, 158), a sensitizing concept that frames play as "a socio-cultural and monetary economy based upon communicative competence and social contracts" (2021, 159). This concept allows the authors to unpack the networks of discourse, agency, and technology that shape the act of play in and beyond AP, reflecting changing conditions in the political economic function of play and games. Their network-focused approach resembles my own breakdown of labour in AP (which I discuss in Chapter 3) and, like this dissertation, seeks

to situate AP in its relationships to capitalism, culture, and practice. Marsden & Mason's longitudinal analyses of *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone* demonstrate how producers transform the content and boundaries of their play as they negotiate their relationships with audiences, supporting a number of my own observations in Chapter 4. While Marsden & Mason's chapter is focused on audiences and processes of consumption, its methodological, theoretical, and empirical strategies are complementary to my own; further research on the political economy of AP could benefit from synthetic readings of these works.

It is not surprising that much of the literature on AP looks specifically at *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone*. These series set the bar for other products, model the norms of the field, and embody its highest aspirations. However, these same qualities make them exceptional cases among AP producers. As I argue in Chapters 4 and 6, these series employ resources that far exceed the means of other producers. The Twitch leak that revealed *Critical Role*'s annual stream revenues to count in the millions (Espinosa 2021; Pesce 2021), themselves only a fraction of their total revenue, highlights the gulf between these champions of the genre and even many of their better-known fellows. The literature's focus on these big series also stands as an obstacle to developing a better understanding of how AP is produced; due to the higher financial and social stakes of public scrutiny, they have an interest in keeping their processes blackboxed. This creates difficulties for research projects interested in the inner workings of AP, while data on fan communities and the series' content is more readily available (see eg. Hope 2017). Research that does provide insight into the work of the most successful producers, like Hedge's (2021) interview with *The Adventure Zone*'s Griffin McElroy, is extremely valuable, but major creators' general reticence to discuss their operations makes such data scarce and limited in scope. I resume this

theme in Chapter 3, where I discuss how my use of interviews provides data not only on the under-studied producers who make up the majority of the field, but also allows for a holistic view of production that would otherwise be difficult to obtain.

There is a growing literature on TRPGs in a number of disciplines.[7] Pertinent to this dissertation are those texts dealing with intersections of TRPG play and media culture. These include sociological studies of TRPG players and the social affordances of TRPG play and groups, as well as the social lives, identities, and culture of TRPG players (eg. Bowman 2010; Femia 2021; Fine 2002; Dashiell 2017; Sich 2012). Social and cultural studies of TRPGs also examine the relationships between media representations of and in TRPGs, the production and circulation of games and meanings (eg. Stang and Trammell 2020; Stenros and Sihvonen 2015; Trammell 2018; Walker 2016), and TRPGs' sociocultural contexts (eg. Chalk 2018; Kamm 2017; 2019; Laycock 2015; White 2019), a complex media ecosystem in which AP is a recent and important entrant. Sidhu & Carter (2020), Torner (2018; 2021), and White (2019; 2020) explore how players' modes of recording and sharing their play, including AP, have informed paradigms of TRPG design and play. Collectively, this research emphasizes interconnections between play culture and media texts, including TRPG products and paratexts. However, it is primarily focused on how these texts are consumed rather than how they are created and distributed – a topic with more purchase in video game studies and creative industries research. This dissertation bridges these literatures, drawing attention to the roles of corporate, technological, and human agencies at a critical juncture

7. This research is excellently encapsulated in an edited collection by José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (2018).

in TRPGs' cultural circuit.

Creative/Cultural Industries

Creative industries (or sometimes cultural industries), refers to the body of scholarship concerned with understanding, analyzing, and theorizing creativity and the creation of cultural goods. This interdisciplinary research area draws on political economy, business scholarship, sociology, and cultural studies. It encompasses, on the one hand, research on the nature of creativity and its social and economic functions and, on the other, knowledge of the types of work involved in producing art and culture. It builds on the works of Adorno & Horkheimer (1972), Benjamin (1935), and Williams (1981), who explore the influence of industrial and capitalist modes of production on the production and content of media forms. They also draw on the cultural studies of the Birmingham School (eg. Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige, and others) to connect modes of cultural production to concepts of expression and political agency. Bourdieu investigates the social economies of taste and class in his theorization of cultural production in its relation to those economies (1994; 2010). A number of empirical studies have documented sectors of the creative industries, ranging in scale from local cultural scenes (eg. Campbell 2013; Shank 1994; Joseph 2012; Woo 2012), to the Hollywood film industry (Caldwell 2008), to wide-ranging efforts to theorize creative work and industry in general (Flew 2012; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). Peterson & Anand (2004) have attempted to formulate a general analytic framework for empirically studying the conditions of cultural production in terms of their social, cultural, economic, and political contexts.

The "creative" in creative industries refers to the body of scholarship interested in theorizing the combined capacity for original thinking and cultural expression. Creativity has become an

important term in theorizations of knowledge work and "the new economy", where intellectual and affective labour are predicted to supplant traditional manufacturing as the key economic driver of the information age (eg. Caves 2000; Florida 2012; Howkins 2013). These authors argue the rise of such work heralds a paradigm where labour is increasingly self-driven and structured towards particular projects and outcomes, rather than by institutional models and bureaucratic frameworks. Nevertheless, extensive managerial literature has emerged to capture and replicate the processes through which organizations can nurture, encourage, and leverage creativity (eg. Bilton 2006; Chen and Huang 2010; Hotho and Champion 2011; C. Jones et al. 2016; McKinlay and Smith 2009).

The critical strains of this research draw on political economy to examine the evolving media and creative industries. Smythe (2012) and Wu (2016) discuss how advertising and the need to capture and retain audiences inform not only the content and structure of mass media, but also its broader sociological apparatus. Many works in this area focus on the nature and quality of creative work; they contextualize contemporary discursive renderings of creativity in neoliberal political projects driving precaritization, casualization, and the dismantling of welfare and labour protections (eg. Banks 2017; McRobbie 1999; 2016; de Peuter 2011). Recent work analyzes new articulations of the creative economy, such as web platforms and the influencer complex (eg. Abidin 2018; Burgess and Green 2009; Bishop 2018; Duffy 2017; Nieborg, Duffy, and Poell 2020; Poell et al. 2017). Feminist scholars also discuss the ongoing influence of gendered and racialized divisions of labour in access to creative work and careers (eg. Duffy 2016; 2017; Harvey and Fisher 2013). For instance, research on independent video game production has shown that much affective labour, integral to key processes of networking and promotion, is un-/undercompensated and

largely falls on women. The subordination of this kind of work to development replicates gendered hierarchies of labour in other established creative industries (Jenson and de Castell 2018; Parker, Whitson, and Simon 2017; Perks et al. 2019). Driven by concerns for social justice and human dignity, a portion of the critical literature investigates the experiential dimensions of creative work and its ability to give rise to good lives, what Hesmondhalgh & Baker term "good work" (2011). This term encompasses normative concepts around social and economic security, mobility, satisfaction with the conditions and products of one's labour, and work-life balance.

Like many new forms of cultural production, especially those fostered by online platforms, AP employs new articulations of labour that, due to their combination of informality and extensive structuration from without, do not fit comfortably within traditional concepts of the workplace or, indeed, work-life balance. McRobbie (2016), Duffy (2016; 2017), Campbell (2013) and others, drawing on feminist political economy (eg. Glucksmann 1995; Rubin 2006; Terranova 2004), have demonstrated how labour has, in any case, never been the exclusive property of the formal economy. They demonstrate how the biopolitical pressures of daily life, corporations, institutions, and policy, structure creative labour at the *societal* level – what McRobbie terms, building on Foucault, the "creativity *dispositif*" (2016). This, crucially, reframes the creative economy not as a set of institutional structures, but as a social horizon of possibilities.

Thus AP, like other new forms of creative labour, demands a reassessment of its social situation as creative work *and* as play and, at the same time, a reevaluation of the normative categories according to which it can be assessed. In its fusion of cultural production and fannish participation, it also blurs the boundaries between job and hobby. One question this dissertation explores is what

AP reveals about the state of creative work: does it afford new opportunities for TRPG players to convert their love of games into sustainable careers? And if so, under what circumstances are such careers possible? What does it take, and what does it mean, to "make it" in AP?

Game Studies and Gaming Media

Game studies is an interdisciplinary research area focusing on digital and analog games, their design and meaning, and the nature of play. While I am not studying a game directly, this dissertation concerns that substantial portion of game studies examining the intersection of games and media culture. This includes theorizations of secondary participation in single-players games, or "tandem play" (Consalvo et al. 2018), and the rapidly growing literature on video game streaming (eg. Jenson and de Castell 2018; Johnson and Woodcock 2019; Skardzius 2020; T. L. Taylor 2018; Walker 2014) and eSports (eg. Johnson and Woodcock 2021; Reitman et al. 2020; Steinkuehler 2020; T. L. Taylor 2012). In keeping with game studies' interdisciplinary scope, such research reflects a diverse set of practices. However, its key themes include the structuration of new forms of engagement with game culture through online spectatorship and easy access to production tools, and the participation of the game industry in shaping and exploiting such engagement.

Studies of eSports and streaming answer renewed calls for more attention to the material culture and sociology of games (Apperley and Jayemane 2012). Amidst a growing consciousness of games as a global cultural and economic force, games are being scrutinized in terms of their functions and the behaviours and practices to which they give rise. This includes their expressivity as texts and their mechanics, especially insofar as games are responsible for reproducing or challenging

heteropatriarchy and white supremacy. The culture of games, in its relationships with its industry, consumer base, and enthusiast press, both independent of and in connection with games as texts, is also under study. Research on game production analyzes how games' cultural functions relate to the conditions under which they are created, and how such conditions relate to the structure of the game industry and, indeed, the creative industries and capitalism at large (eg. Dyer-Witherford and Sharman 2005; Lipkin 2019; Keogh 2020; 2021; Kerr 2006; Perks et al. 2019; Whitson 2019; Whitson and French 2021). Research on game culture as practice emphasizes the role of games as sites of meaning-making, community, and identity formation (eg. Kirkpatrick 2013); as well as sites of virulent cultural struggle and oppression (eg. Braithwaite 2016; Cross 2016; Fickle 2019; Gray 2014; Nakamura 2014). Studies on the modalities of play expand its sociological scope, noting for instance the particular social configurations of cheating and trolling (Consalvo 2007), speed-running (Hemmingsen 2021; Scully-Blaker 2014), and game modding (Gallagher, Jong, and Sinervo 2016; Kücklich 2005b). Finally, a number of studies consider the social and material contexts in which games are produced and played, including political economies of game production noting the function of global production chains and conflict metals (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; Izushi and Aoyama 2006), and the rise of platforms in distributing games and structuring paradigms of ownership (Joseph 2018).

This dissertation adds to and draws upon these discussions in accounting for yet another modality of play in AP: cooperative TRPG play as performance and collective storytelling. In the chapters that follow, I'll examine how the act of play is mediated by the various contexts with which AP overlaps – how the fact of playing games for an audience, often for money, yet as a form of creative expression, shapes the act of play. In this respect, I enter into dialogue with scholars of the

economies of games (eg. Galloway 2007; Nieborg 2015; N. Taylor et al. 2015), whose research investigates the growing overlap between "virtual" economies of play and "real" economies of money and labour.

Theoretical Framework

Political Economy

A number of texts in political economy identify subfields referring approximately to assemblages of information, culture, media and/or technology. These include, for example, Mosco's (2009) political economy of communication, Garnham's (1997) political economy of culture, Winseck's (2011) political economies of media, and Terranova's (2004) network culture. Broadly, I take these subfields and their objects of study as interchangeable, as they all address the ways new technologies have altered human social relations and lives, with a focus on electronic communications, digital culture, and mass or ubiquitous media as key engines of change.

Mosco (2009) lays out a number of the aims and concepts I take up in this dissertation. He frames political economy as "the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources" (2009, 2), characterizing it as focused on "history, the social totality, moral philosophy, and praxis" (2009, 3). His focus on social relations and their interconnection with historical conditions and human activity are essential to my approach to AP.

A key contribution of political economy to my research is a lexicon for describing and analyzing the processes by which political economic forces and praxis give shape to one another. Mosco

(2009) highlights three processes at the heart of political economic analysis: Commodification, or the capture of value and its bringing to market; spatialization, or the modes of managing, traversing, and connecting space, which as Sharma (2011; 2013) points out involves a crucial element of time; and structuration, which refers to the production of conditions of everyday life and horizons for action.

I do not share Mosco's (2009) emphasis on power in the former quotation, understanding power differentials to be ubiquitous to social relations and, as noted by Garnham (1997), prone to occluding the agency of those in subaltern positions. Notably, Mosco's three key processes reproduce this tendency, embedding human life in historical currents without providing much in the way for thinking about praxis. Despite his own insistence on its importance, Mosco ultimately resigns himself to praxis as a fundamental and intractable challenge to political economy (2009, 34–36). This is not the case for Ekbia and Nardi (2017), for whom praxis serves as a critical optic for understanding how political economic processes converge in everyday life. These last authors explore praxis as the way individuals experience and respond to political economy, employing a concept of "predicaments", or ambivalent structural situations steeped in affect, as the ground on which political economy becomes history.

An Actor-Network Approach to "Production"

A fundamental problematic in my research is the porousness of work and play in AP, which in turn destabilizes traditional conceptualizations of "production" as labour. Questions of *what* is produced, *how*, by *who* and for *whom*, are central to this research. Production as such spans multiple tasks and locations. When players get together to record a session, that is production; but

so is the time a Referee spends planning sessions, revising their game notes, etc. The ambiguity lies not in the plurality of tasks but in their ubiquity. For instance, if a producer is passively surfing the web, gets a notification from their series' Discord server, and begins chatting with members of their audience, is that production? Not in the sense of actively creating and editing the footage that make an episode, perhaps, but maybe in the sense of cultivating a spirit of availability and goodwill with the community, affirming the value proposition of their Patreon subscriptions or Twitch communities, and nurturing the income streams that allow them to recoup some of their series' costs. These costs are often paid out of pocket and covering them can be integral to keeping a series online. Thus, tasks that do not strictly belong to production still feed into it and remain integral to the cycle of production as a process.

Given this project's focus on structuration and practice in AP, its descriptive scope is less concerned with arriving at a categorical definition of production than an understanding of what it entails to produce media *in this instance*. I draw on ANT (Latour 2005) to approach production as a multi-sited inquiry into the nature of labour in AP. This is also a methodological point, as I discuss in chapter 3, but it bears noting here since it informs my theoretical framing. ANT builds on the insight that actions and actors tend to extend and overtake one another, and coherent processes are formed in the assemblage of multiples agencies. For instance, AP as a media format emerges in the combined agencies of game players, platforms, computers and software, games and game producers, and audiences. From this perspective, producing AP ceases to be a concrete task or set of tasks, and instead becomes a complex network of relationships. The producer becomes a guide and a way of understanding this network; "production" becomes the matter of how diverse agencies come together in the creation of a particular kind of media object. The stability of AP as

a genre itself appears as a function of these converging agencies, whose operation allows not only for the production of a series, but for the generation of a production *model* spanning multiple media formats and encompassing processes of monetization and promotion.

Fields, Actor-Networks, Scenes

I employ Bourdieu's (1994) concept of a cultural "field" to refer to the range of practices and sociocultural positions taken up by producers of AP. This term reflects the fact that production emerges from historical communities of producers embedded in a particular sociological context traversed by dynamics of power and operating along particular cultural and economic logics. As such, the field provides a model for situating different AP producers and their practices in relation to one another. Bourdieu describes the field of cultural production as composed of positions, relations between positions, processes of position-taking, and forces exerted by agents and through their relations to one another (1994, 30). In AP, these dynamics come into view in, for instance, the range of attitudes towards monetization or the sociological differences between podcasters and streamers. Indeed, this research is primarily concerned with understanding differentials between practices – understanding why and how, for instance, some producers attain a degree of professional success, whereas others do not.

Bourdieu's theory of fields is predicated on the notion of a broader "social space", itself constructed through his analyses of class (Bottero and Crossley 2011, 101). This is reflected in his language around "struggles" for position, power, and various forms of capital. His approach thereby risks overdetermining the interests of practitioners according to those categories. This conceptualization in turn obscures producers' agency and capacity to form a critical consciousness

of their context. His concept of "habitus" (2010) makes strides towards discussing agency by situating practice within embodied assemblages of social position, background, and individual disposition. Again, however, this framing is too liable to see people as driven entirely by social forces and historical accidents. Moreover, constitutive forces that shape fields are taken to prefigure the field itself, obscuring the agencies through which those forces manifest. Together, these concepts make up a schema of cultural activity as a kind of closed loop, ultimately dominated by mysterious forces and subject to variation only at random. For the study of AP, this poses problems both in the mystification of the differential articulation of social forces, and the approach to motives as always already determined by those forces. While I do not dismiss categorically either that social forces exist nor that they have an influence on people's actions, I echo Latour's (2005) assertion that they ought to be taken as efficacious only insofar as they are detectable within specific agencies.

To connect structure and agency, I employ the concept of "scene". As defined in scene studies, scenes concern the structuration of creative and cultural industry, and in how particular cultural clusters seem to take on their own coherence, character, and vitality. Scene studies, itself an amalgam of cultural field theory to ANT, contributes several key insights to my analysis: First, it situates the production of culture within the material flows of everyday life, and highlights the role of human biopower, or "energies," in driving it onward; culture is both a structuring principle of everyday life and an expression of it. Creative energies are channeled through a variety of career structures, institutions, and cultural agencies, indicating pathways through which Bourdieu's social forces, but also local agencies, converge in the emergence of distinct social formations (Straw 2004). Scene analysis also examines how these agencies sometimes conflict or threaten to

undermine or absorb the scene.[8] AP figures as a scene in that it emerges through the expression of fannish passion (energy) for TRPGs, the affordances of technologies facilitating TRPG play and its capture and distribution, and platforms allowing such media to be shared, discussed, co-created, and monetized. A scene approach provides additional tools for understanding the interplay of forces within AP by drawing attention to the action of specific agencies and energies. Meanwhile, it leaves open a space to examine individual practice embedded in the complex social situations encapsulated in Ekbia and Nardi's (2017) predicaments, and recognizes the potential role of such practice in constituting the scene – here taken as itself a kind of field.

Labour: Three Key Perspectives

AP foregrounds a number of critical issues around how best to conceptualize labour. This section examines four categories of theory on contemporary labour addressing different facets of AP: Theorizations of "digital labour", or new configurations of labour mediated by digital technologies; feminist political economy, which challenges established conceptualizations of labour to encompass forms traditionally associated with women and excluded on bases of informality or non-productivity; and critical studies of creative labour, which analyze the political economy of new media and cultural industries and challenge their idealization in neoliberal discourses.

8. See for example Shank's (1994) analysis of the relationship between the Austin music scene, the mainstream American music industry, and the gentrification of the city of Austin as a cultural hub.

Digital labour

Digital labour theory analyzes how digital technologies have restructured and reorganized work in ways that defy traditional formulations. Its critiques are fundamentally concerned with bringing Marxian conceptualizations of work and labour up to date with new capitalist techniques in order to expose exploitative dynamics and economic inequalities embedded in new forms of work and, indeed, play. Crucially, the extension of immediate, always-on digital communications into the home dissolves the boundaries of the classic workplace (Huws 2014). Personal computing connects the home to the workplace and mobile communications render the worker available to their employers from virtually anywhere, any time, resulting in a workforce that is always on-call. In AP, such boundless pressures to produce are apparent in the extraneous forms of labour that accumulate in efforts to publicize or monetize a series; for example, in the extra production encouraged by Patreon, or in the constant attention and moderation required by fan communities.

A key contention in digital labour theory is that new capitalist forms leverage modes of production that do not look or feel like labour (Ekbia and Nardi 2017; Fischer and Fuchs 2015; Scholz 2014), encapsulated in the concept of "playbour" (Kücklich 2005a; N. Taylor et al. 2015), among others. They underscore that participation in these new forms amounts to massive amounts of labour that produce data, affect, media content, and other goods, to the benefit of corporations, virtually for free. This dynamic is visible in AP's interweaving of media production and literal play, which serves to promote and market TRPG products (Sidhu and Carter 2020).

Among these works, research on platforms and "platformization" examine how digital platforms, their design, and their governance, both serve to capture and commodify labour and serve as

brokers, middlemen, and patrons to cultural goods (Burgess 2012; van Dijck, Nieborg, and Poell 2019; Nieborg and Poell 2018; Poell et al. 2017). Fundamentally a platform product, AP is both enabled and constrained by the affordances of the platforms through and for which it is produced. A crucial stake in platform studies is understanding the relationships between the ways in which a platform structures and commodifies labour (see Mosco 2009), and users' ability to own their labour through practice (Duffy, Poell, and Nieborg 2019).

Social reproductive labour

Feminist interventions in political economy have been crucial in revealing forms of labour occluded in classical Marxian formulations of the concept. Beyond the reinscription of 'women's work' as necessary for material reproduction of the *bios*, feminist critique exposes productive forces often overlooked in political economy. Through an analysis of historical practices around sex and gender, Rubin (2006) demonstrates that societies rely on productive forces and techniques outside the market in order to reproduce systems of power. Employing Marxian tools, Rubin argues that although there is an economy to social reproduction, that economy is not the same as the capitalist economy. Thus, she opens up the field of labour to encompass the work of producing and reproducing the social fabric. Subsequent scholarship further refines and diversifies this work: Concepts like affective (Weeks 2007), free (Terranova 2004), and immaterial labour (Hardt and Negri 2000) further decouple Marxian labour from material production, theorizing the social vitality of culture, cooperation, information, and affect, and the many intersecting regimes in which they are produced and exchanged. AP producers I interviewed often employed non-market explanations in positioning their labour, emphasizing its uses as a source of pleasure, recuperation, or social bonding, indicating the salience of these perspectives in understanding their work.

Fan scholars have adopted theorizations of social reproductive labour and emphasize the intrinsic value, or "valueless pleasure" (Stanfill and Condis 2014, para. 1.2) of participation in fan activity to explore its benefits in non-market terms. Fandom is often theorized as a "gift economy" where labour is freely given out of love for the fannish object and/or the community (Booth 2010; Scott 2009; Turk 2013). It also nurtures the social dimensions of fandom, where the community serves as an important site of connection, belonging, and identity construction (Coppa 2014; Duffett 2013; Stanfill and Condis 2014). Nevertheless, fan scholars are wary of businesses' efforts to commodify and manage fannish passions for their own gain, while alienating their labour (eg. van de Goor 2015; Kohnen 2018; Scott 2009; Spence 2014; Stanfill and Condis 2014; Stanfill 2019; Watson 2010). While the rise of digital technology may empower fans to become expressive cultural agents (Jenkins 2006), the conditions and limits to that power are hotly contested.

Scholars disagree on the precise relationship of these alternative labour forms to capitalism. Marxian in background, they understand capitalism as a system of social relations that directs labour to unequal and oppressive ends. For some, like Hardt & Negri (2000) such labour can nurture resistance to exploitation and give rise to more equitable forms of work and exchange. Others (eg. McRobbie 2016, 131–32; Terranova 2004; Weeks 2007) are more ambivalent, emphasizing the historical nature of commodification and its encroachment upon these seemingly resistant modes of production. Rubin's (2006) own theorization does not frame social reproductive labour as fundamentally oppositional or resistant, so much as distinct. Indeed, recent feminist scholarship on labour underscores the ways in which affective and immaterial labour are increasingly imbricated in capitalist production (Harvey and Fisher 2013; Jenson and de Castell 2018; McRobbie 2016; Weeks 2007; Whitson, Simon, and Parker 2018). AP is, in any case,

inseparable from the capitalist technologies of cultural production by which it is both created and brought into exchange (see Winseck 2011, 24). Rather, this body of scholarship underscores that "labour is not equivalent to waged labour" (Terranova 2004, 88). It underscores that labour is complex and multifaceted, and that its status as labour does not preclude it from non-market productive ends.

AP operates in ambiguous relation to questions of outcome and compensation. While producers discuss the good they and others derive from their work, they are also acutely aware of its exploitation by platforms and the TRPG industry as a source of free labour. Unpacking their attitudes towards these dynamics gives way to a multidirectional conception of value, where the industry's gain is not necessarily equivalent to producers' loss.

Creative industries

Research on creativity and the creative industries has produced critical insights into new structurations and ideologies of labour. Creativity is increasingly taken up in the business world as a secret sauce to innovation and prized in contemporary management literature (Bilton 2006; McKinlay and Smith 2009). It is also perceived as a quality of interesting and rewarding work allowing personal fulfillment and expression. For McRobbie (1999; 2016) creativity is all of this as well as a disguise for a neoliberal politics accelerating the precaritization and casualization of jobs and consolidating corporate power (see also Banet-Weiser 2012; Flew 2012; de Peuter 2011; 2014). In short, creative work, while attractive, can also be demeaning and unfair.

Studies of creative industries provide deep, vivid accounts of the activities, institutions, ideas, and conditions comprising creative work (eg. Caldwell 2008; Parker, Whitson, and Simon 2017).

Underlying these accounts is a concern with what Hesmonhalgh and Baker (2011) term "good work", an encompassing concept including questions about the labour process (compensation, autonomy, interest/involvement, self-realisation, security, and work-life balance) and its products (excellence, contribution to a common good). For Hesmondhalgh and Baker, the question of good work is essentially normative, directed towards the question of what forms of work are possible and socially desirable, and according to what criteria. Such questioning has wider sociological and political bearing in its identification of relationships between power, politics, culture, and the subjective experience of work, embedded in industrial processes and infrastructure. Other researchers (Duffy 2017; McRobbie 2016) have expanded the scope of these analyses to include questions of who is able to access good creative work and by what means.

The creativity inherent in AP production is readily apparent, and its practitioners are eager to enumerate the gratifications it provides. However, their accounts also speak to the precarity of their access to these gratifications, and most importantly, to the scarcity of sustainable work in AP in terms of traditional careers.

Critical stakes

These perspectives highlight key questions as to the "why" and "how" of labour in AP. Digital labour studies emphasize tensions between structuration and practice, or the extent to which the work can be directed by producers versus its overdetermination by other actors. Feminist labour and fan scholarship ask what is being produced and exchanged in the economy of AP, and for whom? Finally, the creative industries perspective raises questions of the conditions under which AP production is possible, as well as who is able to produce it. These questions inform my analyses

in the following chapters.

Summary

This chapter has situated my dissertation with respect to three research areas: AP and TRPG studies, creative industries, and game studies. I discussed how my political economic approach to AP provides insight into the evolving relationship between TRPGs, structurations of work and play, and alternative economies of cultural production. I foregrounded the need for a better understanding of the motives and outcomes behind AP. This in turn opens up a key dialectic at the core of my research: How is AP constituted as field? What possibilities does it afford producers, and by what means? This requires understanding the broader social situation in AP – how it relates to the operations of major platforms and corporations – and the local sources of energy, knowledge, and community, that give it shape. The counterpart is a question of practice, which I explore through an analysis of the forms of labour involved in the total production process, including those "off-screen" tasks such as networking and community engagement. Together, these lines of investigation allow for an understanding of how different AP producers orient their practice.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Core Principles

As I have discussed over the previous two chapters, this dissertation is focused on three questions: How is AP constituted as a cultural field? How is AP practiced by its producers, and why? And what can AP production show us about contemporary interweavings of play and labour? In the previous chapter, I clarified how I am approaching these questions conceptually: I frame AP as a field of cultural production and draw upon language from scene studies and ANT to understand how AP works. I also foregrounded concepts and perspectives from the research on labour that will be important to my later analysis.

In this chapter, I lay out my process for gathering data about AP production and analyzing my findings. I used an iterative qualitative research design, employing successive phases of semi-structured interviews and theoretical analysis, combined with ongoing documentary research. Next, I will clarify these terms in relation to my research questions and the ethical and philosophical underpinnings of this project.

Epistemological Realism and Network Mapping

As a work of political economy, this dissertation proceeds from a realist epistemology, that is "an approach to understanding that accepts as real both the concepts and ideas that guide our thinking as well as our observations or what we perceive with our senses" (Mosco 2009, 1). In other words, I assume that the field of AP production really exists, in the sense that the concept of a field

captures an accurate or at least functionally adequate idea of the set of social forces and relationships that structure possibilities for practice in the creation of AP. These forces, relationships, and practices too, are real, in that they designate objective differentials in access to various resources and forms of capital, relationships, and attitude, that shape different modalities of production and positions on the field. When I say I seek to describe how AP is constituted as a cultural field, I mean I seek to identify and understand the actors and processes that determine the particular disposition of social forces and relationships in AP. If I construct my account well, it should contextualize and explain the practices and positions of the AP producers I interviewed, others operating in the field, and individuals who have not yet begun to produce.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, Bourdieu's own (1994) account of the field of cultural production does not neatly reflect the situation with AP – most obviously because it *does* clearly and specifically reflect, and is derived from Bourdieu's empirical research on, the cultural industries in France in the 1970s and -80s. Besides the national context, the intervening decades have seen rapid and radical transformation in the technologies of cultural production, as well as its economy and politics (McRobbie 1999; 2016). Moreover, I am not the first to note that Bourdieu overlooks the role of technology in his sociological analytic of cultural production (Prior 2008, 312–13). Thus, while Bourdieu's concept of a field is sufficient to identify and sketch the outline of the thing I am referring to, it does not satisfactorily account for the particular positions and relationships that shape AP production.

To remedy this limitation, I turn to ANT. A key contribution of ANT is its emphasis on the agency of technology, both in terms of technology's capacity to act upon a situation (to *mediate*) and to

extend the agency of others (to *inter*mediate; Latour 2005, 54). An important implication of this perspective to analyses of cultural production is that "when one opens action up like this, the points of articulation and influence between a range of entities are enlarged such that 'production' becomes a full and expansive concept" (Prior 2008, 314). The act of studying a field then goes from the application of a general model to the specifics of a given setting, to a tracing of the agencies, and thereby relationships, that give the setting shape, and an attention to both internal and external processes of structuration. I here emphasize the term "relationships", a notion Latour himself rejects as a structuring principle in his criticism of concepts of stable "social ties". He argues that arguments about the influence of a "relationship" partake in the mystification of "the social" into an independent and overgeneralized force. For Latour, social ties are only as persistent as the action of one agent upon another, rendering them a subordinate category to agents themselves. I share his concern with the overgeneralization of the social, which is why I turn to ANT to address the drawbacks of Bourdieu's notion of a "social space". However, I share Prior's (2008) assessment that Latour overplays his hand; Bourdieu himself provides tools for understanding the objectivity and stability of social ties in the *habitus*, which refers to the ways in which particular agencies become internalized in dispositions and practices. As I discussed in Chapter 2, I reject Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* due to its overdetermination of agency, but turn instead to Ekbia & Nardi's (2017) "predicament", the situation in which individuals must make difficult decisions based on understandings of what a given agency *can* or *cannot* do, as key moments of those agencies' articulation.

Insider-Outsider Research and Aca-fandom

As I mentioned in chapter 1, I am personally enthusiastic about TRPGs, and spend a lot of my spare time playing, thinking, and talking about them. I am an active participant in several online TRPG communities, from which I have developed several close friendships. Some of the people I interviewed were prior acquaintances, or creators of work I admire. As the people I study are also TRPG players and, presumably, fellow fans, this situates me as an insider-outsider (Dwyer and Buckle 2009) in AP communities, as well as an aca-fan (Cristofari and Guitton 2017). My personal relationship to this field of cultural production is not inherently problematic, but it does colour the research relationship and the implications of this merit unpacking.

It is not uncommon for researchers of popular culture to be members of, or enthusiastic about, the communities they study (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). This requires some reflection on the nature of that relationship, and an assessment of its pros and cons with respect to the researcher's ability to conduct responsible and ethical research. My relationship with AP producers was characterized by, on the one hand, our shared love of TRPGs and, on the other, my status as an outsider to their craft. Our shared interests and play histories offered opportunities for rapport-building and a shared cultural lexicon. However, I also emphasized that they were the experts on AP production processes, and that in fact learning about AP production was a critical piece of my research. This meant that interviews could flow quite freely while we talked about games but needed to become more detail-oriented when we talked about production as I occasionally asked them to explain terminology or expand upon some facet of their work. At the same time, game talk often proved a useful way of digging into important production questions.

I also considered it important to disclose my preferences in TRPG rules and systems. This served two purposes: First, it would help identify differences in our attitudes towards TRPGs that might underlie deeper differences in perspective on central issues of design and play – which in turn may be integral to their production practice. Second this allowed me to clarify my relationship with or disposition toward certain groups and individuals on the TRPG landscape, which can sometimes be fractious. I considered this an important conversation as it helped me establish trust and allowed participants to make informed decisions about what they wanted to share with me. These conversations generally went smoothly and did not seem to produce any serious disconnects.

Hybrid aca-fan positions like mine offer valuable opportunities for mutual exchange between researchers and other communities (Cristofari and Guitton 2017). An opening question in my interviews was whether the participant had any questions about my research. This often led to a short back and forth on topics like my graduate program, the aims of my research, and the nature of my interest in the subject. Participants, many of whom were themselves university educated, were sometimes enthusiastic about some aspect of the study, and would go on to discuss their own relationship to some discourse or concept in their practice. In addition to being quite fun, these moments were opportunities to "follow the actors", as Latour (2005) prescribes, and allow them to guide the discussion for a while.

Ethical Considerations

This project was reviewed in the first months of 2020 by the Ethics Board at York University, receiving approval by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee and Ethics Review Board, and was found to conform to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines.

Because participants were found, and interviews conducted, online, I also reviewed the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR) ethics guidelines (2019) to ensure my methods were conducive to the rights and safety of my participants. For the purposes of conducting ethical research, I have taken the following measures.

AP production is a public endeavor, and producers' public personae are important in building rapport with audiences and obtaining funding. Furthermore, discussing AP production sometimes means discussing uncomfortable relationships with audiences or other producers, or divulging information that could compromise the producers' ability to manage the public perception of their personae. As such, all participants were guaranteed anonymity in this research and any publications that might result. This anonymity extends to the name of the series they produce. As such, I provide identifying information on a series or individual only when I have deemed, first, that such information is necessary to properly contextualize their perspective or practice and, second, that the divulgence of that information does not render their identity traceable. When referring to individual participants, I employ gender-neutral pseudonyms and they/them pronouns. In some instances, I have altered specific biographical details of an account to capture important context while disguising information that may identify the participant and put them at risk. When I do refer to an AP series or producer by name, I relate publicly available information and cite its provenance. It is possible that some publicly available information pertains to individuals I have interviewed; if this is the case, I do not disclose it, and have taken measures to omit or disguise any details that may allow for their linkage.

All participants received a consent form and consented to participate. The consent form detailed

the nature of their participation and the measures taken to protect their identities. Participants had the option at any time to waive their anonymity, if they preferred to have their name attached to their account. They were also free to withdraw from the study at any time, which would result in the removal of all data they provided. No participant took up either option. After each interview was transcribed, I emailed the transcript to the participant(s) involved. They were invited to make amendments, revisions, and redactions to any statement they wished, at any point. In a few cases, some small details were altered, but no significant changes were requested. Participants were also given an honorarium of $10 CAD in thanks for their time. Because this research was carried out remotely, participants indicated how they wanted the money transferred. The specifics of each transfer were worked out on an individual basis and undertaken to the satisfaction of each participant.

Processes and Protocols

My study consisted of multiple, iterative phases of qualitative interviews and ongoing analysis. I conducted the bulk of my interviews over the summer of 2020, with supplementary interviews carried out intermittently until the spring of 2021 to expand on certain topics and round out the sample. This section breaks down the processes and protocols I employed in collecting data and explains the rationale informing those decisions.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through a combination of prior connections, open calls on social media, and snowball sampling. This project was initially designed as an ethnographic observation study

of a single group, and several AP groups operating in the Toronto area had been identified as potential subjects. The Covid-19 pandemic brought lockdowns only a few days after that version of the project received ethics approval. Accordingly, I revised my methods to focus on the interview procedure described below, and included the Toronto-based participants in my first round of email solicitations.

Additional participants were recruited through open calls on Twitter and Reddit. I chose Twitter because I had already established a modest presence on the site among both scholars and TRPG players. My initial tweet encouraged readers to share it if they thought it might reach an interested party. It mentioned that I guaranteed anonymity. This approach paid off, and the tweet was shared by two accounts that aggregate media on AP and connect AP producers. I was also informed by participants that the tweet had circulated on a private Discord server for podcasters. The tweet asked producers to contact me privately, either via direct message or email, and included my professional email address. These measures helped protect participants' anonymity by keeping their contacts with me private. In initial exchanges with contacts, I would also ask for the names of their series; Finding their series allowed me to confirm their identity by matching their name and voice to those of the performers on the show and served as a source of background information I could use while preparing for interviews.

Reddit is subdivided into forums, or "subreddits", focused on a particular topic, community, and/or identity. Users subscribe to subreddits that interest them. The website aggregates posts from users' subscribed subreddits in their main, or home, feed, and they may also visit particular subreddits, thereby only seeing posts made to that forum. The default sorting algorithm for posts grants

visibility according to “hotness”, a combination of favourability, engagement, and recency. Individual users may choose to sort by one of those criteria exclusively, using the “top”, “controversial”, and “new” algorithms respectively. A subreddit can be public, which renders it fully accessible to any Internet user, or private, meaning users must be approved by its moderators to view or interact with its contents. I chose to post my call to the subreddit “r/rpg”, the largest community of TRPG fans on the site. My time as a user of that forum suggested a good mix of playstyles and attitudes among its users, which could provide data on a range of AP practices. This subreddit was also attractive because AP producers sometimes posted there to promote their series, indicating the post was likely to reach its targets. The text of the Reddit post was similar in nature to the Twitter post, although I took advantage of the less restricted post format to include more details about the study and privacy measures.

I carried out most of my interviews during the initial collection phase over the summer of 2020. My first phase of analysis revealed that streamers were seriously underrepresented compared to podcasters, leading me to seek interviews with streamers during the following fall. These contacts were entirely made through a second Twitter post; the first Reddit thread had brought considerably fewer responses than the Twitter thread. Moreover, my interviews suggested that Reddit was not a popular venue for promotion among AP streamers. Additionally, I emailed some producers who had come to my attention through mention by other producers or word of mouth, and whose work seemed to fill out some gap in my data (eg. producers who were highly professionalized, had long streaming careers, or an held administrative position in a podcasting network). I sought additional, targeted interviews of this variety throughout the winter and spring of 2021. These later interviews followed the same general structure as the earlier ones, while giving greater emphasis to those

qualities for which I had initially sought contact.

While AP encompasses three formats – podcasts, livestreams, and edited video – no producers primarily focusing on the third answered my calls or replied to requests for interview sent by email. Edited video is by far the most complex and expensive to produce and stands as the least-practiced form of AP production, even though it is among the most consumed. As such, most edited video series are produced within larger corporate structures, such as CollegeHumor, Smosh, Wizards of the Coast LLC (WotC), and NBC. Producers for such series operate within companies that are traditionally opaque, risk-averse, and less willing to communicate with researchers. As such, my study includes few producers of edited video, focusing instead on the other two formats. I include mention of edited video when information is available in Chapter 4, usually by way of comparison to other formats. I do not include edited video in my discussion of labour in Chapter 5.

Due to the self-selecting nature of the study, contacts were enthusiastic about participating and eager to talk about their work. Many were initially curious about the nature of the study, and a couple participants with research backgrounds inquired about my research questions and methodology prior to or during interviews. I welcomed discussions about the project and made a point of inviting such questions before starting the interview proper; participants did not appear bothered by these discussions, and some expressed excitement about helping spread knowledge about AP. It may be argued that self-selection biased my sample towards those enthusiastic about AP, who would therefore be less likely to discuss contentious elements in the field; However, given the guarantee of anonymity, it seems equally likely some contacts would have seized upon the opportunity to air grievances and ‘set the record straight’ on issues they might not have felt

safe addressing publicly. In fact, participants universally expressed both positive and critical observations; this despite the use of questions specifically worded not to indicate a preferred or value-laden answer (as per King and Horrocks 2010). For instance, rather than asking whether using Twitter was stressful, I would ask descriptive questions like "how do you use Twitter?" and "what is that like for you?"

In all, I interviewed 24 participants over the course of 18 interviews (summarized in the table in Appendix A). This study does not aim for generalizability, as I discuss in the following section. However, my recruitment methods do present some significant gaps in scope, raising questions about the limits of their transferability to other settings and practices (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 298): First, all participants but one resided in Canada or the continental United States. Moreover, my participants were overwhelmingly white and male-identifying, with only nine participants presenting as women or nonbinary (36%), and only four presenting as non-white (16%). These interviews were not sufficient to capture significant differences in the experiences of non-male and especially non-white practitioners, and as such my account may miss out on segments or aspects of the field primarily experienced by individuals with such identities. As I discuss in chapters 5 and 6, woman-identifying participants alluded to communities and dynamics within the field specific to women, confirming that my account provides an incomplete view of marginalized identities and practices in AP.

Interview Design

Network mapping tasks the researcher with investigating situations, identifying agencies at work, and investigating those agencies (Latour 2005). By doing this repeatedly, and with an eye towards

how new data informs their overall understanding of their research questions, a researcher can assemble an account of how different agents come together to manifest a particular situation. In Latour's description, this is often physically laborious as well as intellectually demanding, with the researcher chasing down leads across multiple sites. I had initially planned a similarly meandering investigation of my own, including recording studios, trade shows, and gaming conventions, not to mention a myriad of online spaces. Then the Covid-19 pandemic rendered it impossible for me to be present in many of the sites where my research could take place. My interview-based design reflects a revised approach to network mapping rooted in "predicaments" (Ekbia and Nardi 2017). Predicaments reveal the structural as it manifests in practice and can be investigated through conversations and narratives as well as by observation.

As such, a principle focus of my interview design was to develop narrative accounts of what kinds of activity and interaction went into the full production cycle of an AP series, including efforts to promote and monetize it. Thus, my interview questions tended to be narrative and descriptive in nature, asking participants to walk me through the different tasks, tools, and strategies they employ. These allowed for the production of a "contextualist" understanding, which leverages participants' specialized knowledge to develop an understanding of specific social contexts (King and Horrocks 2010, 20–21). I employed a semi-structured interview design, where a prepared list of open-ended questions served as springboards for conversation. This allowed for detailed description of their practice that left room to expand on aspects I had not known about or about which I lacked previous understanding. I did make sure to cover the full list of questions, but often changed the order to better suit the flow of discussion and allowed certain topics to take up more time than others as participants expanded upon their own specialties and areas of interests. (For

instance, some participants had a lot to say about the finer points of podcast editing, whereas others only gave broad procedural descriptions.) When participants asked me to clarify terms, I often invited them to interpret them as they saw fit, seeing these moments as opportunities to align my understanding of important concepts with theirs.

I carried out my interviews via video call using Zoom. Most interviews were one-on-one, although four were carried out in a group setting involving two or more members of the same AP group. I would usually begin with a few minutes of casual conversation, allowing us to introduce ourselves, deal with any technical issues or concerns, and get comfortable, before activating Zoom's inbuilt recording feature. Interviews usually lasted between 90 minutes and two hours. Zoom's recording feature always captures video as well as audio, but saves the two as separate files. I always deleted the video footage as soon as the interview was over.

Analysis

I used the Otter.ai AI transcription service to transcribe interview recordings. The AI produced an initial transcript, which I then compared to the audio file to correct errors and fill in garbled segments. I conducted analysis using NVIVO, in which I would read through and iteratively code each transcript. In the first round of coding, I identified the tools, objects, intentions, and relationships, that constitute AP production. This generated a list of first-order themes using inductive coding of the transcripts. I took as consistent any themes coded in two or more independent sources (as per Lincoln and Guba 1985, 283, 305), which formed the basis for the thick description presented in chapter 4. Because some statements were pertinent to understanding the field but unique to an individual producer's situation, these could not always be triangulated

with other participants. Where possible, I triangulated these against independent documentary sources or academic research confirming the claim (see section below). I generated second-order themes grouping first-order themes first into the breakdown of production phases discussed in the first half of chapter 4; next, I grouped them according to the kinds of actors they entailed interaction with, forming the units of analysis of actor types in the second half of that chapter. A second coding process identified attitudes towards and reflections on labour, generating the second-order themes that inform the comparative analysis of labour undertaken in chapter 5.

Documentary Research

In addition to my interviews, I employed documentary data to shore up my understanding of various actors and processes. In Chapter 4, I supplement descriptions provided by participants with information gathered from academic research and other documents. For example, I consulted research on Twitch streaming (eg. Postigo 2016; Skardzius 2020; T. L. Taylor 2018), as well as Twitch.tv's official documentation, to develop a better sense of how producers engaged with its back-end. Interviews often yielded information on specific tools, settings, and AP practices I had not known about. I would research these elements after the interview to develop a more nuanced understanding of them. Independent documentary evidence also served to clarify or confirm things brought up by participants. These measures are consistent with an epistemological framework concerned with apprehending objective conditions and following the actors.

My ongoing involvement in TRPG spaces offered a steady stream of embedded cultural knowledge that is impossible to entirely separate from this research. My hobby often brought me into contact with web postings, media, and news articles pertaining to AP. Documents encountered

serendipitously in this manner have also factored into my accounts, although they are not given any special consideration or authority.

Chapter Four: Mapping the Field of Actual Play

This chapter examines key structural dynamics in AP production. In the first half, I use network mapping to develop a thick description of the processes and relationships constituting AP production. I focalize the "core group", the individuals who play and perform the game and generally take on much off-screen labour. I examine how AP producers' work brings them into relationships with outside actors and how the influence of those actors manifests in their navigation of the field. In the second half of this chapter, I identify four key types of actors that, in their relationships with the producer, structure their practice: actors from within the TRPG industry, fellow producers and support workers outside the core group (or "co-producers"), web platforms, and audiences. Finally, I note some key dynamics constituting practice in the field as structured by these actors.

Actual Play Production: "On-Screen" and "Off-Screen" Labour

This section follows the sequence of production in loosely chronological order. A firm step-by-step breakdown of the cycle is impossible; The different phases often overlap, lead back into one another, and iterate in unpredictable ways. This section is better understood as an inventory of tasks constituting the work, with descriptions of their relationships.

Casting and Planning

The first step to launching an AP series is assembling a group of players. Many productions begin with an existing playgroup deciding to record and share their games. This convenient approach to

casting has the advantage of providing a ready-made cast who are already comfortable with one another. However, participants noted a cast so constituted is not necessarily conducive to a more professional product, often lacking expertise in both performance and production. More professionally orientated groups may seek to hire individuals with relevant experience, using casting calls and developing budgets and organizational structures. Some better-resourced series seek to bring in trained actors and editors to elevate the quality of the product. A cottage industry of TRPG streamers has emerged on Twitch.tv who largely develop their careers by appearing on each other's streams. It is also common for AP series to leverage its cast's celebrity and performing bonafides, a recent example being an extended appearance by American actor Jeff Goldblum on the otherwise relatively obscure AP podcast *Dark Dice*.

Casting ties into producers' long-term plans for a series. While some series employ a permanent cast, it is not uncommon, especially on Twitch, to produce limited-run series focused on a specific game or story – a practice widely taken up by streamers I interviewed. Planning a streaming series may involve decisions about how many episodes it will last and the approximate length of each episode, which are important budgetary considerations if working with performers who charge for their services. Professional Twitch producer Little Red Dot broke down her funding and budgeting strategies in a Twitter thread, where she draws a connection between the length of a streaming series and its accompanying campaign and costs associated with producing such a series. She reminds readers to "know how much EACH campaign is going to cost you. Don't forget art & hosting expenses. Did you remember to pay yourself?!" (Little Red Dot 2021). She adds, "If you can't afford a 10-week campaign, then don't run one. Start a 5-week campaign and grow from there. No one can know this but you based on your earnings, budget, & business goals" (Little Red

Dot 2021). These remarks reflect the industry knowledge of an established practitioner and express the negotiation of professional norms reflecting material, social, and cultural conditions in the AP scene on Twitch.

Planning also entails determining what TRPG system and materials to use. I discuss later on the impacts that systems can have on play, but the choice of system also impacts the marketability of the series to audiences and potential sponsors. Advertising is rare, as many AP series do not attract a large enough audience to make for appealing advertising channels. Noel, for instance, included ad breaks in their stream and YouTube videos. However, producers can receive sponsorships from TRPG companies or authors for featuring their games and may also receive compensation, or at least free materials, from producers of accessories such as tables and dice or for promoting their software or services. WotC, the publisher of *D&D*, regularly hosts and produces its own AP and casts Twitch streamers to perform on its shows, including two participants I interviewed. It also partners with other AP series like Dylan's, furnishing them with game materials and funding to feature *D&D* products. TRPG publisher Magpie Games and VTT company Roll20 also sponsor AP producers to promote their products.

Playing

The central productive act in AP is playing a TRPG while recording or live streaming that play. TRPGs are analog games usually comprising two or more players. One player will serve as a Referee (a.k.a. "Dungeon Master", "Game Master", etc.), who narrates an imagined setting and scenario in which the game is set. The remaining players represent individual characters in that setting. Play consists of the players interacting with the fictional situations invented by or with the

Referee or drawn from published text, using game rules (and usually dice) to determine the outcomes of certain actions. As such, play largely consists of speech, as players narrate fictional actions and situations, talk through rules, and report the outcomes of dice rolls to one another.

Because of TRPGs' focus on performance and narration, the most important element in following the game is hearing (and sometimes seeing) the players themselves. In audio formats, players may describe game materials and dice rolls. Video series may also use screen recorders or additional cameras to capture virtual or physical tabletops tracking the game state. Recording apparatuses vary widely depending on the group's resources, degree of investment in the series, and professional aims. The minimum material requirements are relatively modest: one or more devices capable of capturing audio and possibly video (as most personal computers now are), access to TRPG materials (many of which are available at little or no cost), an internet connection that can support streaming for series recorded remotely, and an appropriate time and space in which to record. My data reflects this range in the many participants who assembled their recording setups using whatever was available to them: Lee performed their first streams using "a laptop and my webcam and my laptop's mic"; When Kelly got into streaming, they were limited to appearing on friends' podcasts and streams but could not host their own "because I was running on an old mac that did not like OBS whatsoever. But when I finally saved up the money and got a new laptop, it got a much better internet connection [and] I was able to start" hosting their own streams. Their first stream was a fundraiser "because I needed to raise money for a new computer chair".

But play can also involve extensive technical apparatus, both for mechanical reasons and aesthetic effect. Almost all TRPG systems use character sheets, a document tracking important game

information and narrative background on a given PC. *D&D* uses a set of polyhedral dice in six different shapes, and as a matter of convenience it is common for each player to have their own set. The TRPG *Dogs in the Vineyard* employs three polyhedral types, but requires each player to have multiples of each, and playing the game involves creating and sorting pools of dice; Keeping track of many dice spread out across the table is integral to following the action in that game, and may be challenging to communicate to an audience. One YouTube recording addressed this issue by setting up an overhead "dice cam", providing a top-down view of the table as players roll and sort their dice. TRPG groups may also use maps and figurines to track the positions of PCs and provide a sense of immersion, although most contemporary rules systems do not strictly require their use. These accessories make up part of the spectacle of *Critical Roll*, which employs multiple cameras to provide dynamic views of its intricately crafted model terrain and miniatures.

TRPGs are increasingly played remotely over the internet. Videoconferencing software like Skype, Zoom, and Discord can facilitate the conversational flow of an in-person TRPG session. Remote play introduces some differences, notably a greater difficulty conveying body language and nonverbal cues. A physical tabletop can be substituted with virtual dice rolling applications and file- and screen-sharing for tracking character sheets and images. A variety of VTT apps integrate a suite of such functionalities for a more seamless experience. Popular examples include Roll20 and Fantasy Grounds, which incorporate shared 2D map views, a "token" system allowing users to layer smaller images on the map and move them around like figures, and character sheets and dice rolling integrated with an in-app chat interface. Roll20 offers advanced rule integration in the form of "macros", programmable shortcuts which pull data from character sheets to perform routine dice operations, as well as the option to integrate macros and Javascript commands into

the character sheet itself. Roll20 offers extensive support for dozens of TRPG systems, and users who pay for a subscription can develop their own. Berserk Games' *Tabletop Simulator* does just that – simulates a 3D tabletop, which uses a physics engine to naturalistically simulate rolling physical dice, import 2d images and even fillable PDFs to serve as tokens, character sheets, and reference texts, and import 3d model files for use as terrain and figures. The robustness of such offerings often comes at the price of ease of use, with *Tabletop Simulator*'s rich virtual environment also being the most complex to use.

Performing and Recording

Playing for an audience introduces new dynamics in its execution. AP producers often incorporate theatrical flourishes into their play to make it more entertaining. They speak as their characters, incorporating special "character voices" to denote when doing so and affect their speech with personality and emotion to bring the character to life. In video formats, they may also physically act out some of their character's movements and body language. These techniques are not exclusive to AP, but in casual play stand among a more diverse set of characterization techniques and play priorities. There is also pressure on the group to produce interesting narratives, which can suffer from extensive deliberation, rules talk, or bad group dynamics. Again, conventional TRPG play can be more or less story-focused, but the standards of AP as a genre privilege more narrative orientations to play. Accordingly, producers may choose a given rule system for its ability to provide certain narrative structures, genres, or flow, and producers may introduce changes to the rules they use in order to better facilitate an audience-friendly game. Echoing a sentiment widely held by producers not featuring *D&D*, Jackie launched their podcast because they "knew there were so many more roleplaying games of so many different genres … so I came up with the

concept of doing short-form campaigns … and show off different roleplaying systems." Asra described how between sessions, their group will discuss how the season's story is developing, including "how the system is hindering [a certain narrative thread] versus helping it", potentially leading to modifications to the system or changes of system outright.

The difference between live and asynchronous formats also textures play; Julian related the asynchronous recording techniques of some podcasting collaborators:

> There would be noticeable pauses, as long as 20 or 30 seconds sometimes, as they considered what they were about to do or say. And they know to do that because the editor is going to take out those pauses. So when you listen to it, it flows really nicely, and everyone sounds really smart because they've sat and thought about what they're going to say.

By contrast, live series demand more energetic performances, and long pauses and can make for uncomfortable viewing. Asynchronous recording also allows room to "re-play" a scene or line without disrupting the episode's flow or to repeat a line, whereas a live context requires more flexibility and carrying forward momentum.

Live AP series often incorporate audience participation. Twitch.tv supports live audience chat, which players can monitor and respond to. This interaction encourages audience engagement and can be monetized in the form of rewards for reaching a certain number of subscriptions or donations. Streamers can also set "goals" (collective donation targets) or offer "incentives" (individualized donation rewards) that allow audiences to inject some new mechanical or narrative element in the game. Examples of these elements include granting one or more players a bonus on a role, or even triggering certain fictional events, like the discovery of a treasure or the introduction of a new character. As I discuss in chapter 5, these measures are controversial among streamers,

as the changes to the game state can be disruptive to players' plans and narrative intention and derail the overall story. Because audiences can be unpredictable, it is also difficult to factor audience rewards into planning a stream. More benign incentives, like a shout-out to a donor or subscriber, are less disruptive to the story but can still drag down the flow of the stream if not handled well or going on for too long. Podcasts also have some room for audience involvement, but due to the serial nature of the format, it is less immediate and not as direct. For instance, some groups pledge to name an NPC after every one of their Patreon backers, with no promises made as to the character of that NPC or their role in the story.

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, many AP groups have been playing remotely. Remote play lends itself well to AP: Videoconferencing pairs well with tools that capture audio and video from the screen, making remote play relatively easy to record and broadcast, and some programs even integrate such tools natively. Many Twitch streams use streaming production software like Xsplit or OBS to assemble multiple video and audio feeds into a single view. The standard AP Twitch stream will lay out video feeds showing each player's face tiled against a stylized backdrop. It may also include overlays indicating player and character names, and partial views of dice rollers or VTTs. The stream host can alter the layout live, switching between or rearranging feeds as desired. Audio from conference calls is likewise easy to capture and convert to sound files for import into editing software like Audacity or Reaper. Besides Reaper, all the above software is free or includes a fairly functional free version. The basic microphones and cameras required to record audio and video come built into most current laptop computers or can be purchased at a reasonable price. A strong internet connection is important, as a weak or interrupted connection can compromise audiovisual fidelity and disrupt the flow of play: While living abroad, Noel had to take a break

from streaming because “there were some serious internet connection problems … and our campaigns were cutting in and out.” Nevertheless, many producers eventually purchase higher-end microphones, headsets, and/or cameras, as well as screens, lighting, and rigging, for more professional quality.

Recording in a shared physical space can be somewhat more complicated. Capturing audio usually means using multiple microphones, as many as one per player or more, distributed throughout the space. Microphones with higher sensitivity bands are also more sensitive to ambient noise and, significantly, the clatter of dice. With players freer to move about, they must also pay more attention to their positioning and distance from the microphone to get a clear sound. Sound insulation and “mic discipline” are integral to decent audio, in all formats but especially when recording in person. Jerry described how in their studio space, “we can’t always look at each other depending on where we’re sitting … If Eddie and I are talking, we’re right next to each other. But it’s like, I can’t look at you because I have to look at the microphone, but we’re having a moment.” Video requires one or more cameras, used to capture different angles on the players and table, as well as a disposition of persons, equipment, and play material that affords clear views. Some video series record in studios to better control sound and lighting and use studio rigging. Rowan, who streams video from a studio space, discussed the challenges of training performers to use it:

> We have to remind our actors to please project so that it hits the mic that’s above their heads. If they’re looking down or speaking softly, they have to remember that it’s a stage whisper. But we also have limiters on our mics. So if someone belts out to the rafters, we don’t hear anything because the limiter inhibits all of that.

Video affords opportunities to bring in various visual flourishes such as props and costumes. Some

studio series like *Critical Role* and *Dimension20* incorporate model terrain, figurines and elaborate sets. Dylan's groups sometimes dress up as their characters for streams, even as they continue to perform remotely. These elements are immersive and visually pleasing but can be quite expensive to procure and laborious to prepare. They are therefore most prevalent in edited video. Remote series employing a VTT can also broadcast a feed thereof, substituting lavish (and somewhat easier to produce) maps and 2D tokens for terrain and figures.

Editing and Production

Editing is an important part of putting a professional finish on a series. What it means to edit varies drastically between formats: In podcasts, editing follows recording, whereas in streams editing precedes and overlaps with the performance. The streaming term for this process is "production" and is carried out by "producers", but I categorize it under editing to avoid confusion with the broader conceptualization of production I employ in this dissertation.

In podcasts, editing is often undertaken by a single individual, usually the Referee or some other player in the group. Free and low-cost audio recording and editing software, such as Reaper and Audacity, is widely accessible, with ample learning material available to autodidacts. Editors use these tools to equalize audio levels among players, clean up sound quality, and add sound effects and background music. Podcast editors tighten up the flow of episodes by cutting out long silences, removing noise, cross-talk, and chatter, and sometimes rearranging or adding new dialogue to better contextualize the action. The aesthetic orientation of the series is important here, as it will shape decisions about what to include and what to cut out. For instance, a series with a commitment to teaching players about new systems might make sure to preserve rules discussions, whereas one

more focused on presenting an immersive narrative experience is more likely to cut it out. Despite the accessibility of the software, podcast editing is time- and skill-intensive. Participants often discussed techniques they had learned to streamline their editing process: Jude discusses starting their podcast editing process with a quick render that allows them to visually identify pauses in the flow of the game; "what this does is allow me to find the silences more quickly and take out those silences. For every hour of content, I am probably able to take out four or five minutes of silence." Jan uses a series of "presets" in Audition to filter out ambient sound and "to make it sound like we're all in relatively the same area and that our voices are clear." They added, "when you talk, you naturally get quieter towards the end of your sentences. Everyone does that. [Balancing that] is actually something that took me a really long time to figure out how to do." Expedients like Jan's presets and Jude's visualizations are important when editing an episode can take multiple hours per hour of audio in the finished product.

Editing or "producing" a stream involves managing the multiple audiovisual feeds and presenting them in a way that makes for good viewing. Some streamers frontload this work into pre-stream preparation when they arrange the layout for the stream. For example, before going live, they might run video and mic tests, set up a VTT feed, integrate a chat overlay, or prepare overlays to display player and character names or the status of various incentives. During the stream, incentive trackers will need updating as audiences reach goals, and producers might need to change overlays on the fly. Keeping up with incentives requires the producers to follow contributions on Twitch and possibly StreamLabs, a third-party client used for processing payments, and generating visual overlays and alerts. Some producers might employ stream decks, custom control hardware resembling a lighting board or computer keyboard, consisting of a set of programmable buttons

for quickly managing stream settings, camera inputs, etc., as well as audio mixing boards. These allow for quicker and smoother live editing and reduce on-screen clutter. Unlike with podcasts, editing Twitch streams can draw attention away from the performance itself. Accordingly, streamers I spoke with discussed measures to manage its cognitive load; these include moving production responsibilities away from Referees and onto "player-producers" or designated producers outside the core group.

Distribution and Promotion

Producing a series also means getting it to an audience. Distribution refers to the process of making media content available to audiences, whereas promotion refers to activities meant to attract them. Twitch heavily integrates distribution into the recording process. When beginning a stream, the host is prompted to indicate what game they will be playing. Twitch has options for *D&D*, *Pathfinder RPG*, and a catch-all category for TRPGs. Potential viewers can find the stream by browsing under that game. Twitch users who have watched other TRPG streams may find the stream listed in the recommendations section of their Twitch landing page, and users who have previously followed a channel will receive notifications when it goes live.

The podcasting landscape is a lot more variegated and less integrated. To distribute, podcasters must upload episodes to a web server that can transmit the audio file. They also require an end-user interface through which listeners can discover the file and listen to it. Multiple options exist in both categories. Listeners can generally find their podcasts through listening apps or podcast aggregators, including Spotify, Apple and Google Podcasts, Stitcher, Pocket Casts, etc., or download them directly from the podcasters' website if they have one. Aggregators or

"podcatchers" collect RSS feeds distributing the audio files, as well as metadata including information like episode titles, descriptions, and genre tags. There is currently no universal standard for what metadata aggregators collect, and there are differences in formatting requirements between them: Apple, for instance, has "special naming conventions they want you to use" (Jude). Jay pointed out with some irritation that Apple Podcasts has no category for AP, or even audio drama, limiting their series' discoverability. Notably, many aggregators do not offer hosting, and producers must either find their own hosting or access it through a syndication service like Acast, PodBean, or LibSyn, which combine hosting and aggregator listing, as well as advertising and sponsorship connections. To keep track of the different kinds of metadata required by different platforms, Jude uses a template they created in Google sheets:

> I just plug in like, here's my scheduled list, here's my episode number, what series it is, what date it's going out – I fill it out like a spreadsheet. On a separate page, I can put in the episode number, and it will generate my episode description … It'll automatically generate what the Twitter and Facebook posts should look like, all that stuff. So I can just copy-paste it in the relevant sections on Libsyn, and I can set and forget. … So if I go on vacation, I can not touch [Libsyn] for two months and rest assured that everything's going out as scheduled, on the syndicators, on YouTube, on Facebook, on Twitter, without having to worry about it. I can enjoy a vacation without having to think about the podcast.

Here, Jude demonstrates not only their resourcefulness in managing these platforms but also reveals the large volume of minute tasks that go along with uploading an episode.

Attracting audiences involves extensive social media use across both formats. Producers post to Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and other platforms to increase visibility for their series, sharing links to episodes and streams and engaging with fans and other producers. These platforms carefully conceal the workings of the algorithms they use to sort content. However, participants

nevertheless presented a range of theories on how best to leverage them and employed practices like posting at specific intervals or on a schedule, privileging certain content (Jerry suggested that Twitter favours images but "doesn't like links"), and diversifying their posts.

Algorithmic optimization is also a concern with respect to podcast aggregators and Twitch, which likewise use algorithms to generate user recommendations. Categorization issues exist in both formats; as noted above, Apple Podcasts does not provide a genre tag for AP, and producers must figure out how best to make their work discoverable to listeners on this and numerous other platforms, each with their own sorting schemes. On Twitch, there are categories for two named TRPGs, but only an umbrella category for groups not playing *D&D* or *Pathfinder*. (As such, the *D&D* category displays many series that are, in fact, playing other games but sort themselves under *D&D* and access its larger subscriber base). These algorithms also tend to amplify more popular series, creating an inbuilt reason behind the platform media mainstay, present in AP as well, of calling on audiences to like, comment, subscribe, and rate.

Guest appearances and collaborations, both within and outside AP, are another popular means of gaining attention. Kelly and Lee launched their streaming careers appearing on others' streams and podcasts, allowing them to build a following before starting their own channels. Twitch.tv supports this kind of collaboration in the form of "hosting", where an offline channel can mirror a live channel, encouraging its followers to watch the hosted content. Noel, who has a background in eSports, streams with prominent e-athletes and video game streamers, gaining access to those streamers' audiences. Twitch users can also stage "raids", where a host rallies viewers to visit another channel using a prompt displayed in the channel interface. In addition to amplifying

another broadcast, raids combine the audiences as "the forwarded viewers are actually sent to the channel page of the new streamer and are also part of the new chat there." (Own3d.tv 2021).

Community Work

In addition to producing media for audiences, AP producers often interact with their audiences through and outside the AP setting. These interactions foster long-term engagement with audiences and can be an enjoyable form of interaction in their own right. In streams, producers can respond to audiences in chat. As discussed above, audience interaction can be disruptive, leading producers to circumscribe them. Noel and Kelly related occasionally taking a moment to clarify things that were happening in the game in response to questions in chat or to intervene in bad behaviour.

Producers maintain community spaces where followers can interact with them and other fans. Such spaces usually take the form of Discord chat servers. This allows producers to develop more direct relationships with their most enthusiastic audience members and a sense of community around their show. For producers I spoke with, these spaces are something of a mixed blessing: For Cullen, speaking with fans on their Discord server was "one of my favourite things … it is so uplifting and rewarding to have an actual genuine fan come in and just nerd out about your show with you." However, granting that degree of access to audiences can also be suffocating. As Asra put it,

> It's exhausting to see a space where you get constant, second-by-second feedback of creative work that you do that's separate from, for instance, thoughtful critique. [. . .] That [critique] is different to me in a real way than, like, someone halfway through an episode saying that they didn't like scene X. Or the opposite sometimes is more exhausting: Someone, before an episode drops, being like, 'is the episode up yet? Is the episode up yet? Is it? Can I listen to it yet? I hope they put it out soon. I want to listen to it before I go to bed.' Like, I just don't need that energy in my life.

Asra later connected managing their community to a sense of being "on-call", which they compared to "that style of contemporary workplace flexibility, except with relation to fans, instead of to your boss. [Your boss] can text you to tell you to come into work; your fans can text you to say, 'will this character show up in the next episode?'" Kay cited an incident where a fan of their podcast approached them at a convention hotel. Kay found it "unnerving" how much the fan already knew about them: "They were answering questions for my partner. Someone would ask him a question about his life, and they [the fan] would answer it for him." This led Kay's group to limit these interactions to closer friends, "so thinking about [them] as fans seems like that's not really the relationship anymore." Indeed, most producers I interviewed discussed needing to impose measures to limit their fan interactions to specific contexts and manage the stress of dealing with needy communities.

Participants also identified conventions as sites where they could reach out to fans. Since the outbreak of Covid-19, most game conventions, once vital events in TRPG culture, have been cancelled or moved online. Now, in mid-2022, some major events have begun to take place in person once again. Notably, GenCon, the largest annual meetup of TRPG fans, held an in-person event in 2021 after cancelling their convention in 2020. Attending conventions is exhausting and expensive, and many producers balance AP among various work commitments that they cannot necessarily suspend to attend a convention. Jay, Jude, and Kay had all "performed" their series at conventions, playing TRPGs on stage for a live audience. Jackie, who runs a podcast network, helps their podcasters book convention shows, set up to record them, and "make sure that our hosts, the first time they are doing Gen Con, are walking away with content they could use." Jean has not performed at a convention, but they did attend a local convention where they "had a few

fans that met up with us. I actually ran a one-shot[9] for them that night, within the [podcast's] universe." Conventions were framed as fun social opportunities and allowed producers to deepen their relationships with existing followers, but Kay noted, "I'm not sure that it actually brings in more listenership." Likewise, Jay emphasized the opportunities for fun and "networking potential" at conventions over attracting new listeners to their podcast.

Monetization

A producer's choice of format will strongly shape their monetization options. Through rewards, Twitch and StreamLabs integrate several monetization processes directly into the live stream structure. Ad hoc donations can be made through StreamLabs or using "bits", Twitch's proprietary currency. Viewers can also purchase subscriptions to a channel on a monthly basis. As with bits, Twitch takes a share of proceeds from subscriptions. Beyond in-stream rewards, producers can attach new participatory options to subscriptions, such as badges displayed next to their name in chat, access to exclusive chat emotes, ad-free viewing, and even subscriber-only streams.

Podcasts do not include this kind of built-in monetization. Instead, podcasters seeking to make money off their show generally turn to Patreon. Patreon allows producers to grant tiered access to exclusive content and benefits, with more expensive tiers generally providing higher degrees of access. Podcasters do not usually gate their main podcast behind subscriptions, but Patreon rewards can include early access to new episodes of the main show, as well as access to fan spaces,

9. Self-contained TRPG session.

additional content, and updates from the creators. It is more common to restrict Discord memberships to Patreon subscribers. Producers can also reward subscribers with shout-outs in the show or schemes that integrate them in the performance, such as the technique mentioned above of naming NPCs after patrons. A similar platform called Ko-Fi allows for one-time donations of a certain quantity ("buying the producer a coffee"), and some producers also attach Paypal links to their show notes and websites so that audiences can leave tips. It bears noting that Twitch streamers can and do make use of these other monetization channels but tend to fit them into a larger suite of monetization options. Noel cited Patreon as their most significant source of AP income and had tied their Patreon directly into their streaming schedule by hosting a weekly on-stream game for patrons who pay at least US$150 per month.

Finally, AP producers can monetize their series by selling merchandise. Platforms like TeePublic and Red Bubble allow producers to sell t-shirts, posters, and other memorabilia with custom designs based on their show. These designs may feature popular characters, well-known quotes, or in-jokes generated throughout the series. While these options are convenient, producers I spoke with mentioned that the returns on merchandise were low compared to subscriptions and tips. According to Jackie, who makes US$18000 a year from their AP podcast, "we make almost no money from merchandise … we are lucky if we ever get in the green from purchasing the art necessary to make a shirt." In other words, lifetime sales on a shirt designs usually fall short of the "200 to 500 dollars" they incur in expenses. Kay estimated their series' total shirt sales at "a handful". They emphasized that the main form of support they derived from selling merchandise was emotional: "One of the first people to ever buy a shirt from us always posts pictures of himself wearing it. … To have somebody being really visibly excited is very heartwarming when you're

pretty small."

It bears noting that not all producers monetize their series, may monetize to a greater or lesser degree, and provide a variety of reasons for doing so or not. While some seek to make sustainable careers out of AP, others are happy merely to recoup equipment and hosting costs or simply monetize because the option is there. Some have no interest in making money due to the stress monetizing would introduce to a pleasurable hobby. As I discuss further in Chapter 5, reasons for producing, or even monetizing AP, can have little to do with money.

Networking

AP producers depend heavily on one another to develop their talents and navigate the field. Producers I spoke with communicate on private Discord servers, through AP-focused Twitter lists, and in the chat sections of each other's streams. Producers, especially streamers, help each other gain visibility by hosting each other as guests or cast members. They engage extensively with each other's work, sharing knowledge, boosting viewer numbers, and cheering their friends in chat. Many podcasters I spoke with were members of specialized podcasting communities, where they could exchange tips and moral support. They could even call upon these communities for help with specific editing problems or, in Jude's case, to provide occasional voiceover segments. Jerry, Emery, Cullen, Jude, Jean, and Addison all expressed the sentiment that most of their fans were other podcasters. Some podcasters even form formal networks, like the one organized by Jackie, that help members reach audiences, develop production skills, and promote one another's work.

While conventions were not ideal sites for building a fanbase, producers were emphatic about the

networking opportunities they provided. Game conventions often include special events for podcasters and streamers, and convention are sites where producers get to know one another. These occasions offer precious chances to make serendipitous connections with other producers, develop lasting friendships, and maintain old ones. Jay described Gen Con as "an amazing hub of creators … you all want to collaborate and meet back up with each other. … You don't generate content at the convention; you generate the networks that generate a year's worth of content." Kay noted that their AP group all live in different cities; conventions were a rare opportunity to all be in the same physical space together. They regarded being together at cons as a way of "strengthening the fabric", within their group and with other producers.

Participants noted conventions were good venues for developing connections within the wider TRPG industry, which are useful for series seeking to monetize. For example, industry connections may call streamers to demo new products and arrange sponsorships and advertising spots. These connections may also furnish AP producers with free materials to use in their series. Some TRPG publishers actively pursue such partnerships, including WotC and Magpie games.

Key Actor Types

The thick account above lays out the tasks and relationships involved in producing AP. Producers manage relationships with industry figures and products, production equipment and software, with various social media and content platforms, and with each other. This section considers the constitutive dynamics of the field. I identify four types of actors with critical structuring influences on producers' practices and examine how producers position themselves in relation to these actors in the development of their practice. Finally, I consider how these positions give rise to critical

differentials in the field.

Tabletop Roleplaying Game Industry

This type incorporates both industrial actors producing TRPGs and the products themselves. For example, it includes both WotC, the subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. that publishes *D&D* and the *D&D* product line. TRPG products are core creative tools in AP and play an important role in structuring play and performance; Moreover, the companies who produce them are often active in gaining exposure for their products through the visibility provided by AP.

When AP producers decide which game (or games) to play for their series, they are at once making creative decisions about the content of their series and economic decisions about access to audiences and potential backers. TRPGs are, among other things, tools for creative storytelling. Through their rules and other play materials, they define fictional settings and populate them. Their mechanics pace and direct the flow of play, imposing a kind of simulational metaphysics and texture the performance at large. As such, the chosen system is a critical component in the construction of narrative (even in more "freeform" play styles, although to a lesser degree). For several groups I spoke with, experimenting with different systems on their series served to explore new story structures and characters. Chance told me:

> There's one character in particular that I hold very close to my heart, who I played through a number of different campaigns and systems, where, for me, she was exploring being a victim of domestic violence. And I'm really glad that I was able to carve out a space where I could explore that using many different mediums.

For this player, who had a background in creative and performing arts, playing the same character across multiple systems was a way of exploring different aspects of that same character. The

framing of systems as “many different mediums” speaks to how different systems focalize different aspects of characters and styles of narrative. Near the end of the first season of *The Adventure Zone*, which had previously featured *D&D*, the Referee introduced a bespoke system of his own devising allowing the players to play through long spans of fictional time at once and providing them with a high degree of narrative authority. The system change was intended to break away from the relative granularity of *D&D* (Hedge 2021). A hallmark of the *Friends at the Table* podcast is its willingness to change up systems explicitly to introduce different genre conventions and story structures and provide new perspectives on ongoing narratives.

The TRPG industry is itself interested and involved in the production of AP. It provides visibility for TRPG products and instruction in their use, paired with entertaining and charismatic performances. As such, some producers of TRPG products seek to leverage AP in their marketing. For example, the online VTT app Roll20 produces an AP series featuring popular streamers, showcasing the various systems supported by their software and, thereby, the software itself. Independent TRPG publisher Magpie Games uses outreach programs to train streamers and professional Game Masters to run their games. Magpie also provides links to APs featuring their games on their website’s product pages, allowing potential players to see the game in action.

Julian produces AP as part of a small, independent TRPG publishing operation. For them, it was important to create AP throughout the development process to build up a player base and conversation about the game in anticipation of its release and demonstrate gameplay for crowdsourcing campaigns. They described how they felt that AP has become ingrained in the broader culture of producing and consuming TRPGS:

> To me, one of the most fascinating angles about Actual Play is how there's an expectation that you have more *stuff* with the rules. Like, the rules of the game are one thing. But more and more, you see rulesets that are written with the understanding that you'll be able to watch a video or read a blog post or do some other kind of supplemental thing to understand it better. (Julian)

WotC also have a long-standing investment in Actual Play to promote the *D&D* brand. In 2009 -- before the term "Actual Play" was in use -- they launched a podcast called Acquisitions Inc., featuring the authors of the popular webcomic Penny Arcade, playing the game's 4th edition. Acquisitions Inc. would go on to spawn a host of spin-off series, live shows, and an official *D&D* product line featuring its world and characters. They regularly partner with Twitch streamers and video producers to develop *D&D*-focused AP, providing promotional coverage, airtime, play materials, studio spaces, talent and logistical support, and a degree of funding. They also work with professional studios to create highly polished, lavishly produced edited video series, like *Stuff of Legends* and *Dimension20*. These strategies underscore the use of streaming in gaining visibility for *D&D*, but AP also contributes value in its ability to generate fandom and cultivate followings. WotC banks on coverage from channels with a consistent track record and devoted audiences, even when they do not exclusively play *D&D*; Dylan had been working with WotC for several years when I interviewed them and noted the company began to expand its engagement with AP when "they realized they could market to this crowd and get the *Critical Role* fanbase involved in their stuff." The company's efforts to bring in the fanbase of this most popular series are exemplified in the Explorer's Guide to Wildemount (Mercer et al. 2020), an official *D&D*-branded sourcebook set in the world of *Critical Role* and published by WotC.

An AP series' reach and its connections to the TRPG industry tend to go hand in hand. More

popular series often sell advertising slots to producers of TRPG products and accessories, like miniatures, terrain, dice, gaming tables, rules supplements, etc. APs also use monetized affiliate links to purchase the games they feature, earning a small royalty for each purchase made through the link. As I discuss later on, advertising was a relatively minor, often negligible source of revenue among participants; At the same time, the involvement of larger companies like Magpie and WotC demonstrates the potential benefits of industry partnerships.

Co-Producers

AP draws on labour flows feeding into AP from beyond the recording space. Producing AP requires specialized knowledge and skills to stage, produce, promote, and distribute a series. AP products are developed in relation to producers' access to these elements, as well as in dialogue with other producers. I categorize this grouping of fellow producers, support workers, and mentors, as co-producers. A series' relationship to these factors bears significantly on its reach and monetizability and proportionately inflates the necessary investment of labour and various forms of capital.

For smaller series, most of this peripheral labour is handled in-house. In many instances, the work of editing and promoting a show and managing its community is shared among members of the group or concentrated in the hands of the Referee as a kind of *de facto* showrunner. In more professional efforts, these roles can be hired out in order to lessen the burden on the core group. Dylan's series was bringing in enough money to pay full-time wages to a small staff of producers and managers and part-time to its performers. (Notably, some of these funds had only become available because, due to Covid, the group was no longer renting studio space.) Their channel ran

multiple series with different groups, and each group had a designated "producer/player". When I clarified that this player was not the Referee, Dylan explained:

> What I found is that the [Referee] is usually so preoccupied with both figuring out what they're going to do from week to week, and because of the engagement and interactivity that we do on the channel to raise money, so they have a lot that they're taking on, that I try to take them out of thinking of all the marketing stuff.

The producer-player would be responsible for arranging logistics and scheduling for the series, special events, and feeding updates and series news to the channel's full-time "social media guru", which served to relieve the labour burden on the Referee. Noel largely operates alone without a fixed group but had recently hired a "person to help me manage all these other projects … cut VODs, and investigate how best to tag things on YouTube and how to manage all the crap I don't want to do." They also mentioned they "had some volunteer moderators … who like to help out, and they've been helping manage the Discord and Twitch chat." Noel noted that it was only thanks to this additional labour that they had been able to sustain their "lackadaisical lifestyle of just kind of enjoying things and working as I need to, but never more than I have to."

In brief, the "production" side of AP production creates a need for additional labour, which often surpasses the means of the core team of players. In terms laid out by Whitson, Simon, and Parker (2018), developing professional AP requires "connecting the inside of [the production process] to outside communities of other [producers], fans, funders, and distributors, a practice we refer to as 'interface work'" (2018, 2).[10]

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10. Whitson et al.'s article discusses these factors in relation to "indie" cultural production in game

Interface work is managed differently depending on the format of the series and involves different actors: In podcasts, specialized podcasting networks have emerged to help producers connect, share knowledge and skills, and promote one another's work. More formal networks like the One Shot Network (an outgrowth of the AP podcast *One Shot*) may also provide a degree of resourcing and advertising connections. Less formal networks, which often take the form of Twitter lists or Discord servers, are less organized but still important sources of affective and immaterial labour. Jude handled most of their production alone but occasionally turned to their network for help learning software or for voice-acted snippets. For many podcasters, these networks are also sources of emotional support and social bonds, which are helpful in maintaining motivation and enthusiasm for the series.

On Twitch, co-production operates through a platform-centred network of AP performers, chat moderators, and community managers. Twitch creates conditions for the overlapping of viewing and broadcasting practices; In addition to hosting each other's streams, as Twitch users, streamers act alongside ordinary viewers in watching, discussing, and participating in other broadcasts. Kelly, a Twitch-based performer and community manager in my study, discovered streaming through *Critical Role*. After catching up on its back catalogue, they began to engage with the live stream more directly:

> I started watching it live on Twitch, and I learned about the Twitch community. And it made me want to do that and want to get involved in things online. It really opened up my world, learning how to stream. And especially the AP TTRPG scene, it really opened up

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development, but is oriented towards "the larger context of cultural production and its possible futures" (Whitson, Simon, and Parker 2018, 2). Their language here resonates in both instances.

> my eyes because I would see people I would follow from *Critical Role*, like people I would make friends with in chat and stuff, like, 'Oh, we're going live playing this game.' (Kelly)

Like several other participants pursuing a living in AP on Twitch, Kelly gradually underwent a transition from viewer to streamer as they became more involved in the scene. Casual participation and affective bonds eventually formed the basis for a broader vocational commitment. Additionally, this space is heavily patronized by WotC and other TRPG publishers.

Edited video series, which necessarily require major labour investment and technical skill in filming and editing, are almost exclusively the purview of professional operations with strong ties to established cultural industries. *Dimension20* and *Stuff of Legends* both credit extensive production teams, including prop designers, videographers, camera operators, directors, and executive producers, and are offshoots of existing media brands -- CollegeHumor and Smosh, respectively. HarmonQuest and Relics & Rarities leverage the mainstream celebrity status of their hosts (Dan Harmon and Deborah Ann Woll) in addition to corporate backing. Rather than seeking to monetize the series directly, these are produced within larger media enterprises and synergistic business strategies that allow for degrees of spectacle and polish well beyond the reach of auterish practitioners.

Other forms of co-production are important in boosting a series' visibility. Asra "traced so much of [their] success back to fan artists. Fan artists put the show in front of other fan artists, who put the show in front of more eyes, including other people who are doing Actual Play," who in turn promoted them further. Kay noted that shout-outs or guest appearances from big names in AP led to "a definite spike [in listenership] … It levels out, but it levels above where it was before." These

forms of promotion generate buzz and attract audiences. Thus prior followings and relationships within and beyond the space are often key assets in a series' professionalization: Noel discussed how an extant following from a period of variety streaming, as well as high-profile friendships in eSports, helped them to quickly become established doing AP on Twitch. Their familiarity with the technology and streaming practices, and access to support from co-producers, endowed them with critical cultural, social, and intellectual capital well beyond what they would have to work with if they had been starting fresh.

Co-production also operates along differentials of scale. While not overtly targeting other series, the example set by major producers in the field has a knock-on effect on other practices. High-profile successes like *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone* that come to embody standards of production are both the best-known works in the field and among the hardest to emulate. Participants reflected that these series benefit from professional expertise and budgets that they could not begin to match while also noting the importance of a "professional" look and feel to one's own work.

Prior to the pandemic, many AP streams presented in-person play, often around elaborate gaming tables in studios with sophisticated mic and camera riggings. Parker described a cluster (or "tribe") of TRPG streamers based in Los Angeles:

> In LA, it really comes down to who you know and what you do. So there are like the roleplayer tribe, these are the people who do D&D on Twitch, that do D&D on YouTube, Geek & Sundry… They tend to run with the same tribe everywhere they go, and that community has its own networks.

Rowan added:

> There are definitely different tiers, and … you can sort of determine the tiers by who gets what shows and networks because those networks offer paying gigs. So, for example, if you can get on the *Dungeons & Dragons* Twitch channel, or anything sponsored by, like, White Wolf… There was a point where I did *D&D* for a month and it paid my rent!

Rowan did not clarify what was being organized into these "tiers", but from what they did provide, they seem to refer to the way performers develop relationships with more influential patrons in the TRPG industry, who in turn have access to better studios and talent and bigger audiences. Parker suggested that "since AP is similar to other forms of media, it was immediately handled like a TV show or a movie, like a Hollywood product. … Which means now we have all the pros and cons of a Hollywood infrastructure." Indeed, these two streamers' series made use of that same infrastructure, drawing on local acting talent and a shared studio space developed specifically for AP. Dylan, also based in LA, had made similar use of local resources until the pandemic; Patronage from Wizard of the Coast had led them to shift the focus of their Twitch channel from *Pathfinder RPG* to *D&D*. A precursor to the LA "tribe" is visible in *Dungeon Majesty*, a 2004 public access show following the *D&D* campaign of a group of Hollywood industry workers; In addition to public access TV equipment, these producers used costumes, props, and editing equipment they accessed through their day jobs (Chalk 2018).

The Covid-19 pandemic has somewhat shifted the dynamics of co-production, especially in video. Most APs have transitioned to remote play formats (although some have begun to resume in-person play). This shift appears, for the moment, to have decentered the economy of talent and the calculus of costs, allowing for groups to play across long distances but has rendered production somewhat more spartan, with the disappearance of lavish studios and props. As some begin to forecast a return to "normal" life, it remains unclear to what degree these new spatial arrangements

will outlast the pandemic or whether its conclusion may reinstate prior local hierarchies.

Platforms

It is no understatement that AP is a platform product; There is no meaningful AP scene or industry without the technological platforms enabling its distribution and monetization. This section examines the roles of various platforms in brokering access to audiences, income, and networks of co-production. It underscores how Twitch integrates key functionalities providing significant advantages to those producers who use it while noting the more varied platform practices of podcasters and the more restricted platformization of edited video. This section demonstrates another dimension along which format engenders critical differentials in a product's economic positioning through those formats' relationship to platforms.

The website Twitch.tv provides an all-in-one platform where AP can be produced and broadcast live; viewed, discussed, and engaged with interactively by audiences; monetized; and promoted. In the previous section, I noted how Twitch's integration of features facilitates transitions between participation and (co-)production. Indeed, the ability to "host" other streams or direct one's viewers to another's stream in "raids", creates platform-specific opportunities for synergistic cross-promotion.

Twitch also incorporates monetization as a core function. Hosts can monetize their channels through subscriptions and donations of "bits" -- a form of local currency which can be exchanged for money, with the platform taking a cut of every exchange. The monetization service Streamlabs can also be integrated into one's stream, allowing for more robust donation processing and more

complex incentive schemes. Streamlabs may be critical for more modest streams, as Twitch restricts its native monetization functions to “Affiliates” and “Partners” -- status granted to channels that meet certain benchmarks for regularity and engagement (“Twitch Affiliate” n.d.). Monetization is looped into participation in the stream through a variety of processes, some practiced and some inherent to the platform. For instance, bit donations and subscriptions are displayed on-screen as they occur, and many streamers practice thanking or rewarding their audiences for such contributions. Streamers may reward their subscribers through shout-outs, special badges or other status symbols to sport in chat, opportunities to participate in the stream, and access to exclusive content.

By contrast, podcasters are not able to centralize their work on a given platform. Podcasting requires a highly variegated set of platform practices: Recording, which in the pandemic largely occurs online, involves savvy use of teleconferencing services such as Zoom, Discord audio/video chat, Google Meet, Skype, and/or podcasting platforms like Anchor.fm and Zencastr, in combination with capture and editing software. The audio files must then be uploaded online and distributed to listeners via RSS feeds. This activity takes on a number of forms; some podcasters connect RSS feeds on their own private web servers to specific distributors, like Apple Podcasts and Stitcher. Most, however, use syndication services like LibSyn to host and automatically connect their podcast to multiple distributors or have it handled by a podcast network. However, these services are not entirely straightforward; as I discussed in the earlier section on distribution and promotion, navigating these numerous platforms is difficult and time-consuming.

Nor are these aggregators necessarily friendly environments for AP podcasts. Discoverability

through an aggregator's browse or search functions is managed algorithmically, with preference given to series with higher listener numbers and, on platforms that support them, better ratings and reviews. This creates pressures to push for better metrics, both through various forms of content optimization and appeals to listeners to leave reviews and ratings.

Accordingly, podcasters largely rely on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit, to find audiences for their work. For producers, the workings of these services are often opaque, and using them involves a blend of strategy, intuition, experimentation, and faith. Twitter creates a crowded, competitive field where content requires immediate and intense engagement to gain traction. Jerry discussed a bi-weekly content cycle they followed for their series' Instagram feed to produce varied promotional posts on a regular basis without too much planning while maintaining an attractive-looking feed. Podcasters Emery and Cullen had tried to promote their AP based on a popular anime show on the anime's Reddit community but "got cut apart" (Emery) for being "unoriginal" (Cullen), as well as for taking inspiration from a YouTube series that "rips on" the anime (Emery). Emery remarked, "I didn't know the language that I was supposed to use there." Promotional engagement with these platforms represented a significant labour investment with unclear outcomes, but some social media presence was nevertheless necessary for building a following.

Monetizing podcasts is difficult and is not integrated into the principal act of production as on Twitch. Monetization largely falls into two types: Advertising and patronage. Most AP podcasts are too small to attract advertisers or do not feel the advantages of advertising outweigh the cost of alienating listeners. Jackie broke down podcast advertising by comparing it to "television and

radio [which] have thousands, to hundreds of thousands, to millions of people that advertisers are reasonably assured exist and are listening". Because that assurance has not historically been available for most podcasts, advertisers "really got to set the market". Jackie connected this situation to podcast advertisers' preference for promotional download codes, which allow them to trace purchases back to specific channels. They pointed out that in such situations, advertisers often only pay out per traceable purchase: This "only benefits the person who is 'purchasing' the ad [space] because the advertisers are only paying if they make a sale. Otherwise, you are essentially giving them free airtime." Emery and Quinn told me they "would love to be sponsored by literally anything" but could not attract sponsors, so instead used an affiliate link. Even then, Emery remarked they "don't know how well that referral link works, because it doesn't always [pay out]. … It's been like, maybe four dollars, but for the most part, nobody really clicks the link." For those who do advertise, the work of placing ads is often taken on by syndication services like LibSyn and Acast or, when available, brokered by podcast networks. Patronage can take the form of donations to a show through PayPal or other payment services but is more often platformized through services like Patreon and Ko-Fi. Patreon offers tiered subscription models, where users can subscribe at a higher monthly rate for access to higher tiers. Some podcasters seek to incentivize higher-level subscriptions through the creation of supplemental offerings, such as access to private community spaces, inclusion or shout-outs on the show, or even access to additional content feeds. In other words, Patreon both affords the monetization of podcasts and creates pressures to expand one's labour investment in order to justify higher tiers.

Twitch streamers also promote their series on social media platforms and monetize through both advertising and patronage. However, they undertake these practices in addition to those functions

already provided by Twitch. In addition to the inbuilt markets of audiences and co-producers, Twitch as a platform offers certain advantages in its ability to prepackage key functionalities necessary for professional AP production -- including, as of recently, ad placements. Dylan said that while they draw considerable income from their Patreon, their primary revenue source remained donations and subscriptions on Twitch. Noel reflected that they had once considered using Patreon subscriptions as a way of measuring interest in different products but ultimately had not found it necessary to do so.

Another important platform on the AP landscape is YouTube. YouTube tends to figure as secondary to most production practices and does not play as significant a role in their structuration; Noel's combined YouTube and Twitch revenues add up to "100 bucks a month, maybe 200" – a fraction of what they make from subscriptions (1500-1800), Twitch subs and donations[11], and contract streaming work (800-3000). YouTube serves as a repository for both podcast episodes and Twitch recordings (or "VODs") and expands a series' discoverability somewhat by granting access to audiences who primarily consume online content through that site. However, it is difficult to monetize: like Twitch, YouTube channels must reach a certain baseline level of engagement before they qualify for monetization; Most of my participants regarded YouTube as a secondary platform for their work, and some noted that their view counts were too low to monetize. Even if they do monetize, revenues are based on total minutes watched; Because of AP's relatively small audience, few of my participants were able to draw any kind of revenue from YouTube views, and

11. Noel could not remember exactly how much they make from Twitch, but ranked it their second most significant income stream after Patreon.

those that did mentioned that the income they did receive from that website was negligible. Many edited video series are distributed primarily via YouTube, but as noted elsewhere, these series tend to draw on more traditional, corporate funding structures and thereby tend to operate as parts of larger business models, not as primary revenue generators. Moreover, they are supported by extensive marketing apparatus that put them before a larger audience, increasing what monetizability they have. Thus, YouTube's celebrity economy and its structural ties to formal production industries (see Burgess and Green 2009) make it a good vehicle only for very high-profile series.

Audiences

Dealing with audiences is a fraught but necessary endeavour for AP producers. As noted above, many producers offer access to exclusive fan community spaces for a variety of reasons, including as monetization incentives, to grow engagement, or simply as a way of getting to know some of the people who consume their work. Yet maintaining such social spaces tends to require leadership and governance, especially as communities grow and become more complex. Several of my participants discussed the need to step up and resolve conflicts in their fan spaces, where they were regarded as hosts and authority figures. Furthermore, Jay explained, members of audience communities are rarely content to remain in purely passive consumer roles:

> The people that are in my Discord channel are the people who want to be community members, potentially community leaders. [. . .] They want to be involved in the game. They want to play games with me; they want to be mentioned and get shout-outs. They want to have an interactive experience with the podcast; they want to be part of its production.

Fan spaces, and especially those where the creators of the fannish objects are active, are sites where fannish passions are channelled into creative energies. Many such spaces are pay-gated, and AP series lean heavily on their listeners for income. Accordingly, many of my participants' experiences reflect McMullin and Hibbard's observation that *Adventure Zone* fans' "direct financial contributions can facilitate increased investment and a sense of fan ownership in the narratives, as well as a more direct stake in their relationships with creators" (2021, 157; see also Marsden and Mason 2021). While those authors frame such dynamics as products of *The Adventure Zone's* particular funding model and positioning towards its audience, my research indicated that model and positionality are far from unique to that series, and that similar articulations of those factors produce similar effects.

This elevated sense of ownership can encourage beneficial forms of co-production, such as fan art and hype (McMullin and Hibbard 2021). However, it can also foster expressions of entitlement and generate feedback that is unwanted, unhelpful, and unpleasant. As demonstrated in the earlier discussions of fan interaction from Asra and Kay, these dynamics are especially pronounced when there are few barriers between fans and producers. The ongoing dialogue between a series' producers and its fan communities creates opportunities for audiences to make demands about its development. While not all producers are as responsive to audience feedback as the cast of *The Adventure Zone* (McMullin and Hibbard 2021, 160), the centrality of audience input in platformized economies of visibility and the importance of hype and fannish energies in sustaining a show provide points of leverage where audience members can feel entitled to their say. The visibility of the processes by which stories are constructed in AP may further justify these forms of feedback (Apple 2021, 182; Marsden and Mason 2021). Moreover, failure to meet these

demands can generate hostility. Managing audience affect can become more complicated as audiences grow: *The Adventure Zone*'s Griffin McElroy notes that as the audience for the show expanded, "listening to the audience became a lot harder, because there were conflicting wants and needs" (Hedge 2021, 152). Thus, producers must constantly evaluate their ability to manage conflict and negative affect as they develop their relationships with audiences, with ramifications on the nature and scale of the product.

Despite incentives from platforms to involve audiences in production, and particularly in live streams, producers often resist giving audiences too much control. Audiences can interfere with players' sense of narrative control and disrupt the flow of play. Dylan discussed how, when their channel was just starting to generate profit, they had monetized it primarily through donation incentives. However, they reflected that over the years, the channel had begun to shift its focus towards better and more sophisticated narratives. In this new context, donation incentives became more problematic:

> It helped propel the donations, but we can't do that on something like [our current series], where it's like, okay, yeah, everyone gets a jet pack. You know, everyone gets Iron Man armour. Everyone gets, you know, Cthulhu shows up. I can't do that because you're really going to mess up the story that's being developed. (Dylan)

Noel emphasized that these forms of creative interference are not only incidental but often quite intentional. They described their Twitch chat as "not an honest player. They have no skin in the game; they're just here for some LOLs and some fun. [. . .] I try to avoid them as much as possible. I tell my players not to read chat; I barely read chat. They're the enemy." For this producer, the very presence of Twitch chat was perceived as a threat to the integrity of the narrative and an

unwelcome distraction to the players. Kelly and Lee both explained that while in order to preserve some creative control, they limit their donation incentives to mechanical perks to be activated at a player's discretion, even these are threatening to the coherence of the story: Audience engagement can fluctuate from one day to the next, making the influx of these perks hard to anticipate. Moreover, audiences find ways to game even these more restricted measures, for example, by heaping bonuses on a single player rather than spreading them around evenly.

Nevertheless, audiences' tastes and interests are relevant to AP producers as creators of media and fans themselves. In interviews, practitioners identified a variety of reasons for caring about fan engagement beyond the obvious monetary and algorithmic incentives; Jude explained their decision to feature the *Alien RPG* on their series as follows:

> [Because of] the fact that it had the Ridley Scott franchise attached to it, there were a lot of people who were suddenly interested in this game, right? And that was one of those times where I really wanted to strike while the iron was hot because there were so many people [. . .] that were absolutely ravenous for this content. (Jude)

Notably, Jude does not monetize their series in any way. Regardless, they remain committed not only to producing AP but to generating content that garners positive reactions from audiences and satisfies their curiosity about new products. They also mentioned that they had produced the Alien episodes out of their enthusiasm for its publisher, Free League Games, and as a way of promoting a product by a company they supported and felt would benefit from the extra attention.

Implications for the Field

Together, these analyses of the TRPG industry, co-producers, platforms, and audiences, in relation

to the production of AP provide certain insights into its overall structure as a field. This section closes out the chapter by noting some key takeaways and themes from the analysis above.

Sponsors and Advertisers

It bears noting the relative lack of involvement by advertisers and sponsors from the accounts above. Indeed, while sponsorships are a source of revenue for some AP series, it is not clear from my interviews nor in my analyses of AP products and discussions around them that sponsors constitute an important actor type in and of themselves. Many participants in my interviews did not seek out or use sponsorships or paid advertising to support their series and those who did cite them as meager sources of income. Sponsorships as such tended mostly to take the form of partnerships with publishers, as discussed in the section on the TRPG industry. This is not to say there is no interest in being sponsored by other companies. Rather, monetizing participants were mainly audience-funded but noted this required creative compromises and forms of emotional labour; Dylan emphasized that they wished to pivot towards an ad- or sponsor-based business model in order to focus on their production and storytelling. However, they struggled to develop those revenue streams to the point that they could replace audience contributions. Above, Jackie explained how podcast advertising models disproportionately benefit advertisers. It bears noting that the technology used in podcast ads – discount codes – is widely used on Twitch as well.

Sponsors and advertisers are more visible in a number of high-profile series such as *Critical Role* and *Weave the Tale*. I was not able to get data about the comparative breakdown of revenue streams for these series, but note that at the very least, their high viewer counts surely make them a more attractive prospect for sponsorship than many of the smaller-scale producers interviewed for this

research. Participants noted that advertisers do not have much interest in AP because its overall audience is relatively small. As such, they remain out of reach to those producers who would most benefit from the autonomy they afford.

Dungeons & Dragons as Kingmaker

Throughout all areas of the field, *D&D* and WotC exert a powerful structural influence on the production of AP. WotC is heavily involved in AP, both as a producer and as a patron to streamers and video makers. The *D&D* brand has unparalleled recognition among TRPGs and an overwhelming advantage on the market. Moreover, *D&D* may have an advantage at retaining consumers, as TRPG players who start with *D&D* as their first system appear to play a narrower range of TRPG products (Strejcek and Milton 2020). On Twitch, *D&D*'s subscriber base far exceeds those for other TRPGs. The direct involvement of WotC in networks of co-production further enhances its appeal to producers. For many players, *D&D*'s name is synonymous with TRPGs in general, and AP audiences appear to prefer *D&D* to other systems; Producers who move away from *D&D* often see their engagement levels stagnate or drop (c.f. Apple 2021, 184).

Format Ecologies

Where opportunities for professionalization in AP do exist, they tend to rely heavily on the particular affordances and networks of the live stream format. As I discussed above, Twitch.tv integrates key processes in and around production, including recording, distribution, networking, co-production, and monetization. The somewhat porous limits between audiences and producers on that platform (and in accompanying fan communities) create opportunities for fans to

organically learn to stream and develop their own practice with support from other users. The platform's staged monetization system defines successive goals for new producers to pursue.

While podcasting affords co-production, networking, monetization, and skilling, these are not as extensively centralized and platformized as in streaming, making it harder to professionalize. Conversely, podcasting's low entry requirements, both in terms of equipment and technical know-how, suit it to experimental, hobbyist, or niche products. At the same time, the ceiling for quality, skill, and engagement is quite high, fostering careers for those with the right resources.

Ambivalent Professionalization

In many instances, the general sense of AP as a highly professionalized space is more appearance than fact. My analysis in this paper helps identify many factors that generate pressure to create work with a professional look and feel: Audiences are understood to expect a degree of polish, quality performances, and consistency. Platforms reward series that generate views, listens, and subscriptions. Moreover, platforms encourage "professional" practices and styles by virtue of their design and governance (Postigo 2016). Affordances of the platform, guidance, and creator culture, invite amateurs to self-professionalize (Burgess 2012). In AP, these dynamics underlie a culture of polish and standards of quality that resemble the most successful series, even among creators who do not necessarily aspire to commercial success.

As discussed in the section above, advertisers are drawn to high engagement levels, and the TRPG industry itself seeks out stylish and dynamic representation for its products and brands. Meeting these expectations requires professional resourcing, operations, and networks and demands labour

investments well exceeding the means of casual producers. Without these, opportunities to establish a robust professional practice are few and far between within AP itself.

Among producers I spoke with, only a couple had made a full-time career out of AP. Some employed AP within the framework of a wider livelihood in the TRPG industry or pursued it as a hobby in their spare time. Hobbyists expressed a wide range of attitudes towards the question of going professional; some reflected that it would be nice but did not believe they had the time, resources, and/or talent or could not afford the risk. For others, the idea was profoundly unappealing: Making AP was a way of having fun, connecting with friends, and participating in a community. Any money they made (and many hobbyists do monetize) was a nice bonus but was not per se an objective, and its loss would not prevent them from continuing.

Closing Remarks

The prospects and positioning of an AP product are structured by its relationships to the TRPG industry, co-producers, platforms, and audiences. In managing these relationships, producers situate themselves in differentials of creative autonomy and economic sustainability. My analysis indicates deep divisions in the field of AP along the lines of format, where podcasting, streaming, and edited video all engender critical differences in the balance of relationships to these key actors. These differences correspond to different prospects for profit and the establishment of careers. However, they are not enough to guarantee these outcomes; profit in AP relies heavily on the popularity of, and even patronage from, the scene's most popular brands and products. While there is a degree of synergy between the industry's need for visibility and AP's focus on performance and charm, this synergy rarely pays dividends for AP producers unless they are working with

D&D. Moreover, while AP is rich in creative energy and enthusiasm for TRPGs, and offers easy access to critical infrastructure, that same infrastructure creates obstacles to professionalization that must be overcome using private or external resources. While amateur and professional producers often appear side by side on podcast apps and Twitch recommendations, the structural gap between them is wide and deep.

Chapter Five: Play and Labour in Actual Play

"If it's not fun, then like, it's any job, isn't it?"

- Lake

Introduction

My analysis is informed by a conception of AP as a form of production within a "social ecology of information". Winseck (2011), building on Benkler (2006), defines this construct as referring to "the core and emergent public communications media that migrate around various distribution networks and media platforms and devices [...] tied together through strategies, capitalist investment, ownership, technologies, uses, alliances, rights, regimes, and so on" (Winseck 2011, 3). This *includes* market forces but does not limit its analysis to them. Winseck's conception recognizes autonomist Marxian theorizations of political economy that recognize affect, community, and culture, as goods with value apart from their worth as commodities (Hardt and Negri 2000; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; Rubin 2006; Terranova 2000). Commodification figures as a *historical process* through which these useful elements are captured and brought to market (Mosco 2009), but not as the exclusive measure of their social value. The social ecology of information perspective also underscores that commodification does not obviate the social uses of commodities: Winseck argues that "digital network media are immersed within the market, but they also enable and depend upon forms of expression that are not market driven" (2011, 4). From this perspective, digital culture is produced through practices in dialogue with capitalist forms and

techniques. Thus I approach the production of culture, including media, as a mode of social reproduction in, through, and beyond capitalism.

Understanding labour in AP entails questions of both of *how* producers work and *why*. The "how" requires a concrete understanding of what producers do, whereas the "why" draws attention to the motives behind their activities - the values, outcomes (expected or actual), and relationships that drive them. Below, I develop my analysis through comparative exegeses of two conceptual lenses. First, I examine the concept of playbour, a term that designates fusions of play and work. My analysis finds the concept of playbour useful for describing a certain portion of AP production, but unable to encompass the full range of activities comprising it. Rather, at the formal level, AP consists of a combination of playbour and forms of immaterial labour common to online media production. I turn then to Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2011) framework for good and bad work to assess how AP production fits into questions of good working lives in the creative industries. In that section, I analyze differences between professional and amateur AP production, informed by recent research by Campbell (2020) on the "communities of care" formed by young people seeking to make a living in creative industries. I conclude by noting that AP appears to provide good opportunities for playbour and good work for amateurs, but its professional scene is limited in its ability to provide good working lives.

Playbour

"Playbour" is a neologism designating "the increasingly blurred distinction between online play and labour" (Schott 2010). The term has appeared in various publications in game and digital labour studies over the past couple decades, beginning with Kücklich's (2005b) political economic

critique of video game modding. The aforementioned blurring has been a key theme in edited collections on digital labour from Scholz (2014), and Fischer and Fuchs (2015). However, beyond this notion of "blurring", little effort has been made to develop a concrete definition or even disciplinary framework for the term. Nevertheless, such blurring has obvious pertinence to questions about AP. In the following paragraphs, I attempt to derive a definition of the term.

Kücklich (2005) discusses playbour in the context of video game modding, a practice wherein game consumers produce modifications or supplementary content for an existing video game product. Modding extends the cultural life of games and enhances their value at no cost to the game's developer. Yet game developers also assert intellectual property rights over mods, framing their production as part of the normal play the game is meant to provide (see also Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). Thus, argues Kücklich, modding stands among those "forms of 'free labour' [that] do not fit the categories of wage labour, freelance or voluntary work, and neither do they fit the categories of leisure, play, or art" (2005b, para. 28). Beyond this negative categorization, Kucklich does not define "playbour". His use of the portmanteau seems to refer to a sociological phenomenon, wherein the video game industry "benefits from *a perception* that everything to do with digital games is a form of play" (2005b, para. 26 emphasis mine), and the enshrinement of that perception in game producers' exploitation of modders. Indeed, the mobilization of discourses on play may be the key factor differentiating Kucklich's playbour from other forms of free labour; Rey (2015) points out that in the example of modders, "play and labour remain relatively distinct activities that happen to have a degree of mutual dependency. Mutual dependency, however, is a far cry from the indistinguishability that playbour would seem to imply" (2015, 286).

A second approach to playbour frames it as a structural phenomenon appearing in encounters between, on the one hand, playful attitudes and interfaces and, on the other, 'serious' systems of commodification and labour capture. Nakamura (2014) and Taylor et al. (2015) examine the work of "player-workers" and "industrialists", respectively, in online video games, where players perform labour within the game's simulated worlds to produce virtual objects with real economic value. Their analyses highlight the extension of capitalist social relations into online leisure contexts. Archer (2019) and Törhönen et al. (2019) apply the concept in "mum blogging" and online social video production respectively, discussing producers' interests in seeking revenue while doing work that is flexible, self-directed, and enjoyable. These two sets of authors understand the "play" of playbour in different ways: for the first, play is a putative element endowed by the game context; for the second, "play" designates elements of the labour that are "indulgent and somehow not legitimate" (Archer 2019, 150). As I discuss later, these differences are instructive in their own right. Moreover, these authors agree in framing the acts of play and labour as coterminous, highlighting empirical examples of playbour where, unlike in Kücklich's (2005) account, the blending of play and labour lies in the simultaneity of their overlapping temporalities. They also identify technologies and processes of mediation as engendering the particular relationalities between producers, consumers, and, significantly, industrial actors, that structure this overlap.

Lund (2015) argues that play and labour are conceptual opposites "and that the concept of *playbour* is erroneous" (2015, 76). The formulation of playbour Lund is responding to is a behavioural one, and his arguments are predicated on understandings of play and labour as behavioural categories that are, indeed, defined in opposition to one another along axes of motivation, structure, and

function. These dimensions are intrinsic to the behaviour itself; function, for example, is "meta-question: is the activity mainly specific to a certain society and time or is it mainly trans-historical?" (2015, 64). Lund's analysis of this question breaks down along the lines of whether an activity seems to emerge as some spontaneous expression of human nature, or one shaped by and oriented towards social uses. On these terms, play and labour do appear to be opposites.[12] However, Lund's critique omits the crucial element in the literature discussed above of playbour as a *sociological* phenomenon, rather than a form of behaviour. Indeed, Lund's argument only holds insofar as we understand playbour to be a behaviour rather than an activity formed in social relations between multiple actors. This does not obviate Lund's point that play and labour are opposed, but rather reveals a critical disjuncture between his and other theorists' conceptualization of playbour.

Indeed, if we take play and labour to be opposites on Lund's (2015) terms, where play is free, pleasurable, and intrinsically motivated, whereas labour is structured from without, divorced from questions of pleasure, and motivated by a desire for access to the labour's exchange value (and not its use value)[13], then the concept of playbour is indeed incoherent. But in the examples above, the collapse of work and play is not a question merely of behaviour: it is chiefly one of political

12. It bears noting that defining "play" and "game", as Lund attempts to do, is notoriously difficult. Scholars disagree widely, for instance, on the extent to which children's play differs from that of adults, and on the relationship between play and games. In brief, his formulation of these key concepts invites debate.

13. Lund makes room for behaviours that incorporate other variations of these qualities in his categories of "work" (as opposed to labour) and "gaming" (as opposed to play). However, these other categories are mainly meaningful in Lund's behavioural terms.

economic context. An early popular article on playbour asks:

> How can we make work more interesting, more curious, and more playful so that users willingly play to create value? How can we align incentives in a way that lets us harness free labor? [Conversely,] as our environments become highly-instrumented with and capture data from our activities, how are users compensated for, or even made aware of the commercial value of their data? What does it mean for the broader economy when waged and unwaged labor collapse and are often indistinguishable? What does it mean for society when we debase the notion of pure, innocent play? (Haque 2010)

What this, and other accounts of playbour emphasize, is not a challenge to the notion of play itself, but the emergence of a "highly-instrumented" social context in which play is "debased" or robbed of its 'innocence'; The playful experience of producing information conceals the processes of its commodification. In this view of playbour, it is defined by its behavioural qualities as play *coupled with* a social apparatus that fosters and commodifies it.[14] Or, conversely, it is the behavioural practice of labour within a social context of play, as in the case of *EVE Online* industrialists and gold farmers. Put another way, the activity in question undergoes a doubling: One person's play is another's labour. This doubling is playbour's distinguishing feature, and it lies not in a fundamental fusion of opposite modes of behaviour, but rather in a collapsing of the cultural separation of work and play (Rey 2015).

This gives way to a sociological understanding of playbour that accommodates Lund's (2015) criticisms without sharing his conclusion that the concept is "erroneous". It is possible for an act

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14. Lund's schema categorizes playful activities constrained by external rules as "gaming" and not "play". This explicitly excludes all technologically "instrumented" activities by definition, as the rules are programmed into the activity itself and cannot be negotiated, as well as eg. professional and competitive sports.

to be both labour and play if there exists some apparatus that converts one into the other. Nakamura's (2014) gold farmers labour in the context of a virtual world designed and widely used for play. It is *World of Warcraft*'s imbrication in a wider political economy that create the conditions for activity within the game to be commodified as labour; On the other hand, Archer's (2019) mum bloggers perform playful acts in a setting that allows them to be captured and brought to market. Indeed, for Taylor et al. (2015), the distinction broken down by playbour is primarily an *economic* one, and the term denotes contexts in which play's innate productivity is channeled towards economic production. Rey (2015) narrows the collapsing of contexts into "the very same act" (2015, 286), but that act is already structured by some economic apparatus; not behaviour but behaviour plus context.

Having arrived at a satisfactory conceptualization of playbour, I now consider to what extent this concept applies to AP. Certainly, a significant portion of AP involves a technical apparatus which interweaves labour with play. Yet the play aspect remains salient to practitioners; Many podcasters I interviewed emphasized that it was important to keep their play from "becoming work". They were disinterested in optimizing their play for better listening if it meant making serious sacrifices with respect to its enjoyableness or creative affordances. Many of them are essentially hobbyists, and making little if any money off their series, they denied that they would continue producing AP if it ceased to be fun. Podcasting also allows a degree of separation between the act of play and "production work", including tasks such as editing, distribution, promotion, and monetization. These tasks are less distinct for streamers on Twitch, where the immediacy and interactivity of the stream format affords less distance from audience and "off-screen" aspects such as monetization are more directly tied to the process of play itself. Streamers on Twitch often compromise their

creativity and play in creating monetized venues for audience participation. Yet those streamers I spoke with who employ such strategies maintained the importance of preserving the integrity of their play. For Kelly, streaming games was an organic outgrowth of their prior activities on the platform as a member of the *Critical Role* fandom. Friendships born in *Critical Role*'s chat eventually led to a personal interest in TRPGs, the creation of a TRPG podcast, and active participation in streaming. In the context of this culture, playing TRPGs on stream was a normal way to engage with them and share their interests. Lee pointed out that audience interaction around donations can actually be playful, describing how players in their games, faced with a challenging situation, might appeal to chat to provide them bonuses through donation incentives. "It's fun," they explained, from experience as well as observation, "for them to feel like they're supported by people, that people are rooting their characters on."

It bears noting the experiences of Julian who, involved in the production of AP as a promotional arm for their independent publishing operation, reflected that they "don't [play TRPGs] for pleasure anymore". Julian approached AP specifically as a means of creating visibility and buzz for products in development and giving potential buyers a clearer image of what the game was and how it worked. As such, they take up AP primarily for its instructional qualities, rather than its social dimension or its capacity to entertain. Nevertheless, the seriousness and instrumentality of the endeavor does compromise its pleasures:

> I'm happy to [run games for AP], because I still enjoy myself running the games. [But] I don't love them as much as I used to. It's not as fun as it used to be. But this is far and away the most fun job I've ever had. So it's a balance, right? It's just a decision you make: Once you decide to monetize it, you are saying, 'I am giving up some of the fun.' (Julian)

This question of balance and notion of a tradeoff between fun and monetization were widely reflected by participants. But if there is a tension between these factors, it bears investigating what a "more monetized" series looks like. In other words, is the play element overwhelmed or supplanted by the labour context? Does the play cease to be play and become work?

More monetized series tend to be more professionalized. That is, there is a greater investment in consistent and high-frequency release schedules, audience relations, promotion, and production quality. Significantly, investing in any of these capacities rarely has a direct impact on play, with the exception of more frequent releases, which may require more time spent in the game. Audience relations may mean devoting energy to maintaining and participating in a Discord server or a Patreon subscriber feed or hiring moderators to look after a community space or live chat. Promotion generally involves posting from a series' social media profiles, updating websites, and networking with other producers. Improving production quality means investing in better equipment and software, more time in editing, and sometimes hiring an editor or producer. In brief, monetizing an AP series tends to involve an infusion of non-play tasks *on top of* play - or in other words, the infusion of more labour outside the context of play.

If the sociological understanding of playbour advanced here is to have any meaning at all, then it must be observed that AP also entails forms of labour that do not fall within its limits. That is, AP incorporates both aspects of playbour as I have defined it, and a heavy portion of other forms of work: editing, marketing, community management, etc. For instance, while participants generally described editing as creatively and emotionally satisfying, it is not so clearly playful or culturally "unserious" as playing the game. More clear cut, managing social media was almost universally

described as an unpleasant but 'necessary' task. Rather, these tasks encompass more traditional forms of work. Here, I approach work as a general category of serious, instrumental activity. Following Lund's (2015) schematization, I understand work to be an innate human capacity, and adopt his distinction between "pure" work, or work undertaken as a use value, and labour as a historical paradigm in which work is rendered in abstract as an exchange value. Without drawing the same work/labour distinction, Terranova notes that the structural returns for labour are not necessarily monetary -- in her words, "labour is not equivalent to waged labour" (Terranova 2004, 88). Together, these considerations open up three further areas of inquiry: First, to what extent does AP constitute self-satisfying work as opposed to labour? What kinds of labour are involved in AP? And what kind of working lives does this labour support?

Good work

In their 2010 book on creative labour, David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker (2011) advance a concept of "good work". They connect discourses of a cultural economy and the romanticization of creative careers to neoliberal ideology and deep policy changes around the world (see also Duffy 2016; McRobbie 1999; 2016). Seeking to demystify creative work, these authors advocate for critical interrogations of the creative industries founded on assessments of their material conditions. "Good work" amalgamates qualities of relations and organizations of labour that give rise to positive subjective experiences of and through work, a sense of agency and satisfaction in process and product, and a healthy relationship between work and life (including balance, good wages, and security). Hesmondhalgh and Baker frame good work as a "normative" concept, meant to inform moral and political arguments about the quality of work, and especially to hold to account

assertions that conditions in the creative industries justify, on the one hand, rose-tinted narratives about creative careers and, on the other, exporting creative business models and policy frameworks. While the term "good work" may imply a kind of binary sorting, these authors stress that the real political purpose is to be able to describe, specifically and in detail, how creative jobs compare to other jobs and to one another (Hesmondhalgh 2012, 142). Given the centrality of creative industries in labour policy and discourse, a frank assessment of the actual quality of work in those industries is necessary to mount meaningful political critique. Yet AP producers, like other platform practitioners partaking in emerging forms of work, particularly in UCG industries, pose a challenge to this normative framework. In this account of the field of AP, what becomes visible is a set of positions, dispositions, oriented neither towards the values of neoliberal governmentality nor a kind of emancipatory alternative, but, as I discuss throughout this and the following chapter, processes of social and cultural reproduction that are largely ambivalent to those political poles.

Nevertheless, the good work concept provides a robust framework for assessing labour from the perspective of "working life". It recognizes that work is, or can be, an essential component of a good life and, if nothing else, relates to critical questions of survival and wellbeing for most people living today (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). The facets of good work – wages and security, for instance, but also engagement with one's work and the quality of the product – mediate between individuals and social structures necessary for living well. This offers a critical linkage between practice and Mosco's (2009) "social totality". This constant return to a broader context offers a frame of reference for dealing with critical Marxian concepts like alienation and exploitation. Critiques of free labour, fan production, playbour – that is, of voluntary work, are prone to framing such work as exploited because its benefits to capital are not compensated to the worker (Baruch

2021, 689; Hesmondhalgh 2010; 2012). Yet scholars have struggled to advance a specific definition of exploitation. Conceptually, it relies on assessments of fairness (Zwolinski and Wertheimer 2017), which pair asymmetry in labour relations with "an ethical distinction between legitimate and illegitimate forms of compulsion" to work (Hesmondhalgh 2010, 274). Yet that compulsion is itself embedded in the historical sociology of labour which demands analysis in every instance. Thus, Hesmondhalgh argues that "when the term [exploitation] is applied to specific empirical examples, some kind of link needs to be made to these necessary abstractions if it is to have any analytical purchase" (2010, 274). By connecting work to subjectivity and the social totality, good work substitutes categorical criticisms for grounded, multilayered sociological analysis.

As I discussed in Chapter 4, AP is a diverse and diffuse field that encompasses a range of practices and working lives. Some producers are hobbyists, some scrappy entrepreneurs, and a handful are spectacularly successful. I also noted that these different clusters operate in relative isolation; there is not a lot of mobility between amateurs and professionals, and there are significant differences in production between podcasts and live streams. Accordingly, my analysis in this section treats these clusters separately. I draw the distinction on the lines of attitude towards monetization and the place of AP in producers' working lives: I designate as "professionals" those who produce AP to contribute to the income required for their subsistence, either through direct monetization of the series or as part of a suite of TRPG-related jobs where AP figures prominently. I begin with a summary of those themes common to both groupings, followed by a discussion of good work in the professional space, and then the amateur, and finally compare the two.

General Themes

In coding my data, several themes were common to professionals and amateurs that seem to apply to AP production at large. These themes are fun, creative fulfillment, professional quality, engaging with TRPG culture, and ambivalent sociality. They speak to overarching conditions in AP and provide a baseline understanding of the qualities of the work involved. They also stand in contrast to some of the specific themes I discuss in relation to professional and amateur production, below.

Fun

The point that playing games is fun is obvious but important enough to bear repeating: People make AP because they are playing games, and sharing their play, and those things are fun to do. Some version of this sentiment was almost universal among participants. As Lake put it, "the biggest part of [making AP] is to have fun and play games and try a new creative medium." They later added, "if it's not fun, then like, it's any job, isn't it?" At the same time, pressures to monetize can diminish the fun and turn it into 'a job'. Julian, for whom work in TRPGs had become their full-time occupation, noted that they hardly played TRPGs for pleasure anymore. They reflected that "while as I get a little further from roleplaying games as a hobby, that makes me sad, I do like that I have this source of income that is, you know, kind of fundamentally fun to do." For Jude, the pleasure of the process was important enough that they refuse to monetize in any way. They insisted that "the last thing I want to do is for this to feel like work. There's just this societal pressure that makes us think that, 'oh, you're good at something, you're having fun with something, well try to make money off of it.' … I don't want to turn this into a side hustle or

anything." There was a broadly held notion among participants that the fun of AP prevented it from feeling like a job, even among those for whom it really was a job. If nothing else, it speaks to a sense of ordinary jobs or, in Lake's words, "any job", being less fun than AP.

Creative fulfillment

Closely tied to fun was a sense that AP provides a rich creative outlet. Tracy, an actor by trade, discussed how they've "seen people who have never done any type of drama really love RPGs because it's an opportunity to explore something wholeheartedly and for that to be okay." For Addison, AP acted as a platform for sharing and honing their TRPG talents:

> I don't feel like a very creative person … I'm not a very good writer; I'm not good at drawing and so forth. But I really feel like I get to express my creativity and that I'm good at it when I [Referee]. And so Actual Play has given me a consistent and enjoyable outlet for that.

Kay discussed how a member of their group came to AP from "a place where a lot of their creative outlets had been taken away." They elaborated:

> So this was a chance to for them to play and game and have fun, but like exercise storytelling and creativity, learn sound design and audio editing. And like, they do a lot of the music. They're also a musician and a voice performer … so it was just like the ultimate creative outlet.

TRPGs do, by their nature, afford a lot of space for creativity. Beyond the storytelling aspects, they involve elements of performance, and games can optionally be enhanced with art, music, and sound effects. As Kay's explanation shows, these options integrate well with the production process. Podcast editing, likewise, was framed as a source of creative satisfaction.

More than creative pleasure, it bears remarking that many participants discussed AP giving them

a stronger sense of agency through creative expression. Addison's quote above speaks to the sense of capability that comes with being able to share their talents. Jean, reflecting on the pandemic in its early days, discussed how "is it's amazing how much having an outlet like this is helpful in situations that feel like they're out of your control. Which, honestly, given where we are right now feels even more important. Because there's so much that nobody can control at this point." For one woman streamer, forming her own AP channel allowed her to break out of an online community of streamers she found toxic and exploitative. It allowed her to take control over who she would appear on stream with, how games were run, and the way audience interactions were managed, these having become "too parasocial" in her previous channels.

Professional quality

While not all AP producers are professionals, both professionals and amateurs discussed efforts to give their series a "professional" look and feel. Understanding how AP producers manage questions of professionalism in their labour provides insights into how professionalizing forces encounter a predominately amateur or hobbyist space. I here consider what it means to produce "professionally" in AP, not in terms of career models, but in terms of engagement with the genre's cultural mores, communities, standards of excellence, and aesthetics.

For participants in my interviews, questions of professionalism were closely tied to the quality and virtue of their work, as well as their ability to reach audiences. Podcasters related important lessons they had learned about recording quality and audio editing, and the investment of money and time required for an adequate product. Hobbyist producers discussed their processes learning how to effectively use specialized equipment like high-fidelity microphones, mixing boards, boom arms,

and rigging. These were accompanied by lessons in technique, such as how to position one's body when on mic, methods of enunciation, vocal projection, and modulation, and rules about how to limit background noise, feedback, and interference. Some incorporated staging practices, such as periods of off-mic planning, improvisational, and dramatic technique. In short, these podcasters learned to ply their craft skillfully, and invested heavily in creating polished works.

The desire to produce "professional" quality media is driven at least in part by a desire to attract and retain audiences amid a field of producers that is increasingly perceived as overcrowded and dominated by a handful of highly popular, expensive productions. Discussions of whether to play *D&D* often touched on these market-related concerns: On the one hand, *D&D* is already amply represented by the most popular APs, and more modest series will struggle to carve out a share of their audiences, whereas other games target audiences who may not be interested in *Critical Role* or *The Adventure Zone*. Conversely, audiences for non-D&D games are relatively niche, even within the culture of TRPGs; sustainable levels of engagement and monetization for such a series are unlikely, no matter how polished the product. Quality of audio and video, editing, performance, and narrative, were framed as markers of a good product because such a product is easy and enjoyable to consume. Especially given AP's long runtimes, where a single session of play can take up several hours, producers want their audiences to be able to follow along for the long haul; their success in appealing to audiences was often discussed in terms of engagement metrics, subscriber numbers, and interactions with fans. This same concern for audiences led many participants to emphasize the importance of regular, consistent releases to prevent them from losing interest, and to this end podcasters stressed the importance of maintaining a backlog of recorded material in case a recording session had to be delayed. While producers may pursue

quality for its own sake, the trappings of quality align with those of professional media production and reflect the incentive structures of monetized platforms.

Blendings of amateurism and professionalism are not unique to AP among the new, platformized cultural industries driven by UGC. Burgess argues that since its inception, YouTube "has been the site of … the professionalisation and formalisation of amateur media production." (2012, 54) Examining YouTube's in-house producers' guide, which "details the aesthetic and formal qualities of successful YouTube videos, provides tips on metadata and search optimisation, and … strategies that are necessary to build loyal audiences" (2012, 55), Burgess points out that these materials also "maintain an address to 'ordinary' amateur participants" (2012, 56). Her analysis demonstrates how at the same time as YouTube teaches new and aspiring producers the basics of video production and platform use, it also instructs them in its house style, quality standards, and corporate values. These are reinforced through its monetization and visibility mechanisms, which privilege content that meets the site's aims. Postigo (2016) affirms Burgess's observations on YouTube in his ethnographic exploration of the platform's affordances, noting how the site stages playful engagement with its monetary infrastructure to encourage more monetizable practices. Johnson and Woodcock (2019) observe similar dynamics on Twitch, where they argue affordances for monetization "structure how content production on *Twitch* might be made profitable, and therefore decide what content is made, and how, and when" (2019, 1). The specific analyses will show that these affordances are experienced differently depending on the producer's vocational orientation. Nevertheless, the pervasiveness of professional language *even among unmonetized series*, bears noting.

Engaging with TRPG culture

Participants' love for TRPGs was inextricable from their involvement in AP, and their AP series act as primary means of participating in TRPG fandom. For some, it doubled as an extension of the regular game sessions common outside of AP. Jude told me they started their *Pathfinder* podcast because they "really wanted to run *Pathfinder* … and my thought process was that I needed some type of accountability to actually do this. Because I've participated in a number of these adventure paths … and they just all kind of petered out." "Adventure paths" are part of the *Pathfinder RPG* product line; An adventure path is a series of linked scenarios, or "adventures", for players to play through. Together, these scenarios make up epic plot arcs that can fuel years of play. Long-term scheduling and commitment issues are infamous killers of TRPG campaigns, and Jude's struggles will be familiar to most experienced players. Turning the adventure path into an outward-facing commitment to a wider community helped Jude and his castmates see the endeavor through.

Kay and Kelly both had their starts in TRPGs directly through AP and played their first games on air. They first developed an interest in TRPGs following *The Adventure Zone* and *Critical Role*, respectively, and it was those performances that shaped their early understandings of what TRPGs were. While Jude's podcast was a way of modifying and recontextualizing 'ordinary' play, for Kay and Kelly AP *is* ordinary play. Similarly, while Emery and Cullen have played TRPGs for "years and years", many members of their AP podcast have only ever played in the context of recording. A proper analysis of the ways in which AP has impacted TRPG play culture (see Flanagan 2009) is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but these producers' experiences suggest a broader normalization of playing for an audience.

Gray and Logan both started producing AP through their involvement in an online TRPG community on the now-defunct Google+ social network. This community had roots in The Forge, an also now-defunct web forum dedicated to TRPG theory and discussion where the term "actual play" originated (White 2020). On The Forge, "actual play" designated written reports of TRPG sessions which could serve as empirical materials for analyzing design. The Google+ community had carried on The Forge's penchant for empirical analysis and design discourse, and the platform offered golden opportunities to play and share TRPG sessions. For a time, Google's Hangouts videoconferencing app was fully integrated with Google+, including its event planning functionality. Hangouts supported user-created add-ons, which allowed players to incorporate dice rollers, character name tags and portraits, and virtual whiteboard tools. Moreover, Hangouts could be broadcast live and archived on YouTube. Together, these features offered a robust set of affordances for organizing, playing, recording, and viewing games. Recordings were shared and discussed with the wider community, and served as fodder for generating enthusiasm, advertising the community, and discussing particular games. Producing AP thus became a key component in this community's culture and took on a certain pedagogical character as videos fed into conversations about good TRPG play. Participants from outside the community took up similar pedagogical points, noting that they used their series as a platform to model what they considered good play practices.

Participants regularly took up notions of AP's capacity to model play, amplify players and games, and lead by example as a means of intervening in TRPG culture. TRPGs have historically been perceived as a hobby for boys (see also Chalk 2018; Trammell 2018); Some woman participants and members of groups featuring women, as well as queer and racialized participants, positioned

their series as interventions in representations of TRPG players towards a more inclusive culture. The importance of modelling the use of safety tools – group practices to deal with traumatic content and foster anti-oppressive play, and a relatively recent innovation in mainstream TRPG culture – was also a common theme among participants. Decisions about what games to feature were also framed in representative terms; Jude noted they used their series to promote their favourite TRPG publishers, and Kelly pointed out that they refuse to play *D&D* because they have objections to its cultural politics, and that it gets enough exposure as it is; the latter notion was especially widespread among participants, who felt it was important to provide visibility to lesser-known products. Visibility was particularly important to Rowan and Parker, whose AP output focused on live-action roleplaying, a variant on TRPGs that eschews the tabletop for more full-bodied play resembling improvised theater (Harviainen et al. 2018). Finally, some producers approach their series as an intervention *in AP*. Lake discussed how, having a media production background, they wanted to push back against what they considered to be unambitious standards in editing:

> You have all these shows that are like, the episodes are like two and a half hours long, unedited. Like some guy has to look up a rule or like take a piss break, or is eating his Glossettes, and they have not edited around it at all they just dumped it on the Internet like, do you like this? You want to listen to this? No one wants to listen to that, of course! It seems like the bare minimum you can do if you're trying to create any shared experience with the public is clean it up.

While more restrained in their criticisms, Dylan likewise positioned their Twitch channel as a particularly focused on good storytelling, in contrast to a field they regarded as generally lax about such matters. Given the live nature of the Twitch format, this was not to be accomplished through editing, but rather through various stage performance techniques such as limiting out of character talk, the use of costumes and props, and shifting production and administrative duties away from

the Referee. Both these producers pursue notions of excellence focused on the media product, rather than the game it represents.

Ambivalent sociality

The sociality of AP is twofold: It creates communities of producers, both within the core group and through their extended networks, and it establishes relationships with audiences and fan communities. Participants were generally enthusiastic about the former. Playing together is a pleasurable social experience. Jean, who met their fellow performers while starting to put together their podcast, spoke movingly about their group. They referred to their castmates as "a group of, now, four additional friends that I did not have beforehand, that it feels like I've known all my life at this point." They later mentioned, "if this podcast went away tomorrow, we'd keep playing." As with the element of fun, Jean prizes this contact. Moreover, they identify the genuine sociality of their interactions as a defining factor of their podcast, noting "what we're recording and putting out there wouldn't be as entertaining or enjoyable if we're doing it because we're getting recorded, right? We're recording something that we would want to create regardless, and we're just looking to invite people to hang out at the table with us."

Eddie described their engagement with a Discord server for podcasters they had joined, as "mostly hang[ing] out on the Actual Play channel". Jerry added, "It's also people being like, 'this is where our game's going,' … It's kind of a support system, I think, more than technical support." These participants noted that many of their regular listeners were fellow podcasters, and that responses to events on their series tended to come from people who knew them personally. Their labour, both in process and product, attended to these relationships. Jude credited their long-term

engagement in a similar Discord community as one of their primary reasons for carrying on: they do not drift away from AP because "the community that's attached to [AP] makes that a bit difficult [...] because of just having this common thing with people, like being able to have this conversation." They added:

> The fact is that a lot of the interactions I'm having with these podcast mutuals is editing, I don't want to fall out of touch with that, because if I'm not actively editing and if I don't have anything actively to contribute, it's much more difficult for me to connect to these individuals. (Jude)

For Jude, producing AP had started as a way to have fun with friends, but the editing process had connected them to a community of fellow practitioners. One of the continuing benefits of producing AP is sharing a set of interests, skills, and knowledge with this community.

Many groups host exclusive community spaces for their fans, often in the form of private servers on the Discord chat service and maintain presences on social media platforms, especially Twitter and Instagram. Discord servers are intended to create ongoing relationships with audiences and develop community around the product. These spaces require constant moderation and engagement: without proper management, community spaces are liable to toxify and drive away audiences, or to cultivate audiences that are hostile to the producers. Without sufficient engagement, these spaces will stagnate. Many participants described the experience of unexpectedly becoming a social media manager or included dealing with social media among the 'work-like' aspects of production. While interacting with fans can be enjoyable, the degree of availability and labour demanded by these spaces can be draining, and tellingly is often outsourced to community members or hired assistants by groups that can afford to do so.

Professional Actual Play Production

Precarity and Wage Scarcity

Professional AP producers are enthusiastic about their work and keen to underscore its pleasures, but struggle to develop stable careers and sustainable wages, and find it difficult to keep up with the social demands of audience communities. Professionals I spoke with had backgrounds in and passions for TRPG gaming, performing arts, media production, and community management. They framed AP as a gratifying creative outlet and a source of community. My conversations with professional AP producers bore two important themes with regards to wages: First, there was broad consensus that there is not a lot of money to be made in AP. Second, and relatedly, most professionals I spoke with combined multiple income streams, and often relied on access to independent incomes from partners, family members, or government programs to make a living. Professionals reflected that there appeared to be limited room for growth, and their accounts paint a picture of a space where the biggest players, namely *Critical Role*, eat up most of the available market share. It bears noting that the term "wages" may be somewhat misleading in AP, as even among professionals a lot of labour is informal and yields irregular income flows.

Professionals discussed their AP income in terms of scarcity. Among the four highest-earning participants, Asra, Dylan, Jack, and Noel, Noel was the only one to identify AP as their sole source of income, despite Asra and Jack both running popular AP series. Jack had leveraged the popularity of their podcast into a series of gigs in the TRPG industry, which combined with their spouse's work made up most of their household income. When I asked Asra whether their AP brought in enough money to cover their rent in a major American city, they answered:

> I mean, the podcast pays my rent. That's what I'll say. It doesn't do much more than that. It can't be all the way to a main gig because of where that income is. My main gig has to do more than just pay my rent, right? Like [AP] is not enough to pay my rent *and* my groceries. I think that the show has a cap on it. We aren't *Critical Role*, we don't have a history of being super famous voice actors who have 50,000 to 500,000 people following us already, because of our video game work or anime work. It's a taller hill to climb to convert this to being the full-time gig of anyone on the show.

Lee, a streamer making their living in the Twitch ecosystem, describes themself as "semi-professional." Their output includes sponsored streams, appearances on other streamers' channels, professional Refereeing[15], and moderating Twitch chats. Lee framed their multiple income streams as a stopgap measure to make up for work lost due to the pandemic:

> So we get a very small monetary thing from [Roll20] and then promotion from them. And that has grown since to more monetary compensation per month. Still, like, not anything to write home about, but helpful. As well as actually having a sponsored show, where we do get paid well for playing a certain game. But that's like the most, like that's the level of "professional". I definitely wouldn't call it a full-time thing, it's just kind of by necessity. I was an assistant teacher at a pre-K, but right now with the pandemic, half of us got laid off here. And so now it's kind of become a full-time thing. I moderate Twitch chats, really that's what I do.

Lee's comments about AP being their main income source "by necessity" speaks to the marginality of their wages, especially given their array of skills and jobs.

Dylan, the executive producer for a Twitch channel in the LA AP scene, discussed how recent legislation in California was making it more difficult to manage their payroll and talent:

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15. Professional Refereeing lies beyond the scope of this dissertation, but is a fascinating new form of labour in TRPG culture. As the name implies, seasoned Referees sometimes sell their services to gaming groups, usually on an hourly basis. Professional Refereeing has grown enormously in recently years, and would make an excellent object of study in TRPG culture and labour.

> What we were doing before is we would pay them a percentage based off how much we raised. What I found out is we just can't compete in LA unless we start paying people more. And because of the California law, none of these people can be independent contractors, so all of them have to be classified as employees, which has been an interesting dilemma for us when we have people that work maybe 30 hours a year for us, and are being recognized as employees. So since that law I have to be very, very careful about who's coming in and what we're doing and stuff like that. And we just started doing a guaranteed pay structure, in addition to a portion of the proceeds. So we're moving up in that regard, but it's definitely harder, because we're not making a ton of money, especially now with COVID and stuff. Like, some days we will have really great days, and then other days will be almost nothing.

Dylan is describing a number of factors that complicate their relationships with talent. First, their position in the LA AP scene makes wages for talent more competitive: Dylan's series is competing with the likes of *Critical Role*, and Hollywood-backed edited video series like *Dimension20* and *Stuff of Legends*. This is good news for actors, some of whom can land gigs with better-resourced series, including the official *D&D* Twitch channel. However, these series represent only a fraction of work in AP. Second, California bill AB-2257 stipulates that persons performing work "inside the usual course of the hiring entity's business" (2020, para. 2), among other conditions, must be hired as employees and not independent contractors, which in turn requires a guaranteed wage. Transitioning to such a model poses particular challenges to a business that derives its income largely through donations from Twitch audiences, which are difficult to predict. This situation has led Dylan to become more risk-averse in hiring talent, as the guaranteed wage structure effectively attaches a minimum cost to each performer regardless of how much they bring in. The point here is not that actors deserve less than minimum wage, but rather that scarcity of income renders professional AP production a risky endeavor, even for an established series with patronage from several major TRPG companies, including WotC.

Despite California laws, not all labour in professional AP production is waged. A woman professional I interviewed described being pulled into a manipulative relationship with the producer of a series she admired. She related how the producer leveraged her enthusiasm to get her to do promotion, social media work, community management, and art for his series. When the participant began to push back, the producer distanced himself from her and began turning to other women to take up her work. She and another participant both observed that such dynamics are common in large AP fan communities, especially those surrounding white cisgender men. These two accounts echo findings in creative industries research that stereotypes about gender continue to influence the organization of creative labour and contribute to women's concentration in communication and care work and men's overrepresentation in creative and executive roles (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2015; Campbell 2020). It reflects findings that as small-scale creative business models mobilize 'outside' energies, such as fans and audiences, to carry out key production processes (Whitson, Simon, and Parker 2018) and that women are disproportionately called into these roles (Duffy 2016), especially in fan communities (Busse 2015). These dynamics dovetail with the historical marginalization of women in gaming cultures and the reproduction of traditional gendered divisions of labour in platform labour (Jenson and de Castell 2018).

Monetized Audiences and Toxic Sociality

These experiences also reflect the value of fans and audiences not only in generating income but in carrying out labour (Stanfill 2019). *Critical Role* depended on unpaid labour to produce closed captions for their videos until 2019 (Lockey 2019). In 2017, the community of fans published a breakdown of their labour transcribing the series' first full season as "115 episodes, 24, 750 minutes transcribed, US $93 000 of volunteer … time" (crtranscript 2017). While the method

behind this last figure is unclear[16], these numbers speak to the considerable amount of labour *Critical Role* fans invested in the show's success. Asra compared *Critical Role* to their own series, which pays out fan transcribers for their time, but noted that fans generate value through other forms of volunteer production such as fan art. Dylan reflected that while audience contributions are their primary source of income, they wished to eventually transition to an advertising-based model, which they perceived as more stable. While fans' willingness to do this labour is a separate matter for discussion, my analysis in this section shows that the reliance on audiences to generate income exposes producers to precarity and wage scarcity. The most stable income is in the hands of large corporate IP holders like WotC, and subject to their willingness to invest in AP.

Despite the challenges of working with audiences, pressure to monetize and a lack of viable alternatives mean producers rely on audience contributions to generate income. This dependency intensifies the negative social aspects general to the field. Social media work becomes more important, producers feel pressure to be "on call" and make themselves available to fans, and monetization measures that involve audiences in the show can interfere in play and disrupt producers' sense of creative control. Producers discussed strategies for establishing boundaries, such as distancing themselves from audience spaces and limiting how incentives could affect the game. Noel drew an explicit distinction between their normal, narrative-focused streams, and streams intended to "raise additional money":

16. At the time of writing in 2021, the quoted figured of US $93 000 is well above the market per-minute rate for transcription services, somewhat below estimates of the average value of a volunteer hour, and within the normal range of hourly rates for professional transcribers.

> We'll play with rules like, if you donate $5, we'll throw a magic item into the campaign. And it usually ends up with someone who's got money showing up and being like, 'oh, this is cool. I'm loaded. I'm a millionaire. Here's $1000. So everyone gets super magic swords, and you're like, well, okay, that's the session. Now everyone's got super magic swords, and the rest of the campaign is really easy. Then the millionaire leaves in 10 minutes, and we're playing for another, like, five hours with everyone's super magic swords.

An important piece of context for this quote is that Noel plays *D&D*, where the dramatic stakes of the story often hinge on the characters' might in arms. *D&D* games are "balanced" in order to create tension between the characters' goals and capabilities. The sudden appearance of a bunch of very powerful swords tips the scale dramatically towards the player and can trivialize the challenges and dramatic situations the Referee had in store. Noel's example contains some obvious hyperbole, but other producers agreed that donation incentives can be disruptive and hard to plan around. At the same time, Noel points out that these most absurd and frustrating sessions can also be among the most profitable. It bears noting that *Critical Role* and *Dimension20*, lauded for their performances and story, does not employ this manner of participatory incentive, likely because they can afford not to. Less established professionals may not have the luxury of a generous and diversified income stream and so must choose between the integrity and quality of their storytelling and putting more of their production in the hands of their audiences.

Amateur Actual Play Production

Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2011) normative framework for analyzing creative industries primarily addresses itself to research on more or less traditional careers. However, there is use in applying it, as I do in this section, to informal and amateur production (Hesmondhalgh 2012). For one, noting how analytical concepts such as wages and security apply, either directly or with some

adaptation, reveal novel dynamics in amateur production, especially when faced with a field of amateur producers who nevertheless exhibit some degree of hustle. Second, it offers insight into the micro-economies and -industries that are increasingly prevalent in creative working lives; As Campbell notes, "traditional employment indicators, based in fulltime work, do not register [individuals] navigating multiple jobs or multiple creative sectors" (2020, 526).

Analyzing how amateur AP producers fit AP into their working lives brings to light some of the most novel dynamics in the field. In this section, I highlight two themes that characterize amateur AP producers' distinctiveness from professionals and situate them in the broader social organizations of labour and culture. The first of these themes is the question of free labour, where the concept of wages and security give way to discourses of "sustainability" and efforts to channel excess creative energies. Second, an analysis of sociality in amateur AP production examines what Campbell (2020) terms the formation of "communities of care".

Free labour, ambivalent monetization, and creative surplus

Energized by the informational excesses of internet culture, "free labour is the moment where the knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into excess productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time shamelessly exploited" (Terranova 2004, 78). That is, producers of free labour, motivated by a desire for cultural engagement, and sufficiently secure in their material needs, enter into free flows of cultural production oriented towards the product or some other immaterial good. This production occurs within networks produced by capital, and is often structured in the interests of capital, which finds various ways to collect on the value of that cultural surplus. Free labour is often taken up in theorizations of fan production, where benefit to

capital is a (not necessarily unwelcome) byproduct of a logic of "gifting" in the cultural economy of fandom. Booth (2010) argues that the capture of value by capital does not imply its appropriation, but rather emphasizes the power of information technology to *multiply* cultural work, such that the generation of value in this manner is not a zero-sum game. Critical interventions in theorizations of fan economies underscore, however, that technologies of capture are increasingly the same technologies used for production and communication, and in capturing labour also structure and enclose it in ways that undermine fandom's gift economy (Coppa 2014; Stanfill 2019; Stanfill and Condis 2014). These criticisms speak to some of the problems that Hesmondhalgh (2010) identifies in the structuration of free labour. He notes that free labour must be examined holistically, with attention given to the social and cultural goods it produces, the relationship of that production to the possibility for good working lives, and for whom those lives are possible. He reiterates that this approach must always return to the social organization of work, rather than to individual experience; this allows for a rigorous and unequivocal assessment of the status of free labour in a given field.

The matter is further complicated by the fact that many amateur producers in AP are not, strictly speaking, working for free. Most series employ some degree of monetization, even if it does not bring in much revenue. Amateurs frame money as an 'extra', one of the benefits they derive from AP but not the main motivator. For Jay, Patreon proceeds "pay for Popeyes" fried chicken when their castmates come over to record. Addison gets some small revenue from a Patreon feed and affiliate links, which they reinvest "to buy more games" for their podcast, which features a variety of TRPG systems. Emery described the impact as a way listeners to their podcast can "help with the hosting … Because it's like, a few bucks a month, but financially it might make it easier on

us.” Similarly for Lake, Patreon is a way to “recoup some of that investment. If we can break even on this, and I'm not copping money out of pocket just to run it, that's amazing. And then anything on top of that is just like fun gravy that we will try to make cool things happen for.” Jean is content to front the costs of producing their podcast, but launched a Patreon because “it's not a terribly expensive thing to put together” and helps “offset a little bit of” the expenses they incur. Kay explained that their proceeds “all get fed back into the podcast”, paying for hosting, software subscriptions, guest appearances, and convention travel, but they were not “making any take-home income”.

For Jan, a restrained attitude towards monetization and an intention to resist the urge to chase profits was necessary to keeping their series “sustainable”. Rowan, a professional, spoke to having “seen it happen to people who do the things that they used to love to do, for money. It can change you, it can burn you out, it can ruin what you love, turns it from a work of passion into a work of obligation.” Amateurs are alert to the risks of becoming too invested financially and, as Julian phrased it above, ‘losing the fun’. Chance’s group had considered seeking advertisers, but “didn't really want to compromise on what sort of stories we wanted to tell if we had felt that we weren't marketable”. It is significant that for amateurs these acts of withdrawal from monetization are described as a form of boundary setting, and speaks to a wider ambivalence to monetization: as with professionals, there is a risk of the work sapping the pleasure out of play. At the same time, monetization options are convenient, and it can be nice to recoup the expenses associated with one’s hobbies, and even a little spending money.

Nevertheless, some amateurs wish they could go professional. Jean, a lawyer, quickly said “yes”

before I could finish asking whether, given the option, they would transition to doing it full-time:

> I've been doing this for a little while. And I don't know which episodes you've listened to, but I end up doing more character voices in some than others. And, you know, someone said to me, have you ever thought about just doing [voices] professionally? And that's what led me to start taking [voice acting] classes and all that. … So if it's a combination of this podcast and the voice acting? Yes! Yes to all!

Emery expressed a similar sentiment, reflecting that "this is really kind of like a dream job. Like if it could be my job, I would love it! When I was a kid, I always wanted to get into like radio theater and acting overall, but instead I went with healthcare." These positions echo Terranova's (2004) theorization of free labour as a kind of cultural surplus – individuals with some degree of economic security, exercising their creative talents in their spare time. Yet this labour casts the shadow of a more fulfilling working life, where the demands of gainful employment do not relegate creative endeavors to part-time status. There is a wishful quality to this work that resembles aspirational labour, and it is certainly tinged by the dream of "getting paid to do what one loves" (Duffy 2016, 4). However, unlike Duffy's social media influencers, amateur AP producers' career dreams seem more fanciful, or less driven anyway by a belief that with enough work, their unpaid labour can become a full-time job.

For amateurs in creative careers, AP served as a creative outlet allowing a greater degree of agency and autonomy, and a means of exploring creative avenues not afforded by their jobs. Tracy identified themself as an actor who "audition[s] around" and "work the gig economy of like four or five jobs that I hop around between. Some are adjacent and are like, post-production or like videography, and other stuff is like just regular Joe jobs." They described how some of the enjoyment from AP came from the opportunity to experiment with different characters and develop

them over the course of a campaign. Jan, a video editor for a corporate marketing firm, enjoyed doing editing and production work for a project of their own making. Chance, a writer, made a similar observation, noting that AP allowed them a greater degree of freedom to experiment with character in ways that their writing work did not afford. For Lake, Tracy, and Jay, AP provided a structure for converting excess creative energy into "portfolio pieces" they bring into their careers in acting and media production, but this was not universal. Chance maintained a separation between their AP work and professional writing, describing their podcast as "something that is understandable in the digital world, but not in the physical world," and noting that they did not believe it would be well received by their colleagues.

Communities of care

In her research on youth cultural production in the creative industries, Campbell (2020) lays out a concept of "communities of care" to describe "a shift towards a collective impulse and suggest the resilience of alternative formations of social enterprise within the broader neoliberal uptake of the creative industries as economic driver" (2020, 537). These communities "look outwards, forming loose horizontal networks" (2020, 537) through structures including "collectives [and] support groups" (2020, 536). In this section, I examine whether this concept has purchase in AP, and if so, how AP can contribute to efforts to "broaden our ways of measuring the value of culture" (2020, 539).

Creative communities of care emerge when producers come together to support each other and their work through collaboration, sharing skills, resources, and labour, and participating in forms of recuperative sociality. Like communities of practice (Barton and Tusting 2005; Gee 2006; Lave

and Wenger 1991), communities of care develop forms of collective action and shared goals, but their goals are "based in a desire for enlargement of possibilities of what work in the creative industries might look like and who might work in the sector" (Campbell 2020, 536). They employ practices of care of to sustain alternative structures for creative and cultural production that are less reliant on capital and not motivated by competition and the logic of hustle, but rather an understanding of culture as a public good and the need for sustainable conditions for producers.

In AP, I observed communities of two kinds: The first of the production team, which often consisted of groups of friends and people driven by a desire not just to play and perform, but to do so *with each other*. While professionals might play together because they were hired for the same series, or in order to elevate one another's profiles and expand their audience bases, amateurs tended to insist on forming groups with people they liked and enjoyed playing with. Amateurs were also more willing to distance themselves from audience interaction they found unpleasant. The second is the extended production community, where amateurs exchange knowledge and support. I have described these in earlier sections of this chapter as well as in Chapter 4, so will not do so again here. It bears noting how widespread such networks are: Among the amateurs I spoke to, nearly everyone had developed relationships with AP producers outside their play group. Several amateurs reflected that most of their audience consisted of fellow producers. They framed these relationships as key elements in making the work worthwhile. Professionals, whose material security is tied to their ability to reach audiences, were more prone to framing one another in competitive terms. The supportive networks of amateur production also created small but meaningful clusters of support for more niche or experimental content, whereas professionals needed to reckon seriously with the predominance of *D&D* and the *Critical Role* playstyle as key

market tendencies in positioning their series. In these qualities, amateur AP production communities would appear to fit Campbell's (2020) formulation of communities of care.

It bears noting, however, that amateurs' ability to form such communities and care for one another is highly mediated by the technical infrastructure of online sociality and the platforms through which AP producers create and distribute their work. AP producers are spatially isolated to a degree likely surpassing Campbell's (2020) population. Participants outside of Los Angeles did not refer to local AP, or even podcasting scenes, and made scant mention of local or national contexts. Even prior to the pandemic, it was common for members of the same AP group to live great distances apart. While producers interact with fellow practitioners outside their play group, these interactions are often carried out exclusively online. Conventions offered occasional opportunities for groups to meet up in person, but such events are intermittent, expensive to attend, and prone to conflict with amateurs' work schedules. In brief, AP communities are limited in the forms of care they can provide by the physical distances between their members. I do not mean here to relegate online interactions to some secondary or virtual level of reality; rather I mean to point out objective material differences in the modes of sociality and care available over such distances. AP producers are less likely to be able to make each other a meal or offer a place to sleep. This may seem sentimental, but the ability to provide for one another's basic material needs is critical if communities of care are to mount meaningful alternatives to the neoliberalization of the creative industries. This problem is less pressing in the case of amateur producers, who are presumably not dependent on their production networks for basic necessities but reveal some of the limitations of these networks' wider political potential. They cannot, for instance, relieve competitive pressures among professionals, unless professionals are first able to build robust

structures of mutual aid into these networks that meaningfully intervene in the hardships of precarity and wage scarcity.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I employed successive theoretical lenses on labour to analyze the political economy of AP production. I began with an exegesis of the concept of playbour, where I found that the term captured significant layerings of work and play in AP. However, the term turned out to have limited purchase, as AP requires large amounts of "serious" work not encompassed by the concept. Next, having determined that work in AP is, indeed, work, and not some other thing, I explored labour in AP production through the lens of Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2011) normative framework for good work.

This analysis confirms some of the structural points raised in Chapter 4, namely that vocational pathways are limited for professionals. Moreover, the pressure to make a living creates competition between professionals and a sense of obligation to audiences that are not shared by amateurs. Slim funds in the professional sector also makes it precarious, especially for those not able to secure patronage from a corporate sponsor. The market for AP is closely tied to the market for TRPGs, as shown by the centrality of the *D&D* brand in shaping professional fortunes. The success of major professional APs draws both on *D&D*'s overwhelming dominance of the TRPG market, and the extensive support it lends to AP producers.

Amateur AP production appears the more gratifying route. Amateurs enjoy more creative autonomy and supportive social environments in which to share their work. Some are even able to

access some small revenue streams through AP. Their attitude towards monetization, ambivalent yet interested, reflects Törhönen et al.'s (2019) findings that online content creation is largely motivated by fun, community, and a sense of competence. It bears remarking then that amateur AP production seems to present a rich creative avenue and make for a more rewarding working life for those who can afford it. However, as I raised in my discussion of communities of care, the physically disparate nature of online media production limits its capacity to create robust structures of support for those with less stable incomes.

AP's location in a niche market and its reliance on online infrastructure raises questions about the limits of producers' pathways to economic autonomy and creative self-realization (see Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). In the next and final chapter, I will explore these questions through a comparison with that elephant in the room: *Critical Role*, and its enormous success. Understanding the ways in which that pinnacle of professional success in AP reflects or defies the conditions described in these chapters will provide a better sense of the overall positioning of AP and its producers within the wider creative industries.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

"I've got in in my mind that I'm not doing this as a full-time job. I do it for fun. And if I happen to get money from it, that's great." (Kelly)

As I began writing this chapter in November 2021, WotC had recently announced the production of *Invitation to Party*, a *D&D* AP series for the recently rebooted G4 cable network. The gaming press website IGN deems it "the first Actual Play series to air on cable television" (Ryan 2021). This is an accurate if somewhat technical distinction: in 2016, comedian Dan Harmon launched his own AP series, *Harmonquest*, on the NBC-owned streaming service, Seeso. *Harmonquest* did not indicate what system its performers were playing, referring generically to "a fantasy roleplaying game". But *Invitation to Party* does indeed appear to be the first AP to air on a major cable network. The new series features the talents of "internet personality Kassem Gharaibeh (co-founder of Maker Studios), actress Fiona Nova, Indiana Black (perhaps best known as [esports] caster Froskurinn), and TV writer/actor Ify Nwadiwe (who D&D streaming fans may remember from *Dimension 20*'s Bloodkeep mini-series)" (Ryan 2021). This move reflects many of the dynamics in professional AP described in this dissertation: Wizards of the Coast's patronage of *D&D* streamers, the prominence of the *D&D* brand, the ecologies of online talent, and the growing gulf between many professionals and the connected world of corporate AP.

In Chapter 5, I raised the question of what it takes for professional AP producers to approach the level of profitability and success of a *Critical Role* or an *Adventure Zone*. A sufficiently researched

answer to that question would involve an intimate knowledge of the inner workings of those series surpassing the scope of this project, but I open this chapter with some observations towards that end based on the actor types outlined in Chapter 4 and public knowledge on those producers. Next, I reflect on what this dissertation has revealed about work in the field of AP. In that section, I consider the differences discussed between amateur and professional production in Chapter 5, and their implications for our understanding of play and work under capitalism. Here, a discussion of the political economic ambivalence of AP leads to an exegesis of Garnham's (1997) discussion of "coping", where I interpret that concept as one with significant purchase in understanding emerging forms of labour. Finally, I discuss avenues for further research on AP, highlighting three areas that would benefit from qualitative inquiry: highly corporatized series; woman, queer, and BIPOC producers; and longitudinal studies on careers in AP.

Situating Critical Role

In Chapter 4, I identified four key actor types with significant structural influence in the field of AP: The TRPG industry, co-producers, platforms, and audiences. I argued that a producer's position in AP can be understood through their relationships to these actor types. I also pointed out that there are major structural barriers between amateurs and professionals, limiting mobility between these areas of practice. Yet my interviews suggested that there is significant economic stratification even among professionals, with *Critical Role* embodying a level of success that stood beyond the reach of my participants. *Critical Role* was a gold standard in AP, setting standards of excellence in storytelling and production, while also eating up the lion's share of audiences in a field widely perceived as oversaturated with *D&D* content. In this section, I apply my actor types

framework to *Critical Role*, considering what it indicates about the wider field, and what it might mean to emulate its extraordinary success. Given *Critical Role*'s tendency to keep its inner operations under wraps, my observations here are more in the line of speculation; however, public knowledge on *Critical Role* is enough to get a sense of how it fits into the wider field of relations in AP.

Industry darling

Critical Role enjoys a privileged relationship to the TRPG industry and WotC in particular. Its *D&D* supplement, the *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount*, is officially licensed by WotC, listed on the *Dungeons & Dragons* website, and credits *Critical Role* host Matthew Mercer as co-author alongside members of the WotC RPG development team (Mercer et al. 2020). Its contents include character concepts and setting elements originally featured on the show, providing a way for fans to play *D&D* in *Critical Role*'s world with support from the authors of both. This book speaks to a kind of reciprocity between the two companies: The *D&D* brand allows and encourages third-party publishing but forbids the explicit use of the game's name and certain proprietary ideas, notably including some of the game's iconic monsters and its official settings. A second publishing route is available through WotC's "DM's Guild" platform, a self-publishing service allowing authors to publish explicitly using the *D&D* name and brand imagery and access to certain restricted IP. DM's Guild authors are required to publish in accordance with official *D&D* style specifications, share their revenues with WotC, and relinquish IP rights to their publication. DM's Guild lacks editorial oversight and robust quality assurance, and its products lack the prestige of official *D&D* releases like *Wildemount*. Partnerships of its kind are rare. WotC's willingness to

put their official stamp on another company's product speaks to the size of *Critical Role'*s audience and its significance as a market for *D&D* products.

In addition to partnerships with WotC, *Critical Role* receives numerous sponsorships from within the TRPG industry. These include an ongoing partnership with *D&D Beyond*, the official digital toolset for the *D&D* brand. In addition to buying promotional spots in *Critical Role* episodes, *Beyond* includes support for *Critical Role*-branded game content in its online products. Companies producing dice, specialized notebooks, and other TRPG paraphernalia are common sponsors and advertisers on *Critical Role*. Members of its cast have also periodically teamed up with WotC and Roll20 to promote new products. Finally, *Critical Role* has produced sponsored episodes and mini-series featuring RPG products in collaboration with their producers: These include the *Elder Scrolls* RPG and the Wendy's *Feast of Legends* game – both products notably developed by large companies based outside the TRPG industry and seeking to appeal to it.

Extensive co-production

Critical Role resembles most other AP insofar as all of its performers include it among a number of jobs. It has always benefited from the geek-culture credentials of its cast, most of whom have established careers in voice or screen acting and production work and continue to take media industry jobs to this day. Situated in Los Angeles, *Critical Role* draws on the talent and resources of local industry in television, film, video games, and other cultural industries. The show's first seasons were produced by multimedia production company Geek & Sundry, which by *Critical Role*'s launch had corporate backing from Legendary Entertainment, whose products include the Christopher Nolan *Batman* movies and the recent film adaptation of *Dune*. *Critical Role* employs

at least 31 individuals holding positions in production, marketing, operations, and business development. Unlike many professional AP producers in podcasting and live streaming, *Critical Role*'s non-performing staff outnumber its performers – by at least 2 to 1. This speaks to the sophistication of the company's operations, but also to the large amounts of labour involved in producing a series with its degree of polish and public presence.

Critical Role's network of co-producers also speaks to its diversified activities and revenue streams. Beyond direct revenues through Twitch and merchandise sales, Critical Role Productions LLC includes Darrington Press, a publishing operation focused on developing board games, puzzles, and TRPG supplements exploiting the *Critical Role* brand, including Matthew Mercer's growing reputation as a game designer. The publishing arm's forthcoming products include *Tal'Dorei Reborn*, a *D&D* supplement similar in nature to the *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount*. *Tal'Dorei Reborn* is itself an updated version of the *Tal'Dorei Campaign Setting*, previously released in partnership with TRPG publisher Green Ronin. The *Critical Role* universe and narrative have served as fodder for other media products, including a novel and audiobook, a short story collection, a run of comic books, and an animated series. As Critical Role Productions has grown as an organization, it has consolidated its brand and co-productive apparatus; the AP series is one among a growing range of *Critical Role*-branded products.

Cross-platform operations

Unlike most APs, *Critical Role* episodes release in both video and podcast formats. Pre-recorded episodes premiere weekly on Thursdays and are streamed synchronously on Twitch. Recordings of the episodes are then available to watch through Twitch or YouTube, or to listen to as a podcast.

This multi-format strategy affords multiple forms of engagement. The streams create a weekly live event for the show's audience to gather over and respond to in real time, whereas the podcasts make the show accessible to fans who may not have the time or interest in watching three-hour game videos, and rendering it more portable for listening while doing other activities. This also creates multiple opportunities for advertising. While some of *Critical Role*'s ad spots are soundlessly laid over the video stream, promotional segments at the beginning and end of each video are replaced in the podcast with audio ads, and the podcast draws its own sponsors. Moreover, Twitch often makes special deals with its most popular producers, establishing private contracts beyond the public-facing terms of the platform's Affiliate and Partner programs. Such contracts are becoming more common as Twitch faces mounting competition from YouTube for dominance in live streaming (Harwell 2021).

It is difficult to tell from available data exactly how *Critical Role* manages its presence across various platforms. As a recent leak showed, it is the most popular and highest-earning channel on Twitch (Espinosa 2021; Pesce 2021). However, it is hard to say how much its dominance on the platform owes to algorithmic optimization and/or amplification, and how much it is an effect of its established popularity and ubiquity. Despite its massive Twitch revenues, *Critical Role* also has more diversified income streams than many other professional streaming series and may be less reliant on Twitch's integrated monetization, although they certainly benefit from it. Likewise, it is not clear that it depends on the platform for discoverability, given that it already benefits from extensive press coverage, fan buzz, and promotional support from other producers. What is clearer is the amount of oxygen *Critical Role* take up on the platform, especially where other *D&D* streams are concerned. *D&D* streamers contemplating going online on Thursdays between 7 and 10PM

PST, for example, need to weigh the advantages of that time slot against the fact that they will be competing for viewers directly with the platform's highest-earning channel. Dylan, executive producer for an AP channel, mentioned that sometimes their shows underperform because "we're airing against another show that's in a similar vein, and has really popular people on it, and we just can't compete, you know, our audience is splintered that day." While they did not call out *Critical Role* directly, it certainly matches the description of the kind of show that splinters their audience. In this sense, *Critical Role* has a major impact on the overall experience of producing on Twitch, especially for those targeting primetime audiences in the Americas.

Audiences

Critical Role's massive audience precludes the sense of direct engagement many AP streamers try to foster with their fans, or "Critters". Outside professionally moderated Twitch chats during weekly streams, Critter communities, including Discord, Facebook, and Reddit spaces with tens or hundreds of thousands of users, are fan-run, and not included among *Critical Role*'s "official" social media (Critical Role 2020). Moreover, even during streams, *Critical Role* does not interact directly with viewers or employ donation incentives. Nevertheless, Critters are important engines of the series' success. Beyond their monetary contributions to the show, as eyes and ears for advertising, as well as donors, Kickstarter backers, and buyers of merchandise, fans' enthusiasm for the series feeds public awareness of the series and boosts its visibility. I also discussed previously how fans perform extensive free labour for *Critical Role,* including maintaining its fan wiki and, for a while, producing closed captions for its videos (see Hope 2017; Marsden and Mason 2021, for a fuller account of the ways Critters socialize, and are socialized, within *Critical Role's*

commercial circuits). Kelly, a participant in this research, discussed how finding a community in the *Critical Role* fandom ultimately led to creating AP themself. This anecdote speaks to Stanfill and Condis's assertion that fan work produces "fan community—fandom itself—through the production and maintenance of affective ties" (2014, para. 3.4). Indeed, Jones (2021a) argues that *Critical Role* audiences not only affect the series' public image, but in their archival practices and aggregate discourse with its producers, shape its self-representation and the production of its history.

Adventure Zone host Griffin McElroy discusses the challenges of interacting with ballooning fan community in an interview with Stephanie Hedge (2021). McElroy relates how as *The Adventure Zone* fandom grew, "listening to the audience became a lot harder, because there were conflicting wants and needs" (in Hedge 2021, 152). As audience communities grow, notions about what the series is or ought to be are prone to diverge; direct interaction comes to bear the risk of alienating large sections of the community or stoking conflict. This may shed some light on *Critical Role*'s relative distance from its audiences. In Chapter 4, quotes from Asra, Kay, and Noel also provided a sense of how taxing it can be to deal with even moderately-sized audiences. At the same time, the larger community *Critical Role* attracts and the series' diversified income makes it less beholden to individual contributions, enabling this distance.

Critical Role and the field of Actual Play production

Critical Role operates at a scale that sets it apart from most other AP, not only in terms of revenues or the size of its audience, but in its relationships to other producers, platforms, and the TRPG industry. *Critical Role* launched with corporate backing and benefited, even in its early days, from

recognition through the Geek & Sundry brand and the elevated profiles of its performers. Although it has taken on more elaborate trappings and a more complex marketing apparatus over time, it has always enjoyed a high degree of exposure, professional support, and talent. It has served as a poster child for the meteoric rise of AP and remains, for many, emblematic of the genre. Having launched with corporate backing, it entered the field already better positioned than the professionals I spoke with, even as those same professionals pursue living in a cultural space dominated by *Critical Role*. Its exceptionality can be understood in terms of the special relations it has to key actors: its privileged relationships with Twitch and WotC are negotiated through different channels than other professionals; its co-productive network draw on industries of professional talent and resourcing in one of the world's television and media hubs; the sheer size of its audiences affords a more aloof relationality like those of major media franchises. As between professionals and amateurs, there does not appear to be much of a pipeline between *Critical Role* and the rest of the field of AP. Indeed, much of its commercial success appears built on its roots in other industries.

Work in AP Production

Kelly straddles the line between professional and amateur production. They summed up their situation as follows:

> I'm fortunate enough to receive disability benefits from the government. But I think everyone knows that it doesn't cover everything. So sometimes you do have to monetize yourself, and I think it's very important that you use all of the resources that you have. … I've got it in my mind that I'm not doing this as a full-time job. I do it for fun. And if I happen to get money from it, that's great.

Here, Kelly drew upon professional and amateur framings for their work. Their practices are

generally in line with those of professionals. Using Twitch and networks of friends and collaborators on that platform, Kelly hosts their own AP series, while also participating in not-for-profit podcast projects, charity streaming, and making appearances on friends' streams. Like many amateurs, Kelly frames their AP work as primarily a labour of love, with revenue figuring as a kind of bonus or perk. However, they also note that their main source of income is not enough to support them, and feels pressure to 'monetize themself'. AP provides access to extra funds without the trappings of "a full-time job", but also provided benefits to Kelly in terms of friendships, play, and opportunities for expression.

As a cultural field, AP is structured by its relationships to the TRPG industry, co-producers in other fields and practices, platforms, and audiences. Producers manage their relationships to these actors in developing their own series. Different relationships to these actors engender differentials in vocational commitments and outcomes. Amateurs have more room for experimentation and cultural expression in their choice of TRPG products and, less motivated by pressures to monetize, form communities of care with co-producers and more intimate connections with their audiences. Professionals seek to foster this same intimacy, but also must contend with one another for audiences, donations, subscriptions, industry patronage, and airtime. Careers in AP are characterized by scarcity and many professionals must supplement their AP work to make a living. Platforms' affordances for monetization are rarely enough to support even one individual, let alone a whole group. Meanwhile, the highest levels of success are attained through connections outside of AP, not by navigating its internal structures.

Thus, professional AP does not appear to carry much promise of better work in media production.

In fact, it largely resembles established economies of celebrity and influence in other forms of platformized media production, where scarcity, precarity, and free labour are the norm and "breakthrough" successes are heavily mediated by traditional industry actors (Abidin 2018; Duffy 2017). Indeed, the Twitch hack that revealed *Critical Role*'s revenues also showed that less than 0.1% of users on the platform are bringing in sums equivalent to or greater than the US minimum wage (Grayson 2021). As I noted in Chapter 4, AP producers mix their monetization streams, so Twitch figures are not reliable measures of income even for professional streamers. However, these numbers undercut the narratives advanced by the platforms themselves: that professionalizing and hustle pave the way to a passionate career in platformized production (Burgess 2012; Postigo 2016).

While there are severe limits to profitability in AP, another possibility of a kind of good work appears in amateur AP production, as I discussed in Chapter 5. Amateur AP production employs some of the trappings of professional production, including a hustle mentality and widespread monetization. However, amateurs experience these trappings differently and employ them to different ends. They pursue the playful, expressive, and social pleasures of the space, and privilege fun in their interactions with audiences. Of course, these qualities come at the cost of a fuller commitment to AP, or indeed of a more fully rewarding working life. In this sense, amateur production speaks to the shortfalls of professional production – to the inaccessibility of more robust and sustainable careers in AP. Amateur production is also a product of privilege: it requires leisure time, and access to adequate spaces and equipment. While it does not take a lot to record a podcast, one of the things it does require is a relatively quiet setting. Moreover, the limited monetary returns on amateur production mean it is unlikely to generate on its own the means

necessary for the requisite leisure time, even if it can pay for a microphone and a new laptop.

In traditional economic terms, my findings are humbling. Vocationally, AP much resembles other platformized cultural production. The expansive yet narrowly targeted scope of an online audience has not tipped the scales of corporate power in media, nor has it opened radical new pathways to sustainable creative work. In fact, it partakes in the consolidation of capital in the hands of platform owners. In Chapter 5, I emphasized the importance of AP's recreational qualities – its playfulness and networks of care – as important factors in understanding its place in novel structurations of work and play. Indeed, one of the more innovative aspects of AP is the development of an entire apparatus that generates value from playful activities in a niche hobby. This is the nature of the doubling I identified earlier in playbour. Here, AP reflects theorizations of a form of capitalism that is finding ways to 'de-alienate' labour while still capturing value from it (Hesmondhalgh 2012, 141) – to convert labour into play.

Nevertheless, AP is instructive as a field of practice that reflects how people are finding ways to play and find connection and creative fulfillment within these new forms of capitalism. I return here to my earlier reflections on questions of resistance and complicity in political economy, and Garnham's reference to a "need to make a distinction between resistance and coping" (1997, 67). For Garnham, an ongoing challenge to cultural research is a desire to read acts of political resistance and emancipatory energies into situations where subjects "[do] little … to resist the structure of domination in which they find themselves" (1997, 68). Yet as objects of sociological inquiry, these processes of coping reveal the ways people are making use of exploitative technologies and social relations to attend to matters of connection, culture, and pleasure. In other

words, the study of AP addresses important descriptive questions about the shape of work and play in an age of ubiquitous commodification. If it does not reveal deep changes in the world of jobs, it at least indicates a kind of 'jobification' of hobbies and play activities.

Social Reproduction and Coping

I begin to wrap up this dissertation with some reflections on the wider academic significance of AP, both to properly contextualize this research and to clarify the stakes of future work. It does not seem to me that AP is a vital new force in work. What it reflects about work is largely consistent with broader trends in the platformization of cultural production and evolutions in the neoliberal creative economy (see Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2022). It does reveal processes by which once-private forms of play are commodified and turned towards public entertainment. It also shows how its practitioners fit AP into creative working lives, professional aspirations, and communities of play and care, and in so doing reveals processes by which people find pleasure and fulfillment within the affordances of contemporary capitalism. Then again, it is a niche occupation, both in terms of the (sub)cultural community to which it appeals and the relatively privileged position of that community within the global political economy. In this section I return to the concept of coping introduced above, unpacking this term as employed by Garnham (1997) in his critique of cultural studies and the need for a more rigorous engagement with the political economy of culture. But first, it is necessary to situate the term within the range of concerns and disciplinary perspectives at work in this dissertation.

This research is in conversation with theorizations of creative work which largely approach that work through its structuration in connection with possibilities for careers and better working lives.

These are questions of political economy, where the "political" is the social necessity and benefit of culture (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011) and, accordingly, the question of how cultural work is generated and structured. This turns to the "economy" – the distribution of the means of cultural production. Creative industries scholars like Campbell (2020), Duffy (2017), Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011), and McRobbie (2016), tend to analyze these means in terms of relationships between career structures, opportunities for work that is experientially fulfilling, and economic outcomes amenable to a life not dominated by scarcity. For Garnham, coping, as opposed to resistance, refers to cultural practices which do not contribute to the ultimate undoing of structures of domination, and may even "contribute to the maintenance of that structure of power" (1997, 68). In these terms, the study of creative labour serves two ends. First, to expose the enduring presence of systemic power and injustice in a field of work, the romanticization of which serves to justify accelerating neoliberalization (as per McRobbie 1999; 2016) and underscores the ongoing need for an analysis of resistance. Second, to assess within those fields of work the possibility of resistant practices (as per Hesmondhalgh 2012). For Garnham, coping processes are of limited interest to the political economist: He asks, "can we not admit that there are extremely constrained and impoverished cultural practices that contribute nothing to social change?" (1997, 68)

Rather, Garnham argues, the necessity of an analysis of domination and resistance ties to the necessity of a concept of false consciousness. He argues that "only such a concept gives intellectuals a valid political role in the widest sense of the word" (1997, 66), which lies in the creation of "the consciousness of class out of the fragments of that class's experience," and "provid[ing] a political strategy by providing a map of the structure of domination and the terrain of struggle" (Garnham 1997, 66). False consciousness thus helps to distinguish the properly

resistant subject from the one who is merely coping. A refusal to examine false consciousness obscures the “analysis of the structures, institutions and processes of representative democracy” (1997, 71), which Garnham takes as the ultimate object of political economy, “and the role of cultural processes within them” (1997, 71).

In this critique, Garnham is responding to a vision of cultural studies that is primarily focused on culture as a means of distributing symbolic forms and, accordingly, mediating processes of identity formation and consciousness-taking. Thus, the matter for analysis in the political economy of culture is the relationship between historical material circumstances to “the meanings circulated and to the possibilities of forms of political mobilization” (1997, 59). The limits of a conception of politics so tightly focused on the interrelation between public understandings and institutional democratic processes is better argued elsewhere (see for example Rancière 2016). But it is on the grounds of such a conception that he reads, in Angela McRobbie's work on "how shopping grants women a space for autonomous self-expression" (1997, 67), an expression of "the widespread complicity of victims with the systems of power that oppress them" (68).

This amounts to a binary understanding of the political functions of culture. Cultural practices are either resistant, insofar as they inculcate emancipatory political consciousness and mobilization, or they are complicit. Coping lies in the latter category: It is an "understandable" (Garnham 1997, 67) practice but without political purchase. It also lies on an implicit distinction between culture and economy: There is little value in analyzing "the cultural forms in which women and their allies come to recognize and struggle against [their] domination ... unless it is accompanied by a massive shift in control of economic resources as between men and women" (Garnham 1997, 70–71). The

proper field of political struggle must be that of class -- of economy -- rather than culture. While I agree that widely emancipatory social change requires interventions in the structure of class at the level of state, and also that the possibilities for micro-level adaptation are partially determined by macro-level formations, where I disagree is that the proper object of analysis in political economy lies chiefly in the latter. I contend that the above distinctions between resistance and complicity, and between culture and (political) economy, obscure the political significance of coping.

The first step is to return to the concept of "economy". While Garnham (1997) is skeptical of the notion of "parallel economies", feminist and autonomist Marxist scholarship has never struggled to find the term to encompass things beyond the formal economy of goods and services. Indeed, Garnham concedes to feminist arguments about the role of women's informal work (eg. Rubin 2006) in reproducing the means of production. These critiques open the way to a more fundamental matter, the substance upon which the means of production relies, the *bios* -- that is, human life. Political economists (Berlant 2011; Hardt and Negri 2000; McRobbie 2016) operationalize the *bios* through the concept of biopolitics, originally coined by Foucault. Biopolitics recognizes the way politics are experienced at the level of affect -- that is, in the daily navigation of predicaments managing not only privation and plenty, but pleasure and suffering. Hardt & Negri approach this point in their own (2000; 2005) analysis of biopolitics, but give little attention to the biopolitics of joy or pleasure, even as they recognize that struggles for subsistence no longer lie at the heart of class conscience. They argue this allows for a surfeit of affective and immaterial labour, which opens up cultural and informational flows destined to give rise to new global formations of class consciousness. McRobbie (2016) roundly criticizes this argument, pointing out how these disembodied technological flows remain traversed by embodied political differentials of gender

and race as well as class. While she agrees with Hardt & Negri's identification of a new capitalism driven by the manipulation of affects, she does not concede that this obviates or replaces other modes of domination. Rather, research on the capitalism of affect underscores how it employs fear, suffering, and joy in the production of good neoliberal subjects (Lipovetsky 2017). Berlant (2011) and McRobbie (2016) discuss how fear, collective trauma, and seductive promises of better lives underlie subjectivities embracing precarity and risk. Duffy (2017) argues that the precarious labour of aspirant influencers is driven by fear of privation, pleasure in one's work, and hope for a gratifying career; these motivations are echoed in T.L. Taylor's (2018) work on eSports athletes and game streamers. We thus arrive at a notion of *bios* interwoven in a cultural economy of affects *as well as* the formal economy of goods and services. In affect lies the juncture between politics, economy, and culture -- culture in its many senses, as the production and reproduction of meanings, as the organization and practice of daily life, as a source of "the 'stuff' from which we build our sense of self-identity, our perceptions of the world, and social ties with others, [...] a source of pleasure and conviviality" (Winseck 2011, 12).

In Garnham's (1997) rendering, coping is a cultural mode of managing affects. But he regards this management as fundamentally complicit; a process of enacting one's domination or making it more palatable. Thus, even if culture has a place in political economy, coping remains politically neutral at best. Having situated coping within a cultural (political) economy of affects, one that is distinct from yet entwined with the capitalist economy, the question remains: So what?

As Dean (2012) points out, the pleasurable element integral to the Greek concept of *bios* is often neglected in contemporary analyses of biopolitics. In political economy, the word tends to refer to

sexual pleasure as opposed to the broader sense of enjoyment, satisfaction, and fulfillment it represents in *bios* (Dean 2012, 477). The subject receives more attention in Asian, Black, feminist, and queer studies, where analyses of pleasure emphasize its connection to the political power of the *bios* (eg. Chess 2020; Dean 2012; Gray 2020; Loreck 2018; Morgan 2015; Patterson 2020; Ruberg and Shaw 2017; Trammell 2020; Ward 2021). More common in political economy is an appeal to other virtues close to pleasure: Banet-Weiser (2012) refers to processes of identity- and community-formation in brand cultures, as well as experiences of empowerment; Campbell's (2020) research on young creative communities highlights concepts of care. Patterson (2020) argues that even game studies has a blind spot for pleasure; he echoes Ruberg and Shaw (2017) in his concept of "erotics" as a heuristic for analyzing the ways pleasure undoes or outright defies meaning and, by extension, ideological domination, a point argued in political economy by Dean (2012). Sciarelli (2021) provides further grounds for exploring pleasure in the *bios* in his reading of the concept as an aspect of good *living*, rather than to a kind of momentary excess -- a construction reminiscent of Hesmondhalgh & Baker's (2011) "good working lives".

Jehlička and Daněk (2017) provide a glimpse into how pleasure energizes social formations and cultural practice in food sharing in the Czech Republic. These practices are assuredly economic in the macroeconomic sense of partaking in the circulation of goods and the reproduction of society, as well as in the microeconomic sense of saving on food costs. However, the authors find the sharing of home-grown food to be primarily motivated by "the joy derived from the act of sharing and the social contacts that formed out of engaging in the informal exchange" (2017, 24). Significantly, this finding is consistent regardless of income and "does not represent … a form of resistance to the mainstream market economy" (2017, 26), leading the authors to suggest that it is

rooted in historical Czech cultural practices, rather than economic necessity. In brief, it is a form of coping.

The reason I opened this chapter with, and continually return to, a quote from Kelly, is because their situation speaks quite exactly to the ambiguity of AP's political economic status as a form of coping. It does not appear resistant, insofar as it does not seem to contain within it the grain of a new movement which will upend capitalism and herald in an era of good creative work once and for all. But it remains significant for two reasons: first, because while it bears a paucity of economic goods, it is rich in cultural goods. Second, because the cultural goods of AP are not merely cultural. As Kelly shows us, the cultural goods of AP production include a network of close and treasured relationships, a sense of agency and belonging, and expanded access to social and economic capital. I do not intend to romanticize Kelly's situation or to hold up these goods as equivalent to what Kelly is deprived by a failing social safety net, nor do I intend to normalize the multifarious forms of privation that capitalism exerts upon its subjects but, insofar as these things are actually the case, it seems reasonable to suggest that the net effect of AP production on Kelly's life is a positive one. As such, I propose to reframe processes of cultural coping as an absolute social necessity, and a crucial engine in the total social distribution of labour. In short, coping is an essential ingredient of political economy.

Coping expresses resistance to forces of commodification and co-optation insofar as it manifests energies not yet (or only partially) reabsorbed into capital. The ability of capital to differentially diminish energies it does not take in should not be underestimated; the ability to direct culture, especially monetized culture, to restorative ends, is significant. Coping also expresses that which

is under threat: those practices that rescue from capitalism a life founded in other values, however it may be enacted. Finally, coping reflects those aspects of capitalism that are "good enough" - that foster ways of living that mitigate experiences that would otherwise be intolerable. I reiterate that this "good enough" does not justify oppression, but it reveals the predicaments in which the pursuit of some modicum of a life worth living outweigh the lofty and remote directives of class warfare. This is not the subjective error of false consciousness, so much as an embodied and entirely reasonable response to historical conditions. This modicum too is significant, because it reveals those critical energies of the *bios* that cannot be replenished purely through the distribution of material goods. In so doing, it draws attention to those biopolitical processes between frivolity and privation, complicity and resistance.

My interviews with AP producers are significant to understandings of the political economy of platformized cultural production because they reveal a vital mass of labour directed primarily at coping. The concept of coping resolves apparent contradictions between the pursuit of good working lives and the inequalities of neoliberal capitalism. It allows for an understanding of subjects under capitalism as neither complicit nor resistant by bracketing questions of domination and instead emphasizing notions of pleasure, community, and culture. It identifies how these channel excess energies in the formation of affective networks on top of the structures and technologies of commodification. At the same time, it exposes those networks' imbrication in those selfsame processes, and their vulnerability to absorption therein. To the study of games and the political economy of culture, the centrality of coping in AP indicates the need for more engagement with notions of affect, especially but not only pleasure, in analyses of the relationship between media, culture, and power.

Avenues for Further Research on Actual Play

If AP expresses new articulations of technology, capitalism, labour, and play, there remain several opportunities to better understand the field of relations constituting its production and its place in an evolving creative economy. As I have argued in this chapter, these evolutions are important to understanding not only how people work and play, but how those practices relate to political questions about capitalism and pleasure. In this section I identify three avenues for further empirical work on AP: Longitudinal research on AP producers' careers, in-depth industry research on the production of corporate AP like *Critical Roll* and *Dimension20*, and studies highlighting the experiences of marginalized identities in AP production. Finally, I close this dissertation by outlining some further trajectories for research on coping, pleasure, and play.

Longitudinal research on Actual Play "careers"

AP is a very new genre, even among similar game-based UGC formats such as eSports, video game commentaries, and "variety" game streaming. When I started this dissertation in early 2018, *Critical Role* was just starting to make waves on the wider Internet. Many now-popular APs had not yet launched or were still in their early days. Given the overall recency of the genre, there is much to learn from its development over the next few years, and from longitudinal studies of AP careers, both professional and amateur. If the current mainstreaming trend continues, with the proliferation of highly produced edited video series like *Dimension20*, *Stuff of Legends*, and now *Invitation to Party*, it remains to be seen what effect it will have on the field at large, and especially on the prospects of professionals, who may be facing even stiffer competition for audiences and income. Conversely, the growth of the genre may expand audiences and further elevate existing

producers. Whether and how AP can expand as a market will reflect the changing role of TRPGs and amateur media in the cultural economy. It will also bear on questions of whether platforms like Twitch remain hospitable places for amateurs, or whether trends towards consolidation and celebrification will begin to push out less profitable producers.

Conversely, given that TRPGs appear to be having a cultural moment, following the trajectories of those who depart from AP and the ways in which series 'fail', can provide insight into the life cycles of new media scenes and ecologies. Like AP, the technologies and social structures underlying it are young and rapidly changing. AP may turn out to be a transient symptom of a deeper sociological shift, or one in a cycle of cultural fads. Or, it may speak to new technological articulations of fandom which will eventually begin to replicate in other scenes.

Networks of Corporate Actual Play

My analysis of *Critical Role* earlier in this chapter speaks to the vastly different structural conditions under which major corporate AP products are developed. As this dissertation has shown, one distinctive aspect of these series is their larger production teams and connections to other media industries. Analyses of executive and creative structures in connection with outside agencies (industrial, technological, and public) would provide useful insights into AP's transition into a major media-industrial product. This kind of research likely requires industry connections and inroads into sites conventionally closed to enquiry. It also involves a more variegated understanding of "who" produces AP. While in this dissertation I put the player/performer (who is often also a producer) at the center of production, these more complex operations involve entire production teams that audiences never see or hear, as well as marketing and executive wings that

are likewise separate from the performance. Analyses of how AP is produced in these larger organizations would shed light on the operations of major actors in TRPG culture, and further clarify the internal relations and barriers that mark other areas of AP production.

Diverse Perspectives in Actual Play

As I discussed in Chapter 3, women and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of colour) players are underrepresented in my interview sample. At the same time, the women I spoke with mentioned that they are concerned with the representation of women in AP and TRPG culture and discussed gender-based forms of discrimination they encountered in TRPG communities. At least two women I interviewed had started their AP series partly as a way of breaking out of AP communities dominated by men and developing spaces of their own. BIPOC participants rarely discussed connections between their racial identities and their practices as AP producers. However, women's experiences of developing their own spaces scratches the surface of forms of network-building and practice missed in my data collection. That my few participants of colour did not discuss similar networks does not indicate a lack of racial divides in AP; rather, given the pervasiveness of systemic racism in and beyond the creative industries, as well as in geek culture, it would be surprising if they did *not* encounter such dynamics, and if strategies for navigating a space dominated by white privilege did *not* make up an important element of their practices. As such, this methodological gap amounts to a descriptive gap in my research's ability to capture how non-white, non-male identifying producers participate in and shape AP, and accordingly, in its ability to capture social relations making up the field. This, again, may also involve a de-centering of the player/performer as the locus of work. One participant identified as one in a series of women who

had been pulled into exploitative relationships providing free labour for male AP producers. A more diversified understanding of AP may very well reveal critical labour processes well beyond the core group.

I will take a moment here to reflect on the methodological shortcomings that produced these limitations in my data, as they may be instructive to future researchers: I overestimated ANT's efficacity at identifying and addressing important actors in the normal process of data collection and analysis. I believed, in other words, that if there were important raced and gendered elements of AP, my analysis would identify these and pave the way to their investigation. However, my sampling practices stacked the deck against those lines of inquiry by a) not seeking to sample for diversity to begin with and b) not actively seeking to diversify my sample after the first round of participants came out predominantly white and male. I am a white male myself, and I likewise overestimated my own ability to notice and correct these gaps without building appropriate measures to correct them into my research design. The two women I mentioned in the previous paragraph were both respondents to my second call for participants, which primarily addressed streamers, demonstrating the extent to which such was not the case. I also believed, given that my research questions concerned a field of production at large, that it was only necessary to focalize matters of race and gender insofar as they informed those questions. Yet failure to correct for the systemic influence of whiteness and heteropatriarchy narrowed my descriptive range to reflect those forces' perspectives, resulting in serious descriptive omissions and an analysis that can only accurately assess questions of good work for a privileged fraction of the field.

Coping, Pleasure, and Play

On February 18th 2022, not an hour after writing the first draft of the above section on coping, I attended an online symposium titled "Problematic Pleasures in Digital Games and Play". The conversation, hosted by the University of Toronto's Knowledge Media Design Institute, featured presentations by game scholars Christopher B. Patterson, Aaron Trammell, Kishonna L. Gray, and Bo Ruberg. I experienced their discussion, and its timing, as a vigorous affirmation that my work was heading in the right direction. Trammell and Ruberg critiqued dominant conceptualizations of play that link it inextricably to pleasure and Marxian concepts of leisure – Trammell employing a BIPOC lens to highlight the genealogy of these linkages in White Supremacist thinking, and Ruberg noting the blurry boundary between pleasure, pain, and other affects in kink. Both argued for an understanding of play freed from the baggage of pleasure, Trammell advancing a provocation from Afrofuturist concepts of play as "spiritual motion", asking "what other affects might we embrace?" Gray, who approached digital gaming as a source of communal bonding and personal recuperation in Black woman gamers, emphasized its "lightness" and power as "a source of respite". At the same time, she raised the question of the definitional difference between play and "joy", a concept she suggested differs from pleasure in that it "comes from within". Gray emphasized the question of who gets to enjoy things, and how race and gender affect differentials in the political economy of joy (my phrasing, not hers), as critical questions for anti-oppressive research operating at the heart of her own work. Patterson, expanding on his work in *Open World Empire* (2020), discussed the aesthetics of what he calls the "Asiatic" – a willing and pleasurable submission to domination in the pursuit of a kind of guiltless pleasure of the *bios* and biopolitical, justified by the adoption of a playful politics rooted in enduring imperialistic visions of Asianness

(c.f. Fickle 2019).

Resonant with my earlier assertion of a blindness to pleasure in political economy, these scholars provided a wide-ranging discussion of the various limitations and omissions in game studies' understandings of play that revolved around two themes: First, that it is integral to multiply, diversify, and deepen understandings of affect in play – that a more robust language for describing how people experience play, often in troubling and contradictory ways, is necessary to understanding how play fits into human societies and lives. Second, that conceptions of play as frivolous or privileged may themselves echo a privileged relationship to play – the play of Huizinga (1938) that sets the player outside the world. Rather, play must be re-situated in the social.

What my research has shown is that as the world of work encroaches upon play, workers seek to rescue the playful from its absorption into the laborious. Here, I am perhaps already guilty of some of the sins identified by the discussants above – of equating play with pleasure, and of allowing that pleasure to justify complicity. Yet what I hope my account of AP production, and my discussion on coping in this chapter, have shown, is the possibility of practices that are neither complicit nor resistant – an "away", perhaps, rather than a "with" or "against". Moreover, I have demonstrated the importance of analyses of the pleasurable (or perhaps playful) affects as an energizing and organizing principle in political economy.

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Appendix A: Table of Participants

Name	Primary Series Format	Professional Status
Addison	Podcast	Amateur
Asra	Podcast	Professional
Chance	Podcast	Amateur
Cullen	Podcast	Amateur
Dylan	Live stream	Professional
Eddie	Podcast	Amateur
Emery	Podcast	Amateur
Gray	Recorded video	Amateur
Jackie	Podcast	Professional
Jan	Podcast	Amateur
Jay	Podcast	Amateur
Jean	Podcast	Amateur
Jerry	Podcast	Amateur
Jude	Podcast	Amateur
Julian	Podcast and rec. video	Professional
Kay	Podcast	Amateur
Kelly	Live stream	Professional
Lake	Podcast	Amateur
Lee	Live stream	Professional
Logan	Recorded video	Amateur
Noel	Live stream	Professional
Parker	Live stream	Professional
Rowan	Live stream	Professional
Tracy	Podcast	Amateur

Participants interviewed as a group:

- Rowan and Parker
- Emery and Cullen
- Lake, Tracy, Eddie, Jan, and Jerry
- Addison and Chance