

# Investigating Invisible Labor in Tabletop Role-Playing Game Actual Play

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The popularity of Tabletop Role-Playing Game (TTRPG) streaming has grown exponentially in the last few decades, making way for a new hybrid between film, theatre, and television: Actual Play (AP). These transmedia shows incorporate different aspects of each entertainment model to deliver TTRPGs in the form of a livestreamed or pre-recorded broadcast. Audiences are invited to watch a group of people gather to play a game and maintain a narrative throughout an episode. An Actual Play often works to establish the atmosphere of these imagined circumstances. Viewers often interact with the Actual Play participants in some way: they may be able to donate and change the trajectory of the narrative, make live comments, or vote for their favorite player. However, invisible labor remains concealed throughout the production process. Who works behind the scenes of Actual Plays, and how is invisible labor orchestrated in a genre that continues to transform?



**Fig. 1.** Production shot from Hyper RPG's KOIIOK. Photo from Hyper RPG's website.

Actual Play production groups like Critical Role, Dimension 20, and Hyper RPG (Figure 1) have garnered large fanbases for the quality of their shows. Lighting, scenic, audio, and camera effects are deployed to further entrench the audience and players in the ongoing narrative; this develops a suspension of disbelief similar to live theatrical performance. So long as that labor is hidden in some way, the dissonance between product and labor remains.

With a limited pool of previous research to draw upon, firsthand accounts from participants who conduct invisible labor are the defining trait of this project. While there has been some scholarly exploration of Actual Play, this specific focus on invisible labor has seen little previous research. Dr. Alex Chalk's "Mapping an on-line production network" was integral in establishing a working vocabulary and general trajectory. Dr. Christin Essin's invaluable *Working Backstage* (on the choreography of Broadway's backstage labor) provided a general framework within which interviews would be conducted. Her qualitative oral interview strategies were drawn upon for the purposes of this project, refitted for the context of Actual Play.

This project's interviews were conducted via Zoom and in-person with several Actual Play production team members of different scales. Some interviewees were practitioners of invisible labor outside of AP (film, television, theatre), while others were hobbyists who gravitated toward it by their involvement in the TTRPG community. These unique perspectives come together to influence the nebulous shape of AP, with different practitioners and their strategies informing others to produce inimitable works of all scales.

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**Fig. 2.** Off-camera shot from Hyper RPG's KOIIOK. Photo from Hyper RPG's website.

The differing scales of Actual Plays are key to understanding how a labor framework comes to fruition: budget, location, modality, and time frame decide exactly how labor is to be sourced and organized. An AP that follows the television model may be produced entirely in a filming studio with 10 to 15 team members (Figure 2). A show that is produced virtually (via Zoom or a similar online platform) may be orchestrated entirely by one person running audio and camera effects remotely. These modalities form a spectrum, which presents striations in labor demands that are difficult to cleanly categorize. No two productions are the same.

Revealing the invisible, or off-camera, labor of Actual Play acts as a mirror to the state of entertainment. This project has only led to more questions: how agile must invisible labor be, depending on the modalities and scale of a production? How can social media platforms be used to acknowledge the efforts of invisible labors and, in turn, increase the public's perception of a show's production value? These questions will be answered through further study and more conversations with more Actual Play participants.

These interviews, along with the gradual compilation of a resource bibliography and exploration of academic works, have become the premise for scholarly research on invisible labor in Actual Play. New works in the AP space will continue to generate conversation on how labor occurs in digital and physical environments. The modalities of labor continue to transform in the performance field post-pandemic; this growth combined with the exponential popularity of Actual Play will produce

new perspectives on how labor can be sourced and organized in transmedia spaces. This project is meant to serve as a basis on which other scholars may build their studies and as a living, evolving collection of resources and ideas for coming expansion.

## Statement of Research Advisor

Asking questions about craft and labor largely unexplored in this genre, Olivia Price conducted informational interviews and made site visits to better understand the contexts for backstage/off-camera work in the world of performed tabletop roleplaying games, or "actual play." This research allows us not only to better understand the nature of this performance form (which is practiced by both amateurs and professionals on the same platforms), but also creative labor in new digital media more broadly.

- Dr. Emily C. Friedman, Department of English, College of Liberal Arts

## References

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## Authors Biography



Olivia J. Price is a senior-year student pursuing a B.A. degree in English Professional and Public Writing and a B.F.A. degree in Theatre Design and Technology at Auburn University. As a theatre student, she studies performance and actively participates as a force of backstage labor in the lighting and scenic fields. Her research on invisible labor and its presence in media will continue to expand outside of her undergraduate career.



Emily C. Friedman is an Associate Professor of English at Auburn University. An eighteenth-centuryist and book historian by training, her current work focuses on the long history of creativity outside commercial mass media, from never-published manuscript fiction of the 18th and 19th centuries to creator cultures of the 21st. Her current book project is *Improvised Worlds: Digital Storytelling through Play*.



Chase A. Bringardner is a Professor of Theatre at Auburn University and the Chair of Auburn's Department of Theatre & Dance. His research interests include regional identity construction and intersections of race, gender, and class in popular performance. He has contributed articles and reviews to publications such as *Theatre Topics*, *Theatre Journal*, *Studies in Musical Theatre*, *Theatre Symposium*, and *Southern Theatre*. He has also

published chapters in volumes including *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, *The Cambridge Companion to American Theatre* since 1945, and *The Great North American Stage Directors*, Volume 4: George Abbott, Vinnette Carroll, and Harold Prince (where he also served as co-editor). He is the president of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE).