Volunteers as monstrous workers: 'monsters' in UK live-action roleplay game organizations

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Abstract

This paper examines volunteers as workers in the leisure activity of festival-scale UK live-action roleplaying. The descriptive term 'monsters' is native within the field, referring to volunteer roles often involving dramatic performance of a 'villain' as opposed to the roles played by paying player 'characters'. The term highlights the paradoxical relationship between these 'monsters' and their consumption by the organization in order to produce its main 'product'; the live-action roleplay (LARP) event. These volunteers do not clearly conform to a normative role as customer or employee, and they represent deviations in activity, identity, and morality. Yet this study indicates that the simultaneous production of organization and monstrosity in LARP conceals monsters' role in the production of the LARP event as a conventional leisure activity. The paper suggests that conceptualizing volunteers as monstrous highlights their function and their potential for radical and different approaches to existing organization.

Keywords: monstrousness, volunteering, LARP, roleplaying, leisure

Introduction

While seeking to kill monsters, organizations also seek to exploit monsters. Organizations exploit and consume monsters in consuming all the heterogeneous matter that goes into their production of goods and services...And with exploitation comes organization and transformation. (Thanem 2011, 5)

Live-action roleplay (LARP) is a leisure pursuit based upon the acting out of an improvised narrative, often with competitive elements, in the context of a particular setting or genre. The term 'monster' is native to the field and describes volunteers who have various levels of involvement in the narrative or event organization; this terminology conventionally serves to identify that a 'monster' often involves the performance of a villain in the narrative, or a role otherwise in opposition to the paying and playing

'characters'. The term has no concrete etymology, aside from an (speculative) association with the pen and paper game *Dungeons and Dragons* which publishes distinct volumes for players ('players' handbook') as opposed to game 'masters' ('monster manual').[1] Among participants in this study the term appears in several ways, referring to 'monsters' who volunteer, the 'monster room' that describes the backstage space where volunteers congregate and prepare, 'monstering' to describe the activity of volunteering or 'monster slot', which is the period of its occurrence. 'Monster role' is also used synonymously with 'non-player-character' (NPC) to describe a specific characterisation or scripted antagonist. LARP has a presence in a variety of European countries and the USA and its cultural popularity and public acceptability varies. In the UK this setting is generally a marginal one; UK LARP is often represented as a silly, inappropriate, or illegitimate leisure activity or hobby in media reports. In July 2011, the Daily Mail and the Telegraph websites both featured arguments that LARPers in the civil service were 'cyberslacking' or 'timewasting' by visiting websites on such outlandish hobbies, much less participating in them (Chapman 2011; Sanchez 2011). While the Sunday Times (Hornak 2015; n.a., 2015), Guardian (Hamilton 2012) and BBC websites (Allison 2013) have since published sporadic accounts that are less salacious, the pursuit continues to be billed as the fulfilment of a childish fantasy. Most LARPers from this study describe the motivation to participate in the hobby in light-hearted terms, highlighting both grandiose narrative ambitions (an excerpt from my field notes quotes, 'who wouldn't want to be the hero?') and more prosaic expectations (describing events as 'a weekend in a field with some beer and seeing friends'). Nonetheless, LARP monsters are volunteers supporting an activity on the fringes of acceptability and stigma, not unpaid workers or altruistic citizens providing a social service. As such the extent to which these volunteers can be understood as 'monsters' in more than name seems deserving of further inquiry.

In the UK, LARP constitutes a niche leisure occupation akin to historical re-enactment, where participants come together in a particular location for a limited time to act out an improvised costumed drama with minimum guidance. The game activity is associated with genres of narrative fiction rather than history, and there is no public audience, the game being purely for participants' entertainment. Small clubs and a limited number of larger for-profit organizations facilitate regular events. These events are generally co-ordinated by a group of organizers (often unpaid volunteers), who specialize in a particular theme or scale of event, but in the case of events on the scale of an outdoor music festival, a small number of individuals make this a for-profit business activity. Event organization

requires certain skills, resources and tangible work; including costume making, radio operation, narrative writing, tent erection or set-building, generator maintenance and toilet cleaning as much as theatrical performance. The illustrations I present in this paper are from ethnographic work done among volunteers in a UK organization specializing in fantasy-genre events set within a persistent narrative 'world'. These events usually run over 1-5 days and each event is set in the same coherent imaginary world, so another event taking place 6 days or 12 months later may re-engage with the same characters and themes as a previous event. In this way, multiple events constitute an ongoing world narrative that may last as long as the organization determines, with some 'worlds' persisting for over 20 years in real time. The festival scale of activity is not common among game events of this type, as many operate on a small scale, informal and not-for-profit basis. Festival LARP organizations sanction or franchise these groups to operate regular events consistent with their persistent world narrative. Events vary in scale from 50 to 4500 paying participants supported by 15-200 full-time onsite volunteer crew and a mere 1-6 paid staff members.2 Casual volunteering by paying participants is encouraged on an ad- hoc or scheduled basis. As the festival-scale events draw a large variety of participants on a regional or national level and support these numerous smaller events, their operations represent a normative model for the hobby. In these events, service delivery relies upon individuals who 'come to monster'.

This paper investigates the role of monsters in UK LARP as an example of the extensive use of unpaid volunteers by profit-making leisure organizations. Drawing on how the term 'monster' has already been applied to the analysis of difference and displacement in studies of organization, volunteers are identified as inhabiting a problematic categorical space. According to Thanem (2011), monsters can be understood as creatures which defy neat categorization and act as disrupters of boundaries. By their very existence they expose the fragility of boundaries between organization and market, male and female, nature and technology, and call them into question. Monsters are the messy existential 'Other' against which order may be defined and simultaneously they are disruptors, exposing the fragility of such an order. In LARP there is a dual aspect to the role of those who perform monsters, as not only do volunteers disrupt organizational boundaries around expectations of work and reward, but the performance of the monster role as part of the game narrative also embodies different approaches to ethics that disrupt moral boundaries. Pullen and Rhodes (2015) suggest that an embodied approach to ethics, often overlooked, offers a counter to ethics of organizational

homogeneity and control. This paper highlights the empirical possibility that the capacities of the embodied participant are part of the value of the monster, both for the emancipation of difference and for the organization, as the monster's contribution to the organization paradoxically lies not in orderly compliance, but in the contested space between organization and disorganization.

The literature on volunteering presents many varied approaches to the study of voluntary workers' contribution to organizations, their common traits, obligations, motivations and offers approaches to the management of volunteers (e.g. Bussell and Forbes 2002; MacLean and AQ1 Hamm 2007; Waikayi et al. 2012; Dwyer et al. 2013). In this discussion I argue that this literature Q attempts to categorize volunteers against a definition of an ideal-type of work role, the salaried contracted worker, but it is nonetheless acknowledged that to categorize volunteers as 'unpaid workers' is to limit the understanding of their involvement and contribution to the organization and the broader leisure community. In UK LARP, as in other leisure activities such as sports clubs (Nichols, Tacon, and Muir 2013) or a broad range of serious leisure activity including dog shows, therapy, and search and rescue (Gillespie, Leffler, and Lerner 2002, 287), volunteers are engaged in a number of important roles and activities that not only add to the material production of individual events, but also form the core community of skills and experience brought to the leisure activity and its relations with the public. In this study, 'monsters' fulfil this function for the roleplay organization and the leisure community.

Despite developing experience in creative interpretation of role performance, LARP monsters generally adopt subservient volunteer roles modelled on an employment relationship uncritically. In role-play, a performative concept of role is inherently a part of the activity for monsters and players, as participants improvise and develop their own narrative role for their 'character' within the game narrative. This exploration may be serious, or playful, enacting or challenging specific narrative tropes within the genre (such as the knight errant or the wise woman/healer) and identifying with the role to varying degrees. The performance of these roles is carefully managed and policed by experienced players, monsters and volunteer game-organizers and referees such that LARPers develop extensive expertise in role transition and transformation (Mitchell 2015).

Such expertise is in demand but places pressure on the notion that the organization produces the leisure service. Volunteer workers hold substantial social status within the LARP leisure community beyond their involvement with a single organization. Referees and volunteer organizers, having learned skills of material transformation and service management, run multiple events across

organizations and are frequently invited to support local LARP activities. These contributions and characteristics are what makes the volunteer an attractive prospect for the organization, but they also often fall outside of those characteristics that form a part of a defined work activity.

This paper explores the ways in which the different uses of volunteer 'monsters' in LARP not only question the categorization of these workers as volunteers, but also confuse the boundaries of the organization and its function in the production of the valued leisure product; the LARP event. This contributes to the wider debate on contemporary work that falls outside of clear contractual bargains; work that is 'volunteered' not only through unpaid altruism, but also increasingly through the unbounded demands of contemporary capitalism which blurs the distinction between work and leisure activities.

I do not claim that volunteers are inherently monstrous, rather that volunteer is a category which attempts to tame and organize monstrosity and one which is perhaps less successful in doing so than 'employee'. Approximations to the employee are thus engaged in attempts to write the monster as an individual to be compensated or rewarded for concrete labour in conventional means through meals, tokens, access to the property of the event. It is argued that the management of the LARP monster demonstrates a paradoxical tension between attempts to locate the value of the event in the organization and establish UK LARP organization as a legitimate part of a professional leisure industry, compared to a reliance upon the location of value in volunteers' very 'monstrousness'. The next section of the paper will outline how monstrousness can be applied to the study of volunteers generally, drawing on the literature on volunteering and leisure.

Volunteers as monstrous workers

Monsters may be terrible, horrible creatures that frighten children at night and jump out of the latest science-fiction, horror or fantasy entertainment by day. Conventionally, the monster is the tragic outsider, disenfranchised and excluded from everyday life. However, monsters have specific relevance to how organization and normality are not only understood, but are continually established against the 'monstrous' other. The appeal of monsters to organization studies has been part of what Parker (2005) has identified as a 'gothic' cultural critique of industrial capitalism through which sanitized views of organizations as benevolent originators of economic growth and social progress are challenged. What makes the monster is therefore not make-up and special effects but their disruptive capacities (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis 1999; Thanem 2011); the monster may inhabit a space of

alterity while also offering a form of organizational critique. The analogy of the monster thus goes beyond its expression in literature or myth to provide a powerful image in numerous recent discussions of organization; for example, in technological development and hybridity (Czarniawska and Gustavsson 2008), embodiment (Holliday and Hassard 2001), organization theory (Thanem 2011) and organizational change, death and resuscitation (Riach and Kelly 2014, 2015).

As such, monsters are agents which challenge, disrupt or displace what is normal, and in consequence they are frequently displaced through the boundaries of organization then identified as constituting a disorganized 'Other'. Theories of the monstrous applied to organization have therefore identified how the 'normal', male, heterosexual, individually autonomous and able-bodied worker is an implied ideal-type. Against this ideal-type maternal or disruptive bodies are constituted as threats, or something that needs to be managed and made invisible (Star 1991; Thanem 2011; Gatrell 2014). Although these approaches concentrate primarily on disruptive individual 'misfits', it is stressed that these excluded individuals are not Other as a consequence of natural difference, but through active effects of power relations in heterogeneous networks or discourses. The literature on monstrosity thus does more than defend the exclusion of the monster, but presents a critique of dominant discourses or patterns of relations which work to conceal 'Others' or their monstrous characteristics.

On this basis, volunteers are not inherently monstrous individuals, but the attempt to conceptualize and define volunteers relies upon differentiation compared with the organizational and social role of the paid, contracted worker. This role provides an individualist prototype at odds with a socially responsible or altruistic ideal of the volunteer which is generally excluded from mainstream management theorizing. Though these idealized roles are already problematized in the literature, they act as mediators (see Simpson and Carroll 2008; Jarventie-Thesleff and Tienari 2016) for individual identity work and for the process of theorizing volunteering. Volunteering has been classically defined as unpaid,[3] intentionally productive work undertaken through altruistic motives (Cnaan, Handy, and Wadsworth 1996). This definition excludes work motivated by necessity, such as domestic labour, though the question of volunteer motivation to undertake particular activities is a broad area. Bussell and Forbes (2002) outline the diversity of volunteering contexts as well as volunteer demographics to challenge the claim that altruism is the sole or primary motivation of volunteers. In fact, a wide variety of research suggests motivations and conditions of volunteering in working, social or leisure

capacities stem from a variety of factors and interests (see Musick and Wilson 1997; Hustinxand Lammertyn 2003; Lockstone-Binney et al. 2010), some of which highlight an antagonistic relationship between volunteers and organizations (Kreutzer and Jager 2011; Greene and Ward 2015). Kelemen and Mangan (2013) argue that particular individuals may volunteer as part of a personal militant agenda, or work as 'voluntolds' in response to coercive state regulations on training and employability. As well as the murky distinction between volunteering and work, Stebbins (2012) goes so far as to blur the categorizations of work and leisure, identifying volunteer work as offering an alternative 'career'. This awareness of the problematic status of the volunteer highlights a particular dyadic problem for the literature. Discussions contrasting volunteer categories against paid work maintain the contracted worker/free volunteer dichotomy even though these conceptual theorizations acknowledge the complex differences of volunteer work in terms of the work activity, the identity of workers, and its guiding moral principles and motivations.

To redress this problem of a dichotomized conception of the volunteer, I propose the volunteer be conceived as a potentially monstrous agent, though without fetishizing the volunteer or idolize their motivations. Thanem's (2006) exploration of the history of the monstrous and the role of taxonomy highlights the significance of excess as a property of the monstrous through which category systems might be challenged. I contend that volunteers defy categorical boundaries in Thanem's (2011) terms of excess; even theories of volunteer work struggle to taxonomize the phenomenon, between that which goes beyond contracted requirements through volunteering for unpaid overtime, hopeful unpaid work in pursuit of employment or doubling the activity of paid work by working for no monetary reward. In this, volunteers demonstrate a comparable excess of motivation and autonomy compared to the normative conception of the salaried worker. Volunteers retiring from full-time work for example continue to spend an excess of discretionary leisure time in informal volunteering roles irrespective of their change in work commitments, and formal volunteering increases (see Mutchler, Burr, and Caro 2003), while students on a volunteering trip abroad confuse the boundaries of self-interested tourist and obligated aid worker (see Guttentag 2009).

The association of volunteer work with charitable work or social service places it in an ambivalent space between profitmaking enterprise and the work of the civic state. For Hardt and Negri (2004) the monstrous flesh describes the human population outside of categories such as states,

communities or peoples and represents the antithesis of structures of imperial domination, offering the potential (or threat) to replace modern categories of the body politic. The monstrous flesh produces the common, an unbounded and non-fixed area for production which Hardt and Negri describe as immeasurable, and consequently a space of revolutionary potential against sovereign demands of order and production. From this viewpoint the monstrous, the volunteer, is not chaos, but the repository of value and resource from which to replenish the organization through exploitation or transformation. Volunteers and volunteer-run organizations are nonetheless distrusted, as disrupters of conventional exchange relationships (Mangan 2009), statutory legal relationships (Pirtle 2007; Royston 2012) and individualizing or entrepreneurial values (Musickand Wilson 1997).

Attempts to theorize and taxonomize the volunteer as a version of a contracted employee are themselves an exercise in trying to 'tame' the monstrous flesh through organization. Bloomfield and Vurdubakis's (1999) conception of how monsters are constituted through organization draw on processual approaches from Law (1991) and Cooper (1986) to argue that everyday organizing defines the included and excluded simultaneously, distinguishing the 'pure' and valuable organization from the 'polluting' elements of the outside world. I will employ Bloomfield and Vurdubakis' (1999) three narratives of monstrousness evident as organizing tropes, to highlight this in further detail. They argue that these three tropes of organization *write* monsters as distorted, subversive or undecidable agents. Distortions are distinguished from the acceptable and organized normal by minor yet quantifiable differences, diversity management being one example of how the ideal and distorted employee are co-created. Subversive monsters are those identified as threats to the exposure of the normalized organizing principles of the organization as something which could be otherwise. The undecidable category of the monstrous emphasizes those circumstances whereby the exclusion of the monstrous is on uncertain terms, where multiple 'readings' of a situation are present; thus the very criteria of organization and disorganization are unstable and require continuing reinforcement.

Throughout perspectives on volunteering the volunteer is problematic to define and is often compared to and contrasted against the employee. The volunteer defined as a distortion of the employee is evident in unpaid overtime for the organization as well as 'free' work conducted for other AQ6

organizations. Corporate 'volunteers' are one such, employees encouraged through CSR initiatives Q to engage in unpaid participation in community events or commitment of leisure time to corporate-sponsored charities (e.g.

Peloza and Hassay 2006; Booth, Won Park, and Glomb 2009). Such examples highlight how certain conceptions of volunteering present a distortion of the paid worker: over-motivated by their reward, excessively present in the workplace or the labour market. There is a direct acknowledgement that these workers present different problems for management such as compliance with ambiguous legal responsibilities which only pertain to workers. Yet their similarities allow for the application of classical management theories and procedures adapted to 255 AQ7 problems such as volunteer 'recruitment and retention' (e.g. Wilson and Pimm 1996; Waikayi et al.

Q 2012). In their work activity, volunteers and paid workers are even identified as interchangeable in certain circumstances (Handy, Mook, and Quarter 2007). In the contrasts between paid worker and volunteer the differences are reconciled as the benefits of diversity, in claims such as Grant (2012) who emphasizes the potential benefits to the employee and their organization from participating 260 in volunteering.

Despite these similarities that strengthen the hegemony of the 'normal worker' ideal, volunteers and voluntary organizations are also clearly identified as subversive, often through displaying organizational values beyond the lukewarm commitment of entrepreneurial offerings, or even having clearly different and conflicting identities to those of business enterprises (Mangan 2009). Cnaan, 265 Handy, and Wadsworth's (1996) definition emphasizes the altruism of volunteers, yet even where this is evident this altruistic motivation is not always in alignment with the organization's interests, and presents problems of behavioural control without a clear economic exchange relationship as AQ9 AQ8 the basis of sanctions (see Nichols, Tacon, and Muir 2013; O'Toole and Grey 2015). This contest over value and priorities is not only evident in the academic literature, but also in debates held by 270 volunteers and voluntary organizations (notably around issues such as professionalization) that distinguish between a worker or managerial perspective and a subversive 'volunteer identity'.

From the process of organizing emerge workers of varying reward, motivation and docility, threats and displaced monsters. Where volunteers are captured as distorted workers with quirks, or dangerously subversive workers, their monstrosity is eliminated in this process of categorization. For

the volunteer-run organization such categorizations clearly highlight who is useful in creating value and who contests its location. But for those deferred entities not clearly caught in the defining or organizing process, the undecidable monster may be the chaotic organization or the combined efforts of friends from a university society participating backstage in their first LARP event. The organizing work that constitutes and obscures the monstrous, for Star (1991), is evident in network relationships 280 between actors. She argues that just as organization constitutes what is monstrous, so too by each actor's complicit participation in the network is this maintained. This acts to produce an illusion of unity in those who are not excluded, for example in the executive worker who is segregated from his (sic) 'family self', not only through his own work, but also through the extensive invisible work he delegates to others. For Star, those who constitute 'monsters' such as the victim of torture with 285 split-personality disorder, or the mixed race lesbian, are those who are required to uphold organizational illusions of purity and undertake the work of maintaining a unified self with little delegated help. This undecidable or deferred monster is the mess of organization, and in highlighting the work of categorizing and eliminating the monstrous, the work of denying the monstrosity of the organization in favour of a tidy model of business is also exposed.

Thanem (2011) discusses Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) example of the wasp and the hammer orchid to highlight the relationship between the monstrous and organizing taxonomies; highlighting how the monstrous undermines existing categories or relationships and eludes classification through extensive ambiguity. Although this may appear as simply a matter of uncertainty, this example emphasizes the role of ambiguity in unknowable, undecidable monstrousness. The example high- 295 lights that the categorical definitions of flower or insect are 'leaky' in the reproductive relation between orchids that mimic wasps and wasps that participate in the reproduction of orchids. In this relation, it is not two separate and distinct entities that hybridize across boundaries, distorting their usual behaviour or subverting categorical definitions. Rather, the process of orchid-wasp reproduction defies categorization, offering instead an ambiguous process that questions the very organization or categorization of these de-differentiated entities. For Deleuze and Guattari this is a problem inherent in our system of thinking about the world, and in our thinking about volunteers and workers we often visualize these roles in terms of individual agents undertaking particular activities. Yet the category of volunteer as one half of a dyadic conception of paid work and unpaid work misrepresents both categories.

The very category of the voluntary organization serves to hide the displacement of alternative perspectives on value from business enterprise. Wilson and Musick (1997) have claimed that a significant reason voluntary work is of interest to sociologists lies in the degraded relation between capitalist forms of organizing and civil society. Voluntary work necessarily undertaken to provide social or civic services is presented as redress to the contradictions of capitalism, with high levels of voluntary work constituting remedial action to strengthen or repair social integration placed at risk by alienating employment. Theories such as this position volunteer work as that very 'invisible' activity which Star (1991) suggests upholds the illusion of coherent organization. Volunteer activities may also displace the categorical distinctions between work and leisure (see Stebbins 1996, 2011; Guerrier and Adib 2003). Leisure is traditionally conceptualized as a balm applied to the alienated employee, contrasted against work as offering an outlet for workers to experience fulfilment and flow (Seligman 1965; Csikszentmihalyi 1975) even if this is through consumption practices (McDonald, Wearing, and Ponting 2007). As a receiver of these displaced elements of capitalist forms of organizing, the volunteer-run leisure organization is a place worthy of study. The next section of the paper will outline how data on UK LARP were collected, before presenting an ethnographic narrative on volunteering 'to monster' which describes the process of becoming a committed LARP volunteer.

Becoming an LARP monster

The data for this article are drawn from my diaries and field notes collected as part of a larger empirical project which explored dignity and worth in organizations; in this particular case looking at voluntary workers. Although the data were collected with ethnography in mind, a full ethnographic account was not produced, in the sense that the ethnographic data were written down, but a full ethnography of this organization was not written up (see Humphreys and Watson 2009), as the project compared observations in several different organizations across different sectors. This paper incorporates material from the original project with auto-ethnographic reflection to support the analysis beyond the timeframe of the original research and incorporate detail about my experience of entering the leisure pursuit for the first time.

Brannick and Coghlan (2007) strongly defend organizational research from a 'native' perspective, which was particularly important here to gain access to behind-the-scenes meetings and materials, and consequently to support the identification of significant behaviours. There were nonetheless some practical problems in extracting this perspective from the embedded familiarity of everyday activities.

My fieldnotes on LARP initially focussed on understanding the activity as a leisure pursuit and the role of participants and volunteers. For two years these notes from participant observation as a volunteer and as a paying participant were collated along with material documents from annual meetings between volunteers, tales of good and bad practices, as well as additional notes made through reflection on various key objects and artefacts of the hobby; notably particular elements of costume and props.

As part of the main research project I became what I term below a 'committed' volunteer for a specific LARP organization. The voluntary position of the role within the organization demanded regular time commitments around event organizing; and participation in the research was contingent on maintaining good (and productive) relations with the community, including regular attendance and participation in meetings about events, communication with other volunteers outside of events and strict obedience to the rules of avoiding game-breaching behaviours at events or inaccurately disparaging portrayals of the hobby or individual participants in accounts of game activities. Field notes were therefore frequently produced immediately upon leaving the setting, or occasionally as jottings on the fringes of events, corresponding to what Wolfinger (2002) terms the salience strategies of writing field notes. Writing techniques such as diarizing experiences according to chronological occurrence, function and narrative frame were also used to promote reflexivity, expose pre-understandings of the organization to allow some analytical distance or 'strangeness' into analysis. Sometimes these writings incorporated voluntary tasks undertaken for the group, such as writing guides for new participants and advertising leaflets for other groups. Themes were identified in the data primarily using Goffman's (1959,1961,1967,1974) work on social interaction and the performance management of identity to explore notions of good gameplay and organization as well as the maintenance of ritual boundaries between narrative frames as well as 'front' and 'backstage' (see Mitchell 2015). These notes and draft writings were circulated among research participants to generate alternative perspectives. These texts consequently included significant amounts of material from personal reflection on volunteering to monster in LARP organizations and on back-stage interactions with other volunteers. The data shed light on the embodied, situated and sub-cultural nature of LARP activity and, as a further concern, on matters of volunteering in leisure organizations.

Ensuring that participant observation was conducted in an overt way and informed consent maintained was a significant ethical concern, as breaking out of the narrative on encountering each

individual participant to discuss it and use consent forms would have been damaging to the organization's product. In order to address this, details of the project were circulated within community meetings and forums, and consent was obtained orally from participants during out-of-game periods in the field. This was followed up through community networks and forums outside of the field to ensure participants had the option to withdraw information about their actions and opportunities to discuss concerns about the project.

At the time of collecting this initial data I had around 7 years of experience as a LARP participant and casual 'monster', and 2 years' experience as a general volunteer, and in consequence these materials were focussed more closely on participation and the values of players within the subculture. Since collecting the data I have had a further 2 years' experience as a committed volunteer and have had wider participatory experience of several different UK LARP organizations. In the course of these further experiences I have returned to the original data and expanded on the theme of volunteering practice and the role of 'monsters'. In ethnography and autoethnography, consent is also a matter of authorship as well as participation. As such, preliminary writings outlining these themes have been shared with the UK LARP community through a publicly available online weblog (Mitchell n.d.), through community forums and through practitioner-focussed writing circulated through the European LARP conference Knutpunkt and other organizational networks. In order to maintain a level of anonymity for participants and the organizations studied, the following section is presented as a reflective narrative and omits specifics regarding places, names and identifying symbols. This narrative outlines the experience of volunteering to monster and emphasizes the distinctions between casually volunteering to monster for the organization and engaging in more persistent and committed volunteer work.

Monstering in LARP leisure organizations

Live-action roleplaying in the UK is first and foremost a leisure pursuit, but being far from a main-stream hobby it also represents a relatively small and tight-knit community of players and organizers with a distinctive sub-culture. As part of the LARP community, my activities included volunteering as well as playing from the very beginning. Attending events costs not only the price of a ticket, but also equipment, food and travel so I joined, as many friends did, through sharing transportation and equipment. We booked tickets and registered together, sharing information and learning as we went. At large events, our group would begin the days camped among a field of other players frying bacon

on portable barbecues or open fires, sharing face-paint and swapping tips; about how to create characters that made good use of the rules, to develop our own histories inspired by popular genre fiction and convey them through improvisation, how to improve in combat and how to make or customize cheap materials to produce costumes. We would plan our activities and time as players as well as those times when we would 'go foraging for supplies', a euphemism to explain our character's absence while we 'monstered': changed costume and makeup, donned 'bad guy' roles or referee tabards and became a part of producing the game for others' enjoyment. At large events we are often expected to monster for an hour or for a specific battle, a fun activity as a group since we then have access to scheduled battles or specific competitive adventure scenarios. Often doing this as a group was encouraged as we could already work together well and portray coherent groups of 'bad guys'.

In the beginning

Beginners are quickly encouraged to help backstage where guidance is on hand, and there are few costs or reputational consequences to failing in combat or needing time to learn how to play. This is a way to attend more small events cheaply, as no ticket is needed, a costume is often provided and even (warm) basic indoor accommodation and food may be included or subsidized. After only one or two such events I feel like a more established member of the community; finding myself encouraging new players to 'come and monster' for a few hours or a full weekend as a way of getting to know the game and our social groups. In these social settings, I quickly learn codes of conduct, including an oral set of 'rules' which are not specific to one LARP game. These notably include the rules 'you are not your character', 'roll with the punches', and 'don't take the piss' which on several levels outline the importance of recognizing the distinction between the actions expected and accepted within the gameplay and narrative (such as lying, flirting or violent physical posture) and those appropriate to each other when gameplay stops or is suspended. The first two are in mild contradiction, for they remind the player to maintain a distance from their character performance, but also to embody it authentically. The last, known as rule 7, is regularly invoked as a reference to normative community judgements and so well-known as to have been the moniker of a major online community forum (defunct since 2011).

In the field, different rules of performance apply to different areas, as some parts of the site are designated as outside of gameplay. When the game pauses late at night, heated discussions rage over the importance of reacting to 'wounds' in combat, or the moral status of monster attacks next to

the toilet block, and whether characterized conversations 'count' when not in character costume. Referees supervise monsters in play but are conventionally ignored in performance and are marked out by strictly policed markers, usually a high-visibility vest. Like bright sheepdogs they skirt groups of players or herd hordes of monsters into battle lines, acting as small bubbles of suspended play wherever a player stops to query a rule or a monster their briefing. In answering, they sometimes consult a paper document on rules or narrative. Sometimes they intervene in performance, and use specific regulated commands to halt play for game management or safety reasons.

All performance is suspended in the monster room, where we bundle in as volunteers to enjoy banter, sweets, tea and coffee. The lazy are not suffered for long. We are watched by referees or volunteer administrative crew from a desk piled high with papers and office equipment. There is little to distinguish this from the arrival desk we registered at as players. Referees aiming to 'wrangle' monsters approach and assess our costumes, skills and equipment before recruiting us to specific monster roles. Sometimes there are options and choices between 'talky' or combat roles, but usually minor physical combatants are required; 'You lot! Wanna play some demons? It'll be fun - get painted red!'. We are directed to a table with monsters queuing to have face-paint applied by another volunteer. Meanwhile several referees fuss over a monster with elaborate costume nearby who they soon instruct us is our 'boss'. Our boss is a well-known and regular inhabitant of the monster room, not known by a character-player hybrid name, but rather by a nickname drawn from years among the community; 'Silvertongue Si'. With his upper-class British accent, Silvertongue Si sounds like a Hollywood villain and commands our obedience in the long-suffering tone of an overlord used to absolute power over incompetent workers. His ensuing jokes clearly demonstrate sharp wit and his intent to perform a villain based on 'smarts' over 'strength'. Painted and briefed, we await the instruction that referees, players and Si are ready to have the encounter leave the monster room to take up our position in the field ready for combat with players. Our designated referee delays at the desk, and the remaining referees share in-jokes about backstage activities that few of us understand. While we wait, we improvise possibilities for demonic accents, speculate on our reasons for incompetence and consider our views of our boss. Judging that our 'boss' resembles an evil magician controlling demons against their will, we quiz the referees on whether our incompetence is due to coercion, and if we might mount a demonic revolution. Our referee hears our suggestions with good grace, but instructs us that demons of our type lack the power of speech, thus inhibiting our plan to

hijack our boss or gain sympathy from the players. Nonetheless, we plot to behave precisely in accordance with Si's instructions and exploit any ambiguity to our own advantage.

Si's instruction, 'keep them away from me', is swiftly amended to 'kill them' after hilarity follows our attempts at mimed cries for help, tag and tickling. After some time of being slain in combat by players and re-entering play as alternate versions of the same demons in order to prolong players' opportunities for heroism against Si, we make the arm signal for invisibility to mild applause and return to the monster room. For our hour-long efforts as demons, we receive some in-game 'money' tokens at a specified rate of pay. As some players bring handicrafts and home-baked or home-brewed goods to add props to their roles as traders, these tokens can usually be traded with someone in return for cake or alcohol. Although we enjoyed our monster performances, my unsuccessful attempts on another occasion to reject these payments are described as 'stupid' and, by implication, disrespectful. All volunteers are usually 'paid' for their time and involvement, and when monstering at small events we pay no ticket fee and receive rewards 'in kind' such as free food or indoor accommodation for agreeing to monster the whole event, while paying players will often camp outdoors. This regular casual volunteering would sometimes result in in-game rewards allowing our characters to 'develop' and acquire new skills or equipment more quickly than other players. These rewards are issued in the form of tokens allowing the 'purchase' of authorization for better spells, magical swords, longer 'health' in combat or better information about the game world.

Progressing to monster-wrangler

Some time later in my LARP experience I come to see the monster room from the perspective of a committed volunteer or referee and recognize its role as a key organizing space where players are transformed and organized. LARP as a leisure activity is aimed at direct engagement of the player in a series of narrative and gameplay challenges. These are orchestrated by the organizing team and achieved through 'monsters'. In presenting a coherent narrative to these challenges and crises, individual 'encounters' between players and monsters are scripted in outline using a 'monster brief' or 'encounter document'. Multiple copies are used by referees to schedule and organize volunteers, outlining roles and narrative information (e.g. 'you are demons from the underworld tasked with theft, but you are not very good at your job'). When recruiting and briefing monsters their competency for the role is considered, but excellent improvisation can pose problems in maintaining organizational control over the narrative and gameplay challenges. Briefing documents are never comprehensive

scripts and once 'live' the monster may convey very different information or characterizations which appear more significant to the gameplay than they are while the referee can do little to intervene without intruding on the mise-en-scene.

'Wrangling' monsters, or keeping them in their place, is an implicit requirement for volunteering to referee, but this is not the only ongoing backstage task available. The vast majority of the first aiders, set-builders and desk staff are all committed volunteers. Like Silvertongue Si, many players including myself acquire a full-time or ongoing committed role through regular monstering, becoming well acquainted with the core of volunteers, the rules and setting of the game as well as learning the conventions of backstage life. Ongoing long-term volunteer positions in the hobby are not clearly advertised, but communicated through word-of-mouth and recruited to on an ad-hoc basis according to personal recommendation. These roles allow free access to small and large events and are not consistently referred to as 'monsters', but may instead be listed as 'staff', 'volunteer', 'crew' or in more specific task-related terms such as 'logistics' or 'security'.

As well as playing 'the bad guy', as Silvertongue Si did, knowing and being trusted by game organizers brings opportunities for monsters to play leadership roles within the narrative: as monarchs, heroes, generals or mystics. One criterion of recruitment may lie in existing player character performance of a suitable type for conversion into a leadership role through narrative manipulation, though more often an appropriate character brief will be written to fit with the context and organizers recruit by recommendation. These characters guide the players as the event progresses, to engage them in the scheduled encounters, manage the pacing of the event and distribute both narrative and game information, but are fundamentally different from paying players. They must 'wrangle' players and constantly liaise with the backstage monsters or referees, attending regular briefing and debriefings and also contributing to event organization. I learn to do so in supporting small events, where control over the event and the performance of a major member of what might be termed 'supporting cast' is work accompanied by two benefits; major control over the outcome of players' actions and experience, and minimal financial outlay to participate. In large events the benefits are more mysterious and closely guarded, though those that talk about participation clearly identify free meals, access to good shower facilities or indoor sleeping and some legitimate structural advantages (such as enhanced skills) within the game rules as benefits which can persist beyond the duration of the volunteer activity.

Experienced monsters are often consulted on difficult situations or recruited to train new volunteers. Such veterans are identifiable by their extensive repertoire of stories or accounts of earlier experiences that often figure them in a significant (and at times even maverick) role. There is also a darker side to such tales, whereby cautionary reports highlight tales of committed volunteers 'gone rogue', either vandalizing games or abandoning their role to join or form competitor organizations. These tales highlight the exile of those who do not conform to organizational expectations and are often recounted to justify or consolidate recruitment of seemingly loyal committed volunteers to ongoing organizational roles.

To illustrate, Kelly was a volunteer who featured heavily in multiple stories of previous events. By all accounts Kelly had been charismatic, with a flair for encouraging new players to feel comfortable with the narrative story and mechanics of the game. Yet the tale of Kelly's exile was one of hubris; as a monarch in the narrative she had simultaneously been a trusted figure and source of information for the game narrative and backstage organizational expectations about the direction of the game. However Kelly had gone 'off-brief' and led paying players into conflict with monsters who had been briefed in accordance with rules which made them nearly invulnerable in combat. Referees looked on in dismay as players suicidally engaged with the encounter (against organisers' expectations) expecting to play the conquering heroes on Kelly's lead. Kelly emphasized this was promoting paying players' role in the narrative though this action went directly against the narrative plans. Many players lost their characters in the conflict, and in doing so were dissatisfied. Kelly claimed that the suicidal attempt was more in keeping with the narrative theme of her group and that the aims of the organisers to prolong the narrative on a different theme were disrespectful to that group's ethos. But presented as a misunderstanding, their 'deaths' were 'written' in ongoing play as the result of Kelly's foolish agency in the narrative rather than that of the players. Her own monster-role character also 'died' in the conflict, and Kelly left the organization in order to run small yet competing, non-profit LARP events.

Discussion

Monsters in UK LARP, as in Thanem's (2006,2011) arguments, are an important and necessary part of organization but are subject to processes that aim to 'tame' or 'kill' them. In much of the empirical narrative there are clear acculturation processes where rules and norms are learned, and these are evidently mostly successful in producing compliant 'volunteers'. As new members bring their friends to

the event as new customers, they do not remain external to the organization but instead are drawn in, and as demons begin to pollute it with their differing (player) expectations of autonomy and heroism which are managed away through backstage processes as distortions. Briefings, recruitment documents and supervision as well as imitation of wages and adages such as 'you are not your character' are employed to displace or contain that termed by Hardt and Negri (2004) the monstrosity of the flesh.

Committed volunteers, those less frequently labelled as 'monsters' in the organization, are seemingly the least monstrous. In gaining free access to events they clearly distinguish themselves apart from fee-paying players and take on a clear 'volunteer' role. Their monstrousness now only resides in their potentially subvertive qualities in contrast to the ideal of the employee, qualities which present them as undecidable elements who may contradict the values of the organization or take their skills and connections elsewhere, as in Kelly's example.

A conception of the monstrous as excess highlights the monstrosity of these committed volunteers only, then, in the sense of their over-commitment to the leisure activity, beyond the leisure organization, through production of events through volunteering across multiple organizations. As in the studies of other types of leisure volunteering, individual volunteers contribute not only to events but also to the production and maintenance of a broader community of relationships, which may begin to impose a heavy weight of obligation stemming from this original excess. These volunteers, along with casual monsters and players, are engaged not only in the concrete labour of producing a given event, but also more broadly in social production which is demanding, unbounded and difficult to measure.

Immeasurability as the characteristic of the monstrous flesh and its excesses of labour, as outlined by Hardt and Negri, has been subject to critique (Trott 2007; Toms 2008), particularly in terms of the potential of the multitude as a source of radical change. These critiques focus on claims around the immeasurability of value (and also the increasing homogeneity of immaterial labour), claims which manifest in this argument about the immeasurability of the monster and the value of the contribution of the monster versus their tamed counterpart, the volunteer, to the organization. Leisure services are an excellent example of the extension of capitalist relations of production to the immaterial and the unproductive. Yet it is here that studies of volunteers often present an ambiguous existence, seemingly operating neither clearly within nor without such relations. UK LARP lies on the fringes of

such a case, in the festival scale forms discussed here attempting to mimic types of profitmaking leisure and striving to present a commodity (niche leisure event services) in order to do so.

Although critiques of Hardt and Negri question the immeasurability of the labour of the monstrous, they do not contend that there is no apparent struggle or potential for critique. Rather it is argued that measuring and valuing certain labour does occur and other labour is abstracted as unproductive, through relations of power (Pitts, forthcoming).This argument does not challenge the notion of the monstrous nature of the volunteer, but rather emphasises the significance of the processes of both structural and cultural control highlighted here. For the organization, the activity of volunteers is to produce the event, of players to consume it. The identity of 'monsters' is ideally separate to that of 'players' or 'crew'. These identities and activities are policed not only by imitation of employment and the valorisation of hours of monstering time repaid in commodity tokens, cake, alcohol or beds, but also through moral codes enforced through informal rules and storytelling about failures in game organization privileged over continuity of the diegetic narrative.

If the activity and identity of the volunteer displaces the monstrous, an important question is whether this eliminates monsters and their potential for critique, or simply creating spaces without plurality or ambiguity around activity and value. Unlike Hardt and Negri,for Du Gay (1994) the process of organizing which displaces monsters outside of organization is legitimate without being destructive. The ideal bureaucrat does not eliminate personal feelings and ethics, but rather preserves segregation between professional and personal worlds such that each may offer critique of the other; personal ethics may motivate the bureaucrat to quit the organization while depersonalised organizational process may leave them open to the plurality of others' concerns. However, the fixed jurisdiction and regulations of the ideal bureaucracy bear only minor resemblance to much contemporary work and little to monstering in UK LARP. Du Gay claims that the 'hopeful monster' of bureaucracy facilitates liberal and democratic social organization in contrast to unbridled entrepreneurialism or radical relativism while Hardt and Negri (2004) contest such as sentimental modernist views. In UK LARP, the goal of pursuing bureaucracy to offer such critique is undermined by the intersection of roles in embodied performance and the evidence that highlights the incorporation of the social production of the community culture in the simultaneous activities of the organization.

The leisure community of UK LARP is produced through the excess of labour undertaken by players and monsters alike, including those displaced from the organization such as Kelly, who begin new organizations and seek to embed differing values within them. These commons (to use Hardt and Negri's terms) are paradoxically the excluded elements of unproductive labour and the source of value. With no LARP community, there would be no 'market' for the commodity which is the LARP event.

In the context of a fringe existence as a barely legitimate enterprise this relationship has radical consequences for the LARP organization, which requires competency in performing its own role as a leisure event provider in order to conform to market expectations. In order to constitute the product as a leisure purchase, the organization needs to reconfigure the activity of 'dressing up and playing pretend' into 'a LARP event'. Adverse media coverage such as that mentioned in the introduction does not help matters, as these articles present the hobby itself as monstrous. The maintenance of a solvent bank account, an ability to make bookings with other organizations, conform to health and safety requirements and the requirements of local authorities, to maintain public liability insurance and so on all depend on the LARP organization resembling other legitimate organizations. In the process the organization of the event is presented as an act of value creation whereas the labour of the volunteer monsters is demoted to that of individual identity work. This requires that participants comply with organization to identify clearly with conventional market roles (through booking a ticket) in order to distinguish between paying customers and rewarded workers (in this case their poor relation, the volunteer), yet in such a way that these roles are mediators in the development of a community and an identity as a competent and skilled LARPer.

The volunteer has become the poster child of private solutions for public goods. This very position demonstrates the problems inherent in any argument that presents the volunteer as a potentially revolutionary subject, as monstrous flesh bearing infinite potential for radical change. The case of UK LARP highlights how what we find in the conception of the volunteer is a template for controlling or exploiting the monstrous through identification of organizationally productive attributes and denial or displacement of activity which does not contribute directly to the organization. However, the fringe nature of UK LARP as a leisure pursuit may be a factor in strengthening the role of the displaced monsters here, since the dominant organizations are relatively small and contribute substantially to

the production of a form of solidarity which prevents the dominance of one form of organization. This area is therefore one still considering possibilities and alternatives, from all-member-run non-profit organizations, to the multitude of small events that reject a formal organizational existence in favour of local experimentation and self-financed low budget games. In such a small community however, the culture of UK LARP may be as dependent upon the large festival organizations for continuity as the organizations are on the community as a source of labour and value.

Notes

1. See Fine (1983) for an extensive discussion of this hobby.
2. In personal communications with me in March 2013 a representative of 'Profound Decisions' indicated that they hosted 1331 players supported by 200 volunteer crew and 3 full-time employees plus contractors. A representative of 'Curious Pastimes' indicated their seasonal events varied in size in 2012 from 40 to 50 players, supported by 15 crew to 500-1000 players supported by 85 crew (of which 25 are 'dedicated' ongoing volunteers) and one full-time employee. In speaking for a smaller community, 'Herofest' indicated that in 2012 they hosted three events ranging from 180 to 200 players supported by 19-21 crew. Another well-known UK LARP system, 'The Lorien Trust', is estimated by Falk and Davenport (2004) to organize games for up to 4500 participants during 2002-2003; though requested, no more recent figures were provided.
3. Or as Stebbins (2012) points out, often 'less-than-market-valued' in the case of some volunteers who have to travel or similar and receive a small stipend or expenses.

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