

NO, REALLY: WHAT IS COSPLAY?

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“In anthropology, you can study anything.”

This is what happens when you tell that to an impressionable undergrad.

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INTRODUCTION

The cover of Elena Dorfman's photojournal, *Fandomania*, shows a young female cosplayer. The viewer's attention is grabbed by her copper-red wig and long, tapering elf ears, alerting us to the fact that she is in costume.



A closer examination of the photograph reveals more. Dorfman has positioned the subject in profile with her eyes averted from the camera, her posture evoking submissive contemplation, even loneliness. One does not want to know more about her world. Rather, one would safely pity her at a distance.

In cosplay, individuals dress up as fictional characters among fellow sci-fi and fantasy enthusiasts. As noted by Carlo McCormick in *Fandomania*'s introductory essay, "the purported coinage of the term *cosplay* [a typical Japanese linguistic contraction of the English words *costume* and *play*] by a Japanese studio executive at Worldcon 1984,"

¹ Dorfman, Elena. *Fandomania*. Aperture, 2007. Print.

would suggest that the practice of cosplay is indeed the marriage of its parent words; it is costumed play.²

Yet in *Fandomania*, Dorfman has photographed her subjects utterly removed from the context of their presentation at a convention, which generates a bare-minimum image of the “costume” half of cosplay, while neglecting the “play.” This flawed approach presents, literally, an incomplete picture of cosplay to the mainstream. This is problematic because this audience is the greater portion of American society, within which costumes are trivial matters reserved for parties and holidays. Their exposure to the surrounding culture behind cosplay—sci-fi and fantasy—is often limited to a peripheral familiarity with mass-marketed epics: Harry Potter, Star Wars, etc. They are worlds away from “fandom,” or the fan community surrounding entertainment culture, McCormick further distances the mainstream by describing fandom as: “a community of private fantasy, a safety valve for obsessive tendencies that channels our most unhealthy attachments towards worthy pursuits” (8).

Both the mainstream and fandom are insular spheres. The former keeps to current societal standards, while the latter prides itself on flouting them—and how better to flout society’s norms by dressing up as Batman for a day? This insularity of spheres guarantees little communication between them, and thus requires media intervention to facilitate any sort of mutual understanding.

This is where *Fandomania*, as a representative of the media, fails in its task. Dorfman’s two-dimensional work gives the mainstream sphere an unqualified representation of cosplay: a sad sack in fake hair and rubber ears. By removing the

² Dorfman, Elena. *Fandomania*. Aperture, 2007. Print.

cosplayer from the context of her “play”, Dorfman prevents us from seeing how the components of self and identity are performed within the costume and the manner in which it is worn. She gives no indication that the girl on the cover of *Fandomania* is just one facet of an international subculture widespread across annual conventions and the Internet. That being said, we see that “cosplay” is a blanket term comprised of many scraps and patches, stitched together by the phenomenon’s continued evolution ever since those first Trekkies decided to set forth in homemade garb. The specimens photographed in *Fandomania* should not therefore be regarded as an expression of the hobby as a whole.

The purpose of my study is not only to subvert Dorfman’s misinformed advertisement for the cosplay subculture, but also the mainstream beliefs regarding cosplay, which have been perpetuated by media coverage of cosplayers at conventions. Through the work of journalists, scholars, and artists such as Dorfman, they have attempted to make this subculture more accessible to the mainstream sphere, approaching cosplayers for interviews as if speaking a strange, socially handicapped tribe. By firmly placing them in the context of “other”, this only alienates the individual further.

Cosplayers are already aware of their otherness. They fully understand that the act of dressing up as a fictional character is outside society’s codified garment behaviors, or “the fashion code.” Yet the media brings otherness from unspoken consensus to publicized fact. Under the weight of such scrutiny, cosplayers manifest their otherness by taking the wordless display of their costume to a theatre-worthy performance involving the Self of the individual, the Character being portrayed, and the “cosplay persona” demonstrating the individual’s status as a member of the cosplay community. These three

factors are constantly in flux for every cosplayer, though the audience sees only what is expressed through the individual's outward performance.

However outlandish it may seem, the continuous performance of self is not confined to the cosplay subculture. In fact, scholar Erving Goffman developed his theories on self-presentation and identity based on the acts found in mainstream society. In 1952, he documented these theories in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*—decades before cosplay's emergence as a hobby. However, Goffman's work is no less relevant today than it was fifty-odd years ago. By examining cosplay in the same manner that Goffman approached mainstream performative behavior, we discover that the subculture and its practices are merely a hyper-stylized reflection of the “normal” person's daily performance. Elena Dorfman is erroneous to present cosplayers as lonely, escapist freaks: symptoms of “fandomania.” Their act is no more escapist than ours—they are simply louder about it.

For the word “cosplay” itself, combining “costume” and “play,” immediately denotes performance. Like Erving Goffman, we will use the term “performance” to “refer to all activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a continued set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (22)³.

We must also establish the three essential components of the performance. Goffman breaks this down into: “those who perform; those performed to; and outsiders who neither perform in the show nor observe it” (Goffman 144). For our purposes, the

³ Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Anchor, 1959. Print.

cosplayer is the performer, the convention attendees and other cosplayers are the audience, and the oblivious mainstream are the outsiders.

Within the category of performers, Goffman separates these individuals into “sincere” and “cynical” performers, depending on the strength of belief in the performance: “When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term “sincere” for individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their performance” (2). Among cosplayers, sincerity and cynicism are present at all times, informing and producing the individual’s visual expression of the Self, the Character, and the “cosplay persona.”

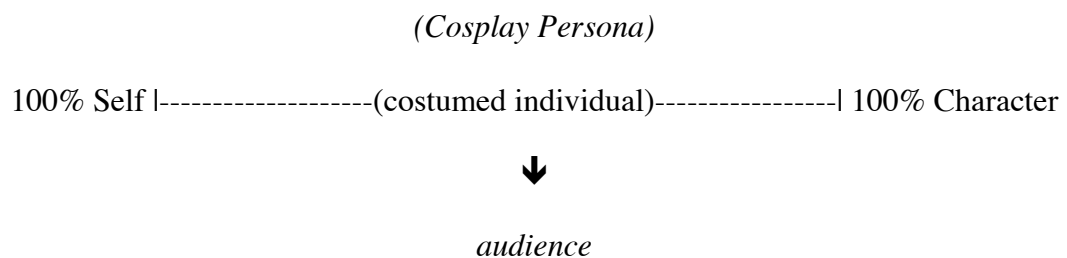
The Self is the individual at his or her most personal; disassociated from the cosplay sphere. The greater the sense of Self while cosplaying, the more cynical the performance, for the cosplayer’s focus is drawn to his or her own state of being rather than that of the character. This must be differentiated from the “self,” that Goffman addresses, which indicates the individual in general.

The Character represents the individual’s personal concept of the fictional persona as whom they are dressed. When performing Character, the individual sincerely behaves in the manner that he or she believes the fictional person would behave in a real world context, further believing that by being dressed as that person, he or she qualifies as the physical embodiment of that person. This is separate from the “character,” a word that Erving Goffman uses to refer to an individual’s personality, yet here we will use it to indicate the fictional persona itself, upon which the individual’s sense of Character is based. A character is the entity in its most nebulous state, the concept existing on a

narrative plane and manifested through the media of its creation: written word, art, film, etc.

The third element of the individual's performance, the cosplay persona, represents the individual's social heading, a member of the cosplay subculture aware of his or her status therein. This functions as a self-presentation of the cosplayer's history of involvement with the hobby and its related activities. Goffman's equivalent term for the mainstream individual would be "profession."

Additionally, Erving Goffman expresses his analyses purely through text, yet for cosplay we may take the three performed elements defined above, and with them construct a visual representation of the individual's performance. This will be called the Self-Character scale. On this non-static internal plane, Self lies at one end, Character at the other, and the cosplay persona hovers overhead as the individual's state of self-awareness fluctuates according to performative context. It has been expressed here on the following diagram:



This omnipresent Self-Character scale visually expresses the individual's immediate internal state, which is transmitted to the audience through his or her performance. At every moment, context shifts one's self-awareness of the role that he or

she is playing—Self or Character—and thus the individual constantly vacillates between the two identities.

Context is determined by what Goffman terms the “front”: “the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance” (22). This expressive equipment may be anything sharing a physical presence with the individual at that moment, as the front begins with the individual’s outward appearance and extends into his or her immediate location at the time of performance. Thus Goffman has divided the front into two categories based on proximity: “setting” and “personal front.”

The former is defined as “the scenic parts of expressive equipment” (22), or the environment in which the performance takes place. In cosplay, this is the convention center, photoshoot space, or even one’s own home—anywhere that individuals can present themselves in costume. Setting is also the physical manifestation of “region,” that being “any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception” (Goffman 106). In the case of cosplay, this extends to the virtual region of the Internet, where the audience is generated by the recorded performance, as opposed to the audience physically present in the actual world regions where the act takes place.

Regions may also be split into two areas: front and back. The “front region” Goffman defines as, “the place where the performance is given” (107). A cosplayer’s front region is in effect when the sense of sincere Character is activated before an audience. The more sincere the performance as Character, the more that cosplayer is said to be “in character,” more often abbreviated as “IC.” An example of this would be at AnimeNEXT, when I encountered a cosplayer who was portraying, or “doing,” Ariel

from *The Little Mermaid*, who referred to himself as “Ariel” and replied to my questions in the manner of that Disney princess—playful and demure.

The back region occurs when he or she shifts to the cynical end of the scale, regardless of the audience present, and performs Self behavior such as taking meals or going to the bathroom. When an individual deliberately performs behavior that is unlike the character, it qualifies as “out of character,” or “OOC,” yet this is still front region behavior because the individual is acting with an awareness of the audience. Had the Ariel cosplayer commenced pole-dancing, for example, while still referring to himself as the Ariel character, then this would have been OOC, since it is behavior that does not fit with Ariel’s character yet it is being performed by that character. True back region performance did not occur in our interaction until he gave me his name, which invoked a sincerer sense of Self, so that he talked to me as a young man named Allen rather than the fictional mermaid Ariel. He was fulfilling Goffman’s definition of backstage behavior, wherein “the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” (112).

Yet Allen’s initial performance was based on his costume; he was dressed as Ariel, therefore it may be established that an individual’s cosplay performance relies primarily on the “personal front.” This is the area of the front that is physically closest to the individual, where one may find, according to Goffman: “items that we most intimately identify with the performer himself and that we naturally expect will follow the performance wherever he goes... we may include: insignia of office or rank; clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like” (23). In cosplay, the costume, props, and

makeup are added to this list of performed objects and attributes, for their presence initiates the sense of Character that calls the Self-Character scale into being.

With this understanding of the personal front, I incorporated it into my fieldwork wearing “civvies”: clothing unaffiliated with branding, fandom or cosplay. As I would be attending three conventions—AnimeNEXT 2012 in Somerset, New Jersey; Anime Expo 2012 in Los Angeles, California; and Otakon 2012 in Baltimore, Maryland—and conducting private interviews with cosplayers as well as engaging the subculture as a participant-observer, I intended to render myself a neutral party when interacting with cosplayers and other convention attendees. To be in costume while interviewing, or while recording individuals for on-the-fly queries, would have been too distracting for all parties. The cosplayers I approached were already dividing their attention between me and the audience of convention attendees; had I been cosplaying as well, the influence of my own performance on the Self-Character scale would have been an additional inconvenience. Therefore, instead of dressing up, I made an effort to present myself in a clean and aesthetically pleasing manner with well-fitting clothing, makeup and jewelry. Thus attired, I assumed I was out of costume.

Yet at Anime Expo, I was approached for a photograph. This was on the main floor, a site where most cosplayers gathered to see and be seen by circulating photographers. Yet one of these photographers decided that I was as much a spectacle as the actual cosplayers. He was what Goffman calls an “outsider,” or a person “for whom performers actually or potentially put on a show, but a show (we shall see) different from, or all too similar to, the one in progress” (135). At a convention, or any other cosplay event, outsiders are any individuals who can claim, “I’m not quite sure what cosplay is.”

Most convention attendees, being members of the nerd community, occupy an in-between space between inside and outside. They come to recognize what cosplay is by proximity at the convention, but since they have chosen not to dress up, then they cannot be considered part of the cosplay community—only an audience to it.

But what if the attendee is an un-costumed cosplayer?

The photo request was brushed off as an outsider's error. Later, as I was purchasing a couple of T-shirts from an illustrator's booth at the Artists' Alley⁴, I complimented the artist profusely on his work and he offered me a free hat since I had bought two items. Upon my apologies that it wouldn't fit in my luggage on the plane, he insisted on sending me the hat at my home address.

With my articulated personal front and self-presentation, I was cosplaying a girl who, due to the manner of her performance, could possibly be interested in this young man. My real interest was only in his art, but from an audience's perspective, this could have been a scene of flirtation between the artist and the girl of my performance. During this exchange, I realized my own position within its context—an awareness proving that I was cosplaying after all, perhaps even since the beginning of the day, when I dressed and took care with my appearance to produce an attractive result.

So much for the “civvies.” I was cosplaying a pretty girl.

Thus, we return to the fact that cosplay is a performance in the sense defined by Erving Goffman, for the presentation as a fictional persona is a form of self-presentation as a whole. Says Goffman:

⁴ A usual convention fixture where low-budget independent artists, artisans, and craftsman peddle their work outside of the industry-run booths of the Dealer's Room.

A character staged in a theater is not in some ways real, nor does it have the same kind of real consequences as does the thoroughly contrived character performed by a confidence man; but the successful staging of either of those types of figures involves use of *real* techniques—the same techniques by which everyday persons sustain their real social situations (254).

In essence, cosplay is a performance in which we engage no matter what costume occupies our personal front. By examining the practice of cosplay as a culture, we will find that it parallels mainstream social behavior while simultaneously magnifying the performance of the everyday.

CHAPTER 1

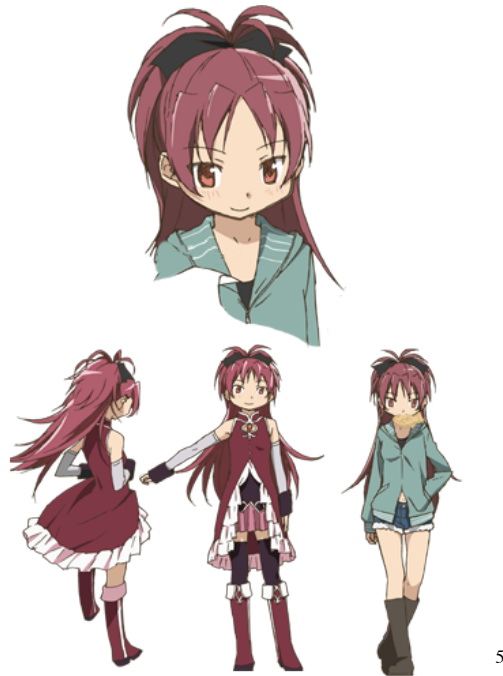
“Costume”: Part One

To understand cosplay, one must understand the costume as a storied structure—literally. The process of its making determines the cosplayer’s relationship with the garment and through it, the character he or she is representing.

At the first convention I attended for my fieldwork, AnimeNEXT 2012 in Somerset, New Jersey, it quickly became apparent that the lead-in of, “Mind if I ask you a few questions?” immediately generated a sense of awkwardness when interviewing individual cosplayers. It wasn’t until the last day of the convention, when I had already finished my recordings, that the most enlightening interaction transpired simply out of casual conversation. I had begun talking with a male cosplayer simply out of personal interest in his costume, unrelated to fieldwork. He and his friends had constructed original ensembles based on the pre-existing female characters of *Mahou Shoujo Madoka Magica*, an *animé* centered around “magical girls” with twisted motives.

What struck me was that they identified with these female characters and professed a great enjoyment of the show—yet they also identified as utterly heterosexual and male. The resulting construction of their costumes, as they explained to me in great detail, was based off personal designs that functioned to bring forth the essence of the female character while presenting it in a male format. And to be sure, this format also had to be aesthetically pleasing.

For example, the cosplayer who ignited this discussion was dressed as the character Kyoko Sakura,



—or as he called it, “Brokyo,” taking the character’s name, dropping the Japanese feminine “-ko” ending in favor of the English prefix, “bro⁶,” to repurpose this persona as male.

Brokyo summarized the thought process behind his costume as, “How can I take this outfit and still make it manly?” We must recall that clothing operates as the personal front, wherein gender is performed along with all other appearance-related markers of identification. Kyoko’s ensemble performs femininity, thus Brokyo’s job was to perform masculinity while maintaining all other aspects of the character, so that the audience could recognize Kyoko through his costume but still identify the cosplayer himself as

⁵ “Kyoko Sakura.” *Puella Magi Wiki*. Mediawiki, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

⁶ His fellow genderbent *Madoka* cosplayers had done the same with their characters: Madoka and Homura became “Mabroka” and “Bromura” respectively. The term “bro” is synonymous with “dude” or “guy”, referring to a generic young man. It may be used as a noun or adjective, and the connotations may be positive or negative depending on context; a good bro represents the desirable qualities of a would-be brother figure, while a bad bro exemplifies the undesirable qualities of a brother figure. Allowing this archetype to be condensed into a single syllable, “bro” is thus a convenient etymological device in fandom.

male. Brokyo ultimately accomplished this by carefully deliberating the garment's construction, translating the delicate silhouette of the character's tunic into the straight lines of a masculine frame, and placing her signature colors such that they corresponded with the original design found in the *animé*. He also altered the proportions, on the grounds that showing more skin was "girly," and eliminated the equally feminine ruffles that adorned the original.

For Brokyo and his fellow Madoka genderbenders, the costume process represented a continual dialogue between the individual and the character. In constructing a costume, cosplayers construct a relationship with that fictional entity, which they will be representing upon the completion of the project. As Brokyo detailed the precise prop-making techniques he had used to build his spear, the time and dedication that went into just a single piece of his ensemble, he was articulating the result of a personal connection formed with the costume—and thus with Kyoko herself.

A similar conversation had occurred earlier at the convention, with a transgirl cosplaying Haineko, an anthropomorphized sword from the *animé Bleach*. For half an hour, she gave a step-by-step breakdown of how she achieved her voluptuous silhouette, from the 9 cups of birdseed in her false breasts, all the way to the 42 darts in her pillow-stuffed posterior.

Why such attention to detail? The individual-character relationship developed through costume construction serves as the driving force for the cosplayer to "do justice" to the character, coming as close as possible to his or her notion of the entity, so that when the costume is worn, the individual's personal front adequately performs his or her personal identification and love of that character.

The character is, after all, the first and foremost reason why the costume is constructed. Which character is chosen, and why, is subjective. Usually a cosplayer is already familiar with the series that the character comes from, but this is not necessary for the costume, as characters may also be chosen based on the aesthetic appeal of their design. Further reasons for selecting a character are derived from the individual's own self-conception, for as Goffman writes, "The role of expression is conveying impressions of self" (248). In this case, the character and costume function as a vehicle of expression by which the cosplayer—wittingly or unwittingly—performs impressions of Self. However, if the individual is participating in a group cosplay and is unfamiliar with or ambivalent about the series, the character may be chosen for the individual due to the group's own impressions of the individual's Self.

Regardless of the cosplayer's specific situation, it must be established that "doing justice" to a character is essential to the cosplay mentality. Thus it becomes all the more imperative when the individual is given the responsibility of executing a costume for a group, seeing as "the individual may deeply involve his ego in his identification with a particular part, establishment, or group, and in his self-conception as someone who does not disrupt social interaction or let down the social units that depend upon that interaction" (Goffman 243). His or her failure to accomplish the costume, or deliver it to the same standards at the group, represents a failure to himself, the group, and the character. We will return to character-selection motivation and elaborate on its particularities in Chapter 3: Wearing.

Once the character is selected, the individual has the option to modify the design, personalizing it as they enter the costume into subgenres of fashion such as gothic lolita⁷ and steampunk⁸, or the genderbend genre that we saw exemplified in Brokyo and his Mabroka group.

If the cosplayer does not wish to modify the character's pre-established design, then the first step is deciding how to execute the costume. They may make it entirely from scratch, modify premade components, or purchase a ready-to-wear costume, either from an online seller or specialist commissioners.

With this decision, which is based on the individual's costuming ability, the result on the personal front will yield the cosplayer's performance of his or her status within the cosplay community—the status of the cosplay persona. The greater one's perceived fortitude in the three main areas of costume construction—sewing, prop-making, and wig-styling—the greater the status within the community. Sewing especially is valued as a necessary skill, for it allows the individual to construct costumes that cannot otherwise be bought or altered from premade items. Someone with a limited knowledge of the three fields, and who has little intention of acquiring that knowledge, may then have those parts of his or her costume completed by someone else of a higher cosplay status.

⁷ Lolita is defined by the EGL, or Elegant Gothic Lolita, community as, “a fashion subculture originating in Japan that is based on Victorian-era clothing as well as costumes from the Rococo period,” which emphasis on embodying “cute”, “youthful”, “feminine”, “detailed”, “deliberate”, and “doll-like” without being overtly sexual. Gothic lolita is a subgenre, distinguishable in that wearers look like Victorian dolls that came out of the wrong end of a metal concert. From:

The EGL Community. The EGL community, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

⁸ Another Victorian-inspired fashion subculture, but with more gears and goggles. From: *Steampunk.com*. The steampunk community, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

If status is produced by skill, and skill is produced by experience, then gender presents an additional complication in the costume construction process. Mainstream society considers sewing to be an especially gendered practice, associated with women and flamboyantly gay men. As we have mentioned previously, cosplay society is peripheral to mainstream society, therefore it follows that before entering the cosplay culture, male cosplayers are unlikely to be proficient in sewing or wig-related skills. Meanwhile, girls usually begin their cosplay career having had some prior experience with a needle and thread, since mainstream gender culture grants females easy access to such domestic activities. Thus for males who are irrevocably averse to sewing or wig-styling, it helps to have a female friend who also cosplays, so that she can make the desired costume. Cosplaying girlfriends can often be ideal personal commissioners, as the intimate relationship means that they are more likely to take on an additional costume, especially if it results in a “couple’s cosplay”: partners cosplaying characters who are also in a relationship.

However, we must return to the desire for the individual to “do justice” to the character, as well as to exhibit a cosplay persona that bears a respectable cosplay status. For male cosplayers, this means disregarding gender and accepting the fact that cosplay requires, at the very least, knowing how to turn on a sewing machine. If the desire to “do justice” is strong enough to be sustained in the pursuit of future costumes, then most males teach themselves how to sew through trial and error. Since they perceive the act of sewing a masculine costume as belonging exclusively to the cosplay sphere, it negates any possible feminization of the Self that could occur from association with a sewing machine. Rob, another male cosplayer, described how as he became more familiar with

the practice, sewing morphed from “girly” to merely “a pain in the ass.” Both he and Brokyo found infinitely more pleasure in building props, where one engages in comfortably male endeavors such as hammering, screwing, and plugging, to create the character’s signature hardware—i.e.: a gun, sword, or gun-sword.

Wig-styling similarly favors females due to its surface association with the styling of actual hair. One assumes that since wigs are merely a replacement for human hair, then they can be treated like human hair, and thus males are just as likely to be socially distanced from the practice as they are from sewing—contemporary American culture leaves little room for boys to practice French braiding on each other.

Thus, women dominate the niche market of cosplayer-run wig companies, for they may safely occupy a space where they can sincerely perform their gender in the context of costume creation, a performance that can lead to establishment as professional entities. For examples, one of cosplay’s most well-known wig technicians is Katie Bair, of Petting Zoo Wig Design, who has spent years performing her craft by producing high-quality commission work to help mask the lower status of cosplayers who lack wig-styling skill of their own. Her success as a commissioner and wig guru thus profits off the status discrepancies in cosplay culture, as do many others who have made careers within this specialized division of cosplay-making.

This leads to the matter of compensation. When it comes to commissions in general, you get what you pay for and you pay for what you get. Goffman refers to this as “dramatizing cost,” in which a business owner, or the provider of a service, must justify the cost of their service by explicitly expressing the labor involved. For cosplay commissioners, this means producing costumes of such caliber that their worth cannot be

mistaken and marketing them in a manner that draws attention to the care and detail that went into their production. Cosplayers looking for commissioners often want to pay as little as possible, which makes dramatizing cost an exceptional necessity for the one providing the service, for as Goffman describes: “the proprietor of a service establishment may find it difficult to dramatize what is actually being done for clients because the clients cannot ‘see’ the overhead costs of the service rendered them” (32).

High-quality commissioners are often expert costume-makers with significant cosplay experience of their own. For clients with whom there is no personal relationship, they charge based on materials plus the labor put into the costume. One successful commissioning business, God Save the Queen Fashions, placed the value of an average costume for 2012 at \$950.00⁹ The hallmark of GSTQ and other professional costumers is that in person, these costumes are constructed with the same attention to detail that makes Hollywood costumes so sleek and wearable, looking as if they walked off the movie set and into the convention. Ironically, by disguising themselves in a picture-perfect costume, the lucky client performs even more of his or her Self, revealing the type of personal economic status that would allow for such extravagance.

At the opposite end of the quality scale, a more affordable option is sweatshop costumes. Primarily from China, they may be found across eBay at often half the price of a professionally made costume. They require only one’s measurements and the patience to wait a month or so for the shipping. When the cosplayer has no sewing skill whatsoever, these costumes offer a solution not unlike walking into Wal-Mart and buying a mass-produced costume for Halloween. The quality will vary between sellers, but the

⁹ “God Save The Queen Fashions.” *Facebook.com*. Facebook, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

comparatively low price of the costume serves as an indicator that they will use the least expensive materials possible, such as faux vinyl to mimic the appearance of leather.

There are also sellers who produce character-specific wigs to go along with the costume, so that altogether it can be possible to purchase an entire costume without lifting a finger otherwise in its construction process.

Ethics aside, this “Cosplay For Dummies” approach allows lower-status cosplayers to participate effectively in the hobby, since they are still sincerely performing their cosplay persona. This is because sincerity requires the individual to make an effort to the best of his or her ability, and if that ability is limited by a Self who lacks access to skill and finances, then a premade costume adequately performs that truth while still granting the cosplayer the opportunity to present as the desired character.

More often than not, however, the average cosplayer will attempt to make the costume by hand, the outcome of which will be determined by the self’s personal skill level.

Skill is a product of all costume-related experience: sewing, prop-building, wig styling, and makeup artistry. Since these are also components of the personal front in general, these practices may be developed in mainstream society outside the cosplay sphere. The advantage goes to individuals who specialize in the visual arts, as they have access by proxy to the techniques involved in cosplay and can therefore achieve a higher skill level and status due to sheer experience. Individuals outside visual culture often enter cosplay without any prior knowledge of costuming or construction, which means that they must learn the necessary practices on the fly, during the process of making the costume.

Cosplay skill acquisition may be aided or abetted by the countless tutorials available online, developed by other cosplayers expressly for other cosplayers since character costumes often require very specific techniques that are not found in common sewing or costume-making knowledge. For example, the hairstyle of Sailor Moon, heroine of the *animé Bishoujo Senshi Sailor Moon*¹⁰, is unique to her character and the surrounding fandom sphere. As a result, mainstream hair- or wig-styling culture does not possess the techniques on how to achieve this hairstyle. Pre-styled Sailor Moon wigs are available in abundance via the cosplay sellers on eBay, but many cosplayers would prefer to make theirs by hand.



Thus, in order to fulfill this need, there exists a plethora of tutorials on how to construct Sailor Moon's hair, which involves an elaborate use of wig extensions and Styrofoam balls in order to achieve that character's look. These tutorials are made and

¹⁰ Translated in English as "Pretty Girl Fighter Sailor Moon," but more commonly referred to as just *Sailor Moon*.

¹¹ "Sailor Moon (Character)." *Wikipedia.org*. Mediawiki, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

distributed via the Internet by cosplayers who have already gone through their own trials and errors in the pursuit of satisfactory Sailor Moon wigs. By following the tutorials of previous Sailor Moon cosplayers, individuals wishing to follow in their footsteps literally build on the past experience of their predecessors, adding to it with documentation of their own costume-making process through social media—for example, tweeting pictures tagged, “WIP,” or “work in progress,” that show the garment in various stages of completion. This allows the audience to vicariously participate in the cosplayer’s construction venture, so that the knowledge gained in the process is passed on to the cosplayers within the audience; altogether, an online performance furthering the social development of the individual’s cosplay persona.

Thus, cosplay construction culture is continuously evolving as new techniques are developed and shared throughout the community. Katie Bair, for example, has released a 300-page book containing her self-developed methods: *The World of Wigcraft*. This full-color tome covers everything from basic bangs to adding wefts and custom dye jobs¹². An excerpt from Bair’s book gives a list of what one can do with a wig:

- “You can cut it shorter.
- You can add extensions to make it longer.
- You can straighten or curl it.
- You can dreadlock it.
- You can move the part to anywhere on the head.
- You can add or remove bangs.
- You can French braid it.
- You can make it thicker or thinner.
- You can dye it with Wig Dye, or streak it with markers.
- You can add highlights or lowlights with extensions.
- You can make it stick up or out.
- You can make the fiber conform to any shape.
- You can make ponytails come out of places that they shouldn’t be able to come out of.

¹² *The Busy World of Katie Bair*. Wordpress, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

You can make feathers, yarn, or even tinsel come right out of the scalp. You can make accessories stick into it without a string or ribbon holding them on.

There is only one thing you cannot do to a synthetic wig: **you cannot bleach a wig.**”

Many of these acts seem like they would be perfectly possible with the cosplayer’s own hair, but it must be kept in mind that human hair by itself is brittle and unable to withstand the treatment that necessary to make it resemble the surreal, gravity-defying hairstyles common to *animé*. The techniques detailed in *The World of Wigcraft* turn wigs into multi-media sculptures. One may learn how to deconstruct a wig weft by weft and then re-stitch it together to add volume; or how to form pigtails by sealing off the initial ‘tails with caulk, then hacking off the excess so that it may be re-attached as a separate extension.

The application the methodology of sewing and wigcraft to the costume itself—a three-dimensional, highly irregular, non-static object—is a further performance of cosplay skill. Wigs, for example, must be constructed with the correct proportions of the character’s hairstyle to “do justice” to the character, but these proportions must also fit the cosplayer’s physical features if the result is to be aesthetically inoffensive.

Meanwhile, there is still the question of physics—can it stay on a moving cosplayer’s head? Will it be secure on its own, held in place by the wig cap underneath, or will it require insurance items like bobby pins in order to remain secure?

Thus, a cosplayer’s need for informed knowledge of the practices surrounding the main three cosplay skills—once again, sewing, wigcraft, and prop-making—accounts for the profound value of these skills within the community. For those who do not wish to

invest the \$59.99 in the *World of Wigcraft*—or the \$112 for the Starter Kit, which includes essential tools such as scissors, conditioner, and a foam head with table clamp—then there are countless free resources elsewhere on the Internet. The Tutorials page of another well-reputed wig company, Arda Wigs, links to 17 different step-by-step videos and blog entries on how to handle and alter a wig, including Arda’s own YouTube channel.

However, community involvement can only go so far—nothing except personal costume-constructing experience can develop a sincere cosplay persona. No matter how many tutorials have been read and absorbed, an individual’s personal skill level is the primary variable in the costume’s outcome.

Yet we must address two other quantifiable variables: time and money.

Time will determine the efficiency of execution. Depending on the level of detail and construction involved, costumes may take anywhere from days to months for completion. Deadlines are the intended convention or photoshoot, which means that the cosplayer must plan out their costume construction to allow for the end product to be acceptable for public consumption. An “end” product is not necessarily a finished one, but for the performance to be successful, with sufficient “justice” being done to the character, then the audience must be convinced that the costume appears to be finished.

Money will determine the overall quality of the costume. Generally, the more “justice” has been done to the character, the more it will have cost to produce the costume. However, one may also fall into the trap of paying exorbitant amounts—hundreds of dollars, sometimes into the thousands—for materials that do not come together satisfactorily and result in a poorly-constructed costume due to the individual’s

own level of cosplay-making proficiency. A cosplayer of a greater skill status may be resourceful enough to use unorthodox methods such as discount supply stores and old clothes. When combined in a skilled manner, these materials may produce a costume whose quality is on par with professionally commissioned work.

Thus, when one combines the variables of skill, effort, time, and money, a formula takes shape:

Effort => skill x resources => costume

One's input of effort yields skill and resources, which in turn yields the costume. Effort encompasses the performance of physical labor in order to produce the costume, as well as the performance of time and exertion that the individual spends in the process of learning the necessary techniques. This altogether results in the accumulation of skill knowledge as well as knowledge of materials.

Effort is also an indicator of the sincerity of the cosplayer's performance of costume-making, or how deeply does he or she desire to "do justice" to the character. A sincere individual takes it upon him- or herself to learn the fundamentals of the three cosplay essentials—once more: sewing, prop-making, and wig-styling—and will accumulate further knowledge and experience in the continued performance of the cosplay persona before the actual or virtual audience.

The experience from this process grants the cosplayer's understanding of the above formula: how materials function, how much they will cost in money and labor, etc. With that in mind, the cosplayer can then prioritize accordingly, allocating personal funds

to purchase materials of the desired quality and then dedicating his or her free time to work on the costume.

With an individual's effort as the product of all accumulated cosplay experience, transferred into the resources and production of the costume, it follows that massive input—i.e.: years of cosplay in which one has been making multiple outfits per year—yields massive results: high-quality costumes.

When there is less input of effort, the results are reflected in the performance. A lack of effort equals a shoddy costume, and it becomes obvious that the cosplayer cynically does not care enough to “do justice” to the character. Particularly in the case of the costumes purchased from eBay sellers, where the only effort made on the cosplayer's part is to take a few measurements, then open his or her wallet and type in a credit card number. The entire sewing, building, and styling process is taken care of by the company, an equally cynical entity that has no incentive to “do justice” to particular characters or causes. This does not apply, however, to professional commissions, since we have established that these sellers are sincerely performing their costuming skill for the sake of the client.

When it comes to the performance of effort and sincerity, beginner cosplayers are given the benefit of the doubt. “When the performer is known to be a beginner, and more subject than otherwise to embarrassing mistakes, the audience frequently shows extra consideration, refraining from causing the difficulties it might otherwise create” (232) says Goffman. More experienced cosplayers are likely to look on beginners with indulgence, as they recall being at that same age when the hobby seemed so shiny and new.

Therefore within cosplay culture, the ideal costume costs as little time and money as possible, which satisfies the sincere performance of the Self's socioeconomic status, yet must also be pleasing both to look at and to wear, which satisfies the sincere performance of the Character. This overall concept serves as the motivation for an individual's effort in producing a costume, which we have established and quantified in the costume-construction formula. The only blind spot in this formula lies in the department of sheer dumb luck—it does not account for unexpected occurrences such as bargain fabric finds, or someone's cat spilling paint on a hand-sewn kimono. But barring those circumstances, the formula may adequately predict the quality of a costume.

Now, what constitutes “quality,” anyway?

As we have seen, quality is an indicator of the cosplayer's skill level, a performance of status via the personal front, for as Goffman notes: “A status, a position, a social place, is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated” (59).

In addition to its outward impression, quality is largely determined by wearability. As noted in the practice of wig-styling, it is not enough for the article to merely appear presentable. It must be sturdy enough to withstand the period of time for which it will be worn, upwards of two hours at a time, if not an entire whirlwind day at a convention. The more closely a costume resembles and operates like a manufactured article of clothing, the more advantageous it is to the cosplayer, for it is far easier to perform one's character sincerely in a homemade suit jacket that has been lined and tailored to be worn and buttoned like any off-the-rack suit jacket.

However, many cosplayers do not study fashion or costuming as a serious career, and therefore cannot sincerely perform a Self that would add to the quality of the costume, for they do not possess the associated skill-knowledge, tools, and experience. Unless they acquire these techniques by osmosis from the cosplay community, they are left to take shortcuts that often result in garments that have a satisfactory appearance only on the outside. Thus, an abbreviated, lower-quality version of the aforementioned suit jacket would be composed of a single layer of fabric, with unfinished interior seams that grow more ragged every time the costume is worn, and buttons that have been sewn as decoration in order to obscure a Velcro or zipper that serves to fasten the garment. These indicators, plus other popular, unorthodox resources such as safety pins and hot glue are what Goffman would classify as an “inside secret”: “Inside secrets give objective intellectual content to subjectively felt social distance. Almost all information in a social establishment has something of this exclusion function and may be seen as none of somebody’s business” (142). Therefore the performance of a character while wearing the lower-quality jacket will ultimately be more cynical, as the individual is continually aware of the insincere representation of clothing that he or she is wearing.

However, when the costume is being worn, the audience can only see what is manifested on the cosplayer’s body, and therefore that leaves room for the less-skilled individuals to get away with the use and abuse of techniques that would have no place in the production of “normal,” marketable clothing—yet are perfectly adequate for the purposes of cosplay, seeing as the intended garment is created with the understanding that it will be worn for a very limited amount of time and needs only to be just good enough to stand up to the task. This is where cosplay’s inside secrets are necessity. They allow

the perpetuation of the character illusion before the audience, as “the more the individual is concerned with the reality that is not available to perception, the more he must concentrate his attention on appearances” (Goffman 249).

Once the countless variables of physics are taken into account, then the cosplayer is at liberty to pursue the aesthetic aspects of the costume, which are often closely linked to the physical. At this point, one must address the question of accuracy versus aesthetics. As seen in the cases of Brokyo and Haineko, the construction process carries with it a sense of personal intimacy to the character who is to be cosplayed, with a certain, continuous thought shadowing every step: “What would the character do?” When selecting materials, one asks what kind of material would they wear? Would they go for more utilitarian and boring, or more attractive but flimsy? What shade would they prefer?

Thus we see the sincerity that may be involved within the production of the costume. Yet the Self’s cynical presence on the other end of the scale reminds us that the cosplayer’s work is showcasing his or her own identity as much as that of the character. To return to the rivalry between accuracy and aesthetics, a sincere performance of Character would be an accurate costume produced with significant effort. The character’s costume would remove the cosplayer’s Self from the point of focus and zero in on how well the costume and wearer’s physical appearance duplicate that of the character. Choosing to showcase the cosplayer instead would be more cynical as it hovers closer to the Self end of the scale, for the individual will pursue personal aesthetic satisfaction in the costume, often making adjustments to the character’s original design as they abandon “doing justice” for looking good.

Thus we see how the performance of aesthetics and accuracy in a costume represent key values within the cosplay community, which follows Goffman's statement that, "when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society" (35).

A New York-based cosplayer, Cassi, once posted as her Facebook status: "Whoops. Hand stitching part of my supernatural cosplay. Pricked myself and accidentally bled on it. I feel like I'm less messing it up, more like I'm making it accurate."¹³ Here, the character in question is often spattered with blood; therefore it is perfectly plausible that the addition of the cosplayer's blood would fit in the intended look. This renders the costume a more sincere performance of Character.

However in cosplay, aesthetic pleasure is a hazy subject, often depending on the individual for his or her personal definition. The general consensus is that it is inspired by how closely the costume evokes—but does not necessarily mimic—the original upon the first impression. Total mimicry would fall under total accuracy, which is indeed aesthetically pleasing in and of itself, but this pleasure is not guaranteed. It would follow therefore that a costume must be accurate to be aesthetically pleasing, and it must be aesthetically pleasing in order to be accurate. Yet due to the myriad methods, materials, and skill levels evidenced by the above discussion and formula, the overall effect of each costume will be individualized depending on the decisions made during its construction process. Such decisions impact the accuracy, and by default the aesthetics of the costume. If we return to Sailor Moon as an example, one sees how and why her variations could be carried out.

¹³ Facebook. Facebook.com, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

In the previous image, one notes that Sailor Moon has yellow hair and wears an abbreviated sailor uniform as her outfit of choice. If the cosplayers wishes to produce a version of Sailor Moon that is accurate and performs a sincere interpretation of Character, he or she will have to take all color and fabric choices directly from the design, including a bright yellow wig and matte accents to replicate the original *animé*'s characteristic, flat cell shading of the 1990s.

However, in person, yellow hair may seem garish, and the flat accents could cheapen the look of the uniform—all of which reduce the aesthetic pleasure of the costume. Therefore, the Self is performed in the alteration of a character's design for the purpose of flattering an individual's personal physical features. Many cosplayers of Sailor Moon choose to abandon the yellow wig for a blonde one, which looks more natural. The costume becomes less textbook-accurate and less sincere, but ultimately more aesthetically pleasing since it draws on the physical features of the cosplayer in an attractive light.

The importance of a cosplayer's physical features as a performance of Self becomes all the more relevant in the next stage of costume production: wearing it.

CHAPTER 2

“Costume”: Part Two

The act of putting the costume on the body calls forth the character as a living, breathing entity. This stage tests further cosplay skills as well as the individual’s sincerity and dedication to the character, for once worn, the garment represents a culmination of all effort involved in its initial production—not merely a physical manifestation of the character, but also the individual’s love for that character.

Before the costume goes on, however, we must address¹⁴ the cosplayer’s physical body. The presentation of one’s physical body bears significance not only as a contributor to the appearance of the costume, but, as Goffman notes, an indicator of how the individual perceives his or her personal Self. “When an individual appears before others, he knowingly and unwittingly presents a projection of the situation, of which a conception of himself is an important part” (242).

Allow us to return to the concept of accuracy as a profound cosplay value. Presented in a costume, accuracy extends beyond the garment and props, encompassing all aspects of resemblance to the character, with a particular focus on body type and gender. If a cosplayer cynically does not care much for visual accuracy—one recalls the individuals who buy premade eBay ensembles and treat them as they would Halloween costumes, to be thrown on for the convention and shrugged off at the end of the day—then the physical self within the costume is a non-issue, as they have already moved on to the next ritual in cosplay, in which they consciously present as the character.

¹⁴ Pun count: 1

Yet if the individual wishes for his or her appearance to come as close to the character's as humanly possible, then additional considerations must be made. The choice is purely voluntary, for a cosplayer is not strictly expected or encouraged to achieve the exact proportions of a fictional being whose body type might be as achievable as Barbie's—a well-known structural impossibility. The cosplay community is founded on the belief that if the costume is done out of one's love for the character, then anyone may cosplay whomever they wish, regardless of their own physical features. Even a popular tumblr dedicated to "bad"—that is, aesthetically displeasing and inaccurate—or humorous cosplay bears the disclaimer, "we encourage people of all races, faiths, shapes and sizes to cosplay whatever they want as much as their hearts desire."¹⁵

Despite this policy of universal inclusiveness, what more often occurs is that the accuracy-seeking cosplayer will have chosen their character with conscious consideration of his or her body type and sex¹⁶, so that the physical Self bears actual resemblance to the character and thus render the performance more sincere. Some individuals prefer to cosplay exclusively characters whose body types are similar to theirs, to avoid the hassle of body modification through prosthetics, undergarments, and makeup. Others readily accept the challenge of cosplaying characters who have little in common with one's physical Self; they construct the illusion of the character's frame by using their own bodies as a base structure. This construction may occur in the literal sense;

¹⁵ *Omgpleasestopcosplaying*. tumblr.com, 2013. Web. 13 Apr. 2013.

¹⁶ "Sex" and "gender" are discussed as separate, distinct terms using Judith Butler's theory of sex/gender distinction: "gender is the social significance that sex assumes within a given culture." In the context of cosplay, the in-costume cosplayer's gender identity is purely subjective, taking a backseat to the character's gender, while his or her sex is addressed only within the functional elements of the costume.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* Routledge, 1993. Google Books.

QuantumDestiny, a petite, female cosplayer, has made a name for herself by cosplaying men from the *animé Dragon Ball*, using handmade muscle suits to achieve the characters' bodybuilder physiques¹⁷.



In other instances, the cosplayer may directly alter his or her body type by losing or gaining weight to match the character's frame. Cosplay.com, the main playground of the cosplay community on the Internet, has a Fitness forum dedicated to the support for cosplayers who use costumes as incentives to adopt healthy living habits, eating well and exercising regularly, so that they may reap the aesthetic benefits in their improved physiques.¹⁹ Seeing as physical health and fitness is a key attribute of many popular

¹⁷ - ¹⁸ "QuantumDestiny." *American Cosplay Paradise*. ACParadise.com Network, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

¹⁹ *Cosplay.com – The World's Largest Cosplay Community*. Cosplay.com, LLC, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

characters²⁰, this fulfills the notion of “doing justice” to the character, as the cosplayer continues his or her costume-building quest to perform sincere accuracy.

This aspect of cosplay society may also perform on a cynical level, showcasing the degree to which the individual Self’s adheres to mainstream culture. Body image in cosplay is based on continuous exposure to characters that have been conceived and popularized through the media, characters whose appearances and proportions are formulated by their creators’ cultures. Cosplayers are usually aware that fictional beings, as they derive from nebulous concepts, are therefore not subject to laws of human physiology. Yet it remains that these characters’ resemblance to humans encourages the sincere attempt to achieve such physiques. A search for “cosplay thinspiration” or “cosplay fitspiration” yields a shocking number of results on tumblr, primarily from girls’ blogs showcasing anorexic tendencies²¹. Many female cosplayers, compelled to appear svelte for the sake of performing a scantily clad character with an idealized body type, have slid into the realm of eating disorders²².

A fit body may contribute to a greater appreciated cosplay persona as well, granted by sheer attractiveness in the eyes of the audience. However, many cosplayers would prefer to shift the audience’s focus to the garment aspect of the costume. They choose to express their sincerity through its painstaking construction, seeing as cosplay ensembles already contain components that serve to mask or distort the physical body without altering it on a lasting, biological level. It is taken for granted that the process of

²⁰ In “The Dark Knight Rises,” Batman didn’t escaped from prison by sitting around—he had a lengthy training sequence of hardcore bodyweight exercises that got him there.

²¹ *The Things We Do For Cosplay*. tumblr, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

²² “Cosplayers are passionate, talented folks—but there’s a darker side to this community, too.” *Kotaku*. Gawker Media, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

applying the costume takes enough time and energy without considering the additional pressure of body image for the sake of “doing justice” to the character.

Since the physical body is the ultimate link to the Self, it follows that attiring oneself in costume is an act that is highly Self-involved—a backstage performance based on re-tooling the personal front with cynical, non-character-related methods, so that the cosplayer may achieve a sincere appearance of Character when presenting to the audience. The choices made in this stage of cosplay are also governed by the relationship established with the character during the production of the costume. As in the production process, the cosplayer considers, “What would the character wear?” and “What would I wear?” simultaneously, vacillating between the desires to perform Self or Character, sincerely or cynically.

The more cynical processes that are needed—massive amounts of makeup, for example—then the greater the final resemblance to the character, which serves to trigger a sincere performance on the part of the individual from his or her commitment to applying this costume.

Each cynical process constitutes a separate layer, which must be cultivated and applied in turn during the act of dressing. The exact number of steps will depend on the level of the cosplayer and the costume. For example, a low-level or inexperienced cosplayer with simple, all-in-one eBay garments needs only to pull the clothing on and add a wig if he or she wishes. In contrast, a high-level cosplayer will agonize over detail and thus need more than an hour to make themselves—and their cosplay personas—camera-ready.

The underlayer is applied to the cosplayer's naked body to create the sense of the character's own body underneath their clothes; the most intimate expression of the physical Self. If the individual has no desire to alter his or her body type, this could be as basic as putting on underwear. Yet many cross-gender cosplayers—known as “crossplayers,” who perform characters of the opposite gender—prefer to physically match their character to the greatest extent possible, which involves body modification. For example, female-to-male crossplayers have a variety of techniques to bind their breasts, depending on how much of the chest area is visible in the costume. On the flipside, male-to-female crossplayers may create padding for the illusion of a fuller figure, as seen earlier in the case of Haineko. An additional, all-purpose underlayer is the wig cap, which holds one's hair in place so that the wig may cover it without tendrils escaping.

The clothing layer of the costume is another expression of Self when considered as a personal front device that interacts with the physical body. A cosplayer with a poorly-constructed garment will need to employ certain tricks to make sure that the costume stays in place while it is being worn—in a pinch, hot glue, duct tape and safety pins are a cosplayer's best friends. Since most cosplayers dress in the safety of their hotel rooms at a convention, these tools can cover up mistakes or solve last-minute crises when one's options are limited.

Then we arrive at the outermost layer: makeup. One could argue that because some cosplayers—usually males—do not wear make-up, the makeup layer is therefore optional. Yet the individual's choice to not wear makeup still acknowledges the fact that

it could or should be worn, therefore its absence is as much of a performance of Self as its presence.

Thus, we may see how the clothes-wig-makeup layering process bears its own layers of meaning. A character may be shown fully clothed and barefaced, which would seem to require the cosplayer to apply nothing more than a single layer of outwear in order to sincerely perform that ensemble. However, although it may qualify as accurate to the original design and thereby satisfy the sincerity of that performance, the cosplayer still possesses a notion of Self as he or she inhabits the garment. No matter how successfully the individual has “done justice” to the character, one’s personal needs²³ of self-presentation must be fulfilled.

This is where the underlayer becomes significant. Any non-lingerie-based costume design will not state what lies beneath the clothing, aside from the physical body of the character. Unless there is additional reference material available for the character, such as the artist’s own reference sketches, then by necessity—the Self’s desire for physical comfort, perhaps—the cosplayer is left to figure out underwear for his or herself.

Makeup must be noted as well. If the character has a wildly different skin tone from the cosplayer, then the Self’s ethnicity also is integrated into the performance. This raises certain moral dilemmas. An alien character, such as a grey-skinned troll from *Homestuck*²⁴, presents no ethical debate, as their skin color is outside the realm of the

²³ Many unskilled cosplayers forget that self-care is a necessary part of self-presentation, which accounts for much of the pervasive “con funk” that gently wafts through convention halls.

²⁴ An online comic turned cult sensation, featuring a cast of humans and otherworldly “trolls.”

human spectrum, therefore their impersonation cannot be anything but a cynical performance of ethnicity and will not be considered offensive by mainstream social standards. Human characters raise greater debates. Within the unspoken standards of cosplay, there exists a certain amount of social leeway for cosplayers to maintain their physical ethnic characteristics even if the character's design would speak otherwise. This is intended to avoid offending other ethnicities with a cynical representation of their features.

Yet it remains that in American mainstream culture, light-skinned people are predominant, which results in fictional characters being predominantly light-skinned. Thus, light-skinned cosplayers generally have more freedom in their character choice and performance thereof. Caucasian cosplayers may freely dress up as any human character whose skin tone is achievable by makeup, as long as they do not commit social transgressions by the cynical practices of replicating blackface, eye-alteration, or otherwise present themselves in a manner deemed socially unacceptable by both cosplay and mainstream standards. If a Caucasian cosplayer wishes to cosplay as minority character without being horribly offensive, then he or she may darken his or her skin only to a shade that could pass as a natural tan.²⁵

Minority cosplayers are faced with different options. The cosplay community prides itself on being a safe, neutral space for all ethnicities, genders, and sexual preferences. Theoretically, minority cosplayers are assumed to have the same liberty as whites—greater liberty, in fact, since if a minority cosplayer chooses a white character, it

²⁵ As for Asian characters, many popular animé characters are ethnically Japanese, but due to the style in which they have been drawn—big eyes and Caucasian-toned skin—white cosplayers are not usually expected to make themselves appear more Asian.

will be frowned upon to degrade them for an inaccurate skin tone even if their coloring presents a cynical representation of the character.²⁶ Many minority cosplayers portray white or white-seeming characters without altering their skin tone to match, for in this hobby, the love of the character comes first and foremost. If the love of the character is sincere, then that may excuse a cynical performance.

Yet even if the cosplayer's skin tone is compatible with the character's, he or she may still wish to apply makeup for the sake of fulfilling the look of being a drawn or animated figure, so that the individual "does justice" by becoming sincerely accurate to the design and pleasing to the eye. A male character usually appears to be wearing nothing more than the skin on his face, give or take some facial hair. Female characters often indicate some need for cosmetic use, whether it be a bare-looking, fresh face or brilliantly-colored lips and eyelids. As a result, even male characters, regardless of the Self's sincere gender identity, are encouraged to be presented with the addition of makeup; an artificially matte face mimics the young men found in *animé*, who often possess neither facial hair nor the unsightly blemishes that are a side effect of being a real person.

Since cosplay is a performance, and therefore a form of theater, theatrical makeup is commonplace. There is no subtle irony in how the appearance of a fresh-faced damsel character, when brought into actuality, may be achieved by copious product use that ultimately results in a cynical personal front. A cosplay makeup tutorial from "Cosplay Blog... With a Brain!" details the process: moisturizer, then the basic primer/concealer/foundation triad is essential, followed by eyeshadow, eyeliner, mascara,

²⁶ This is not to say that racism in cosplay is nonexistent. Online, inaccurate or "bad" cosplay may be subject to verbal flogging for a host of petty reasons, ethnicity included.

blush, lip color, and loose powder to finish²⁷. Additional shading may be used if the cosplayer wishes to modify his or her facial structure—females cosplaying men use makeup to give themselves masculine features such as pronounced brows and cheekbones, even Adam’s apples for the full effect.

During my fieldwork at AnimeNEXT 2012, one of the cosplayers staying with us our hotel room, Max, identified as genderqueer. His conception of Self didn’t subscribe to one gender, but preferred male pronouns. That weekend, he was going to cosplay a female character, Sayaka, from *Mahou Shoujo Madoka Magica*. Unlike the Brokyo group’s take on the Madoka characters, Max’s costume was sincere to the original design and did not switch the character’s gender to reflect his own out-of-costume identity.

When out of costume and dressed in street clothes, Max’s sincere, Self-based gender presentation involves male undergarments and binding his chest. However, when it came time to wear Sayaka, he put on a bra and shaved his legs—standard practices of hygiene and beauty performed by American females and female-identifying cosplayers. In this particular circumstance, the importance of the character’s gender identity, and the execution thereof, trumped the importance of Max’s gender identity as an individual. He would rather sincerely “do justice” to the character than sincerely perform his own Self’s gender identity. The character of Sayaka has visible breasts in her silhouette, and shows no body hair, therefore in order to “do justice” to the character through visual accuracy, it was necessary for Max to replicate that in his appearance. This was regardless of the fact that bras and leg-shaving are actions that are associated with a specific gender, female, as opposed to his self-identification of being in-between.

²⁷ “Guest Post: Makeup 101.” *Cosplay Blog...With a Brain!* Wordpress, 2013. 18 Dec. 2011. Web. 29 Apr. 2013

Furthermore, Max's boyfriend, Cal, must also bind his chest in order to present as male. Due to a medical condition, this causes him physical pain, yet he continues because it is a necessary component of his gender identity. However, during that same convention when Cal put on a bra in order to cosplay a female character—this particular situation was another *Mahou Shoujo Madoka Magica* character, Madoka herself—the costume's gender was no less a form of alter ego than Sayaka had been for Max.

We see that gender presentation in cosplay is no small matter, for it serves as a visual indicator of the Self's presence. Thus, crossplayers have developed a microculture of their own within the cosplay community. I attended a panel at Otakon 2012 called "Crossplay for Women," which covered all aspects of presenting as a male character when one has a female body, accompanied by a PowerPoint slideshow that allowed attendees to take notes—and many did, copiously. Crossplay is hardly uncommon; given the feminine physiques of *bishounen* or "pretty boy" types of *animé* men, it is nearly expected that these characters will be cosplayed in the majority by women. Hence, the panel was extremely popular.

It began with the basics: chest binding. This practice of flattening one's breasts is the go-to body modification to render a female-bodied person recognizably male, used by centuries of transvestites long before cosplay's inception. *Les Misérables*'s Eponine, for example, disguised her chest with cloth bandages to pass as a boy²⁸. Today's cosplayers have access to more modern, more effective equipment. The panelists—all of them female and cosplaying male Homestuck characters—explained the pros and cons of each method of binding:

²⁸ Hugo, Victor. *Les Misérables*. Livre de Poche, 2000. Print.

- Duct tape: a quick fix, but a serious no-no because the material does not stretch, which results in a compressed ribcage and back pain.
- Ace bandages: very effective at breast-flattening when bound correctly, but extended wear also causes potential harm. Also, one should use caution in extreme heat, since that may cause the bandage to slip and roll down.
- Sports tape: more acceptable than duct tape and useful for open-shirt costumes, where the cosplayer can flatten her breasts by pulling them to each side and holding them in place with the tape and there affixing the shirt.
- Sports bras: the most comfortable method, but offers the least compression. Good for cosplayers with already small chests and costumes with a loose-fitting top.
- Compression vests: the second most comfortable option, as effective as ace bandages at chest-flattening, but unsuitable for costumes exposing the area from neck to navel.

It became apparent that the more skin was to be exposed in the costume, the more effort the cosplayer would have to put in to the male-bodied illusion. This trend continued as the panelists discussed makeup techniques of shading and highlighting to impart the appearance of masculine features. They also made mention of QuantumDestiny's Dragon Ball muscle suits, citing them as proof that, "You can do anyone."

The panel also went over how to effectively present as male in other aspects of cosplay by posing in a masculine manner, with straight hips and open legs to simulate the standard posture of men caused by their physiology: smaller, narrower pelvises and, of course, "junk" at the groin. These demonstrations were coupled with anatomical images on the PowerPoint, as a reminder to the crossplayer that even if the character is a fictional entity, the act of being male is very real. To further the illusion and "mess with people," they even included tips on lowering the pitch of one's voice.

Altogether, the panel was a demonstration of performative elements that would render the cosplay as a cynical act, for in their delivery they require the individual to be intensely conscious of the physical Self. However, these elements had been conceived by

the panelists for the purpose of producing the most sincere performance possible in the eyes of the audience. It was understood that, once again, this would be a manner of “doing the character justice” to the utmost. The audience would be so taken in by this performance of gender that they would be convinced of the accuracy of the individual’s portrayal of that character, which would dissuade them from questioning its sincerity or cynicism.

Thus, when it comes to crossplay, the underlayer of gender could be seen as a costume in and of itself. By altering one’s appearance and behavior, the individual’s personal front may embody the opposite gender, while the garment indicates which specific member of that gender is being embodied—that being the character. It follows that any instance of physical disruption to the cosplayer’s body or costume creates a backstage region and triggers a backstage response, described by Goffman thus: “Such activity [causes] the individual to disarrange his clothing and to go ‘out of play,’ that is, to drop from his face the expressive mask that he employs in face-to-face interaction. At the same time it becomes difficult for him to reassemble his personal front should the need to enter into interaction suddenly occur” (121). One sees how the physical region functions as the primordial anchor of Self. It rips the cosplayer out of any character mentality as it draws focus to the costume and the physical body, components of the personal front that have been made by, or exclusively belong to, the individual.

Cosplayers are aware that when wearing a costume, the character always comes first. It is the overlying identity of the cosplayer; the audience may not know the cosplayer personally, but even in passing they will be able to identify who the character is, or what series they come from. Thus in every action related to one’s costume, the

sense of Character is present no matter how great the individual's sense of Self may be at that moment. The costume acts as a trigger, initiating the sense of Character, and as long as the garment is being worn, it continues to anchor Character to the individual. Without a costume, the audience perceives no character at all; when audience and costume are subtracted from the setting, then cosplay is no longer being performed.

An audience may be present even in backstage settings. Cosplayers dressing in a hotel room, such as Cal and Max, will often sound as if they are putting on someone else's purloined clothing. During my stays at conventions, I would often hear exchanges that went: "Can you hand me the hot glue? One of Godoka's rhinestones fell off." "Sure, as soon as I get Twilight's wig on." "How long is it gonna take to get into her?" Rarely do cosplayers offhandedly refer to the articles of clothing or accessories as specifically belonging to themselves. This expresses the individual's commitment to the character, the sincerity in their dedication to the costume, for it is a manner of bringing forth the character as an existing entity, even if only on a conceptual level.

However, Self is still present in this context as well. When the blood, sweat, and tears involved in the production of a costume component is called into question, then the cosplayer is more likely to proclaim it with a personal pronoun, the primary indicator of Self, wherein one hears, "*my* wig" and may be thus informed who is responsible for its existence. This simultaneously reaffirms his or her status as a cosplayer—a sincere performance of the cosplay persona.

An overlap of Self and Character occurs when cosplayers exchange costumes or costume components. In that case, the object will be referred to simultaneously as belonging to the character and the cosplayer who made it. For example, the phrase:

“Mario is using Natasha’s wig for Shizuo.” If the object was originally used for a different character or costume, then one would hear, “Mario is using Natasha’s Tamaki wig for Shizuo.” This establishes that a cosplayer takes ownership of a costume and its materials, yet the components are directly related to the character and thus belong to that character. Thus the physical, tangible aspects of the costume are in the possession of the Self, with the understanding that these aspects would be possessed by the character if that entity were to exist on a similarly tangible level. In the example phrase, the listener is informed that Mario wears a wig that is legally owned by Natasha; she purchased and altered it, therefore the object is her possession. However, that particular hairstyle as a *concept* belongs to the character of Tamaki, which is why the wig was originally part of a Tamaki costume. It is implied that Tamaki’s hairstyle is so similar to that of the other character, Shizuo, that the wig sincerely satisfies both costumes.

The wig, as the real-life representation of a hairstyle-concept that may be found in multiple *animé* sources, may thus be seen to belong to multiple characters. Frequently, wig sellers capitalize on this fact by labeling their wares with an assortment of possible characters who may be cosplayed using that hairstyle. However, when the wig is worn with the garment, it is seen only in the context of the singular character being cosplayed by the individual at that moment.



Thus, one notices that Character and costume frequently merge into one entity in the eyes of the cosplayer, a result of the trials and tribulations of making and applying the ensemble, which contribute ultimately to a sincere performance. Hence, “casual” cosplayers, who purchase ready-made costumes, may be held in contempt by other cosplayers who make their own costumes, for they perceive the lack of effort as a cynical performance of character—“justice” has not been done to the fictional entity. Furthermore, without the production process, casual cosplayers may not form an interpersonal relationship with the character because they have not had the chance to input the Self into the costume. After all, when the costume has already been assembled by a professional or more experienced service, it is taken for granted that it is sufficiently

²⁹ Right: “Doorknocker Dog.” *American Cosplay Paradise*. ACParadise.com Network, 2013.

Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

Left: *Facebook.com*. Facebook, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

accurate, which satisfies the casual cosplayer enough that he or she has no reason to develop a personal connection to the garment via his or her own alterations.

In effect, the physical costume is still owned by the casual cosplayer, but it lacks the sincere sense of Character and thus the concept of its belonging to the character is diminished.

Getting into a costume is therefore a greater process than simply applying the physical components, as even the backstage practices of bodily preparation are components of the performance. As the preparatory practices are carried out, the bond between cosplayer and character is strengthened, and the sense of Character is established so that the individual may now fully present on the Self-Character scale in whatever sincere or cynical manner that he or she chooses.

Without the aforementioned incidents, however, wearing a completed costume means that the personal front is also rendered complete, and ready to be performed. It creates the effect of embodying the character, marking the moment of awareness that the individual is visually presenting as the character. The Self-Character scale is thus initiated, and the cosplayer truly begins *cosplaying*.

CHAPTER 3

“Play”: Part One

The “play” aspect of cosplay occurs at a convention, gathering, or photoshoot. Casual cosplayers may simply put the clothes on his or her body and carry on as usual, but some serious cosplayers choose to comport themselves as the character would, though speech and interaction, often ignoring common social norms such as politeness and personal space for the sake of “doing justice” to that character’s personality. As we have established, this is known as being “in character.” With the performance by the Ariel cosplayer at AnimeNEXT, it became clear that this depends on the sincerity of the performance of Character or the strength of the individual’s belief that he or she actually embodies the character. As that belief is expressed through the performance, this allows the audience to gauge where precisely the individual lies on the Self-Character scale at that moment.

First, however, we must address how the Self and the Character arrive on that scale. During my queries with cosplayers at the three conventions, I asked why they were cosplaying that character, and each individual gave a different answer. Primarily it was personal identification with the fictional persona, some variation of “I admire that character,” or “I *am* that character.”

In the case of the latter, the cosplayer is drawn to that character on the basis that he or she sees aspects of personal Self reflected in aspects of the character. Sometimes this may be due to someone else’s suggestion that certain qualities in the character’s appearance or personality are reminiscent of the cosplayer’s Self. “It just kind of

happened,” said a guy dressed as Keith, a concept character³⁰ from the video game *Left 4 Dead 2*. His friends had encouraged him to do the costume because both he and the character were redheads. Since hair color is a marker of the physical Self, Keith just “fit.”³¹

By thus linking the Self to the character before the costume’s construction, this establishes a pre-existing affinity of the cosplayer with the character. This may be insurance to the group that the individual will sincerely “do justice” to the costume and perform well as a cosplayer, for as Goffman notes, “It is apparent that if performers are concerned with maintaining a line they will select as teammates those who can be trusted to perform properly” (91). In Keith’s case, his friends deemed him appropriate for the role and this inspired him to execute it to his best ability. I saw the sincerity of his performance as he showed off the details of his costume to me with the same vigor that AnimeNEXT’s Haineko had when she described the process of butt-dart-sewing and breast-stuffing.

³⁰ “Concept characters” are characters that exist secondhand, never appearing in the narrative except when referred to by other characters. The characters of *Left 4 Dead 2* mention Keith frequently, but he is never shown on screen.

³¹ Pun count: 2



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In other cosplay cases, personal identification with the character occurs when cosplayers desire that persona for their own Selves. One must recall that Character refers to the individual's interpretation of the fictional persona, and a personal interpretation is subjective to the Self's perception. Many queried individuals, even when not asked why they had chosen their particular costume, revealed their sincere adoration of the character for being "strong," "smart" or "sexy." Although there was a degree of cynicism present in their awareness that their Selves lacked those qualities, there was also sincerity within that same performance. By presenting as Character, the individuals were adopting a persona that was *more* than themselves, and by performing their Selves' desired traits in that character, the entire act was as sincere as it was cynical.

We have seen this doublethink already in the process of physically dressing in costume. In this case, rather than using makeup or body modifications, the cosplayer is

³² Image by Natasha Nestic, 2012.

applying thick layers of front region character behavior. The sincerity of one's belief in the character's nature may either compound or mask the cynicism that arises from personal, "inside secret" knowledge that he or she's Self is very unlike that character.

Many cosplayers, however, sincerely consider their Selves to already possess the character's traits, thus by performing as Character, they are also broadcasting those traits of Self. One may choose to perform all such qualities of the character, no matter how desirable or undesirable, which would adequately "do justice" to the character and make the performance totally sincere.

Some choose to present Character in more selective measures, taking specific traits and magnifying them in the performance. For example, at Anime Expo, a cosplayer of DC Comics' Poison Ivy³³ was giving the audience the "sexy" aspect of the character, as she posed seductively for pictures and her attire consisted of just a leafy bikini. When she spoke to me in a backstage context, she mentioned other admirable aspects of the character that she identified with, such as Ivy's academic intelligence, which inspired a sincere love of the character. Yet when others approached her for a picture, all anyone could see in her performance was "sexy"—"smart" was nowhere to be found among the foliage of her personal front.

One sees that if a cosplayer wishes for public recognition in his or her performance while walking around the convention center—as someone put it, "Some people just do it for the attention"—then there are two factors that guarantee widespread reaction: skin and spectacle.

³³ One of the main female villains in the Batman universe, Poison Ivy is a former scientist whose genetic makeup has been altered to grant her an affinity with plants.

“Skin” would denote a sexually attractive costume. While talking with Poison Ivy, as well as other scantily-clad cosplayers of both genders, it became clear that with more skin showing, more attention is generated, and more attention equates more power on the part of the cosplayer.



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“Spectacle” denotes costumes that command audience attention via sheer presence. To quote Guy de Bord: “the society of the spectacle has continued to advance,” and such acts of cosplay clearly demonstrate its influence on the audience³⁵. Skin costumes are a source of spectacle by nature, but asexual costumes such as giant robots also command attention due to the sense of awe inspired by the knowledge that every inch of the massive ensemble was handmade by the wearer.

Spectacle costumes often come from a sincere, Self-generated pleasure in the act of constructing the costume, i.e.: “I just wanted to build that character’s clothing.” Tina, a cosplayer known for doing masked characters, explained in her private interview that not

³⁴ Image by Natasha Nesic, 2012.

³⁵ de Bord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Black and Red, 2000. Print.

only does she find pleasure in making the masks themselves, but more importantly they allow her to conceal the look of her recognizable self, so that she may enjoy the freedom to act as she wills—be *more* true to herself, in effect. Goffman addresses this: “In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves—the role we are striving to live up to—this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be” (3). Thus the costume, as a constructed piece, becomes another sincere expression of the personal Self.

Christine, another cosplayer at Otakon, was motivated to complete her Kirin³⁶ costume because she wanted to make an “epic tier” costume—so termed because the level of detail and craftsmanship is achievable only through painstaking labor and produces a visually impressive result. An “epic tier” accomplishment is a visual marker of the cosplay persona, informing the audience that the individual is a master-level cosplayer, and thus possesses the power accorded to that status. “Power of any kind must be clothed³⁷ in effective means of displaying it, and will have different effects depending on how it is dramatized” (Goffman 241). Unless commissioned by someone else, an epic costume’s awe-inspiring presence has power over the audience so that it is taken for granted to be a sincere demonstration of the Self’s technical skill, and therefore the audience does not question the veracity of the overall performance.

³⁶ The Chinese unicorn, originating in Eastern Asian mythology. Christine’s costume was an anthropomorphized kirin character shown briefly in the animé *Petshop of Horrors*.

³⁷ Pun count: 3



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Thus, we see how in the cosplay world, audience attention grants power to the cosplayer. The entire point of dressing up in full view of the public eye is so that one will be recognized as that character and ultimately be judged to have “done justice” to the fictional entity—a validation of the Self’s sincerity in the performance. Even if the audience has no idea who the character is, but still reacts favorably, marks the success of the costume itself. An ensemble delivered with extreme accuracy and aesthetic appeal may trump the obscurity of its source material simply by grace of the number of onlookers who are attracted to the sight. *Petshop of Horrors* is a relatively unknown *animé*, but Christine’s costume had the power to grab the audience’s attention through its sincere performance of dedication and skill. Later, when she entered the Hall Cosplay Contest, this power caused the judges to deem her worthy of a master-level craftsmanship award, which she now includes in her cosplay résumé, as it adds further to her overall cosplay persona status.

³⁸ Image by Natasha Nestic, 2012.

The intoxicating nature of power, stemming from copious audience attention, provokes the sincere desire within the individual to continue developing his or her cosplay persona. This leads to further involvement in the hobby as the individual goes on to produce increasingly skin-baring or spectacular ensembles. These subsequent costumes, however, may be more cynically performed than previous endeavors, since the reason for their construction lies more in the Self's pursuit of recognition and cosplay persona status, rather than the sincere compulsion to "do justice" to a loved character.

Yet not all cosplayers participate in such a fashion³⁹. We must return to Goffman's statement that performance is an expression of self, and this is the primary reason for cosplay. In the previous chapter, Cal and Max had placed Character before the Self, yet this was only on a visual level. Their personal Selves were still sincerely performed, since the characters of Sayaka and Madoka represented aspects of Cal and Max's personalities regardless of gender. As a pair, the two characters reflected the cosplayers' relationship; in our hotel room at AnimeNEXT, the interplay of Cal-to-Max and Max-to-Cal contained an intimate sense of "I'll lean on you and you'll lean on me," similarly expressed in the Sayaka-to-Madoka and Madoka-to-Sayaka exchanges in *Mahou Shoujo Madoka Magica*.

There were other intense cases of Character-Self identification that came forth in my private interviews. At Anime Expo, long-time cosplayer Mario articulated the level of contemplation that went into his character decisions. His sincerity was apparent as he cited aesthetics—as in, how much did he already look like the character, could he pass as that ethnicity, etc—and personality compatibility. Being a theatrical fellow, whose

³⁹ Pun count: 4

cosplay résumé boasts numerous MC gigs at conventions and events over the years, he is drawn to characters with similarly vibrant mannerisms. When he mentioned being unable to cosplay characters whom he admired and otherwise identified with, his reasons fell under the umbrella of aesthetics. “I’m a perfectionist.” If his physical Self does not suit a character, then that becomes the deciding factor, as the discrepancy in appearance would become a cynical element in the overall performance. However, there is still cynicism present in his character portrayals; unlike most cosplayers, Mario does not make his own costumes, preferring to commission them from other talented members of the cosplay community—thus the irony in his claim to perfectionism.

Mario’s approach to cosplay proves that no matter the individual’s intention, one cannot perform with complete sincerity or complete cynicism. Both must be present due to human nature, as proposed by Goffman:

The expressive coherence that is required in performances points out a crucial discrepancy between our all-too-human selves and our socialized selves. As human beings we are presumably creatures of variable impulse with moods and energies that change from one moment to the next. As characters put on for an audience, however, we must not be subject to ups and downs (56).

At a convention or other cosplay setting, the front region activity of constantly presenting as Character, despite the pervasive influence of the Self, makes cosplay an exhausting pursuit. The audience is primarily interested in interacting with the individual’s Character since it is the immediate visual engagement; to them, the Self is merely a vehicle by which the Character is produced. As the cosplayer becomes increasingly fatigued in his or her performance, the sense of sincerity decreases in proportion, with a mounting sense of cynicism tied to the stressed physical and emotional state of the Self.

Hence, a back region of a cosplay event is imperative. This may be a physically removed setting away from the audience, or the individual's switch to backstage behavior of the Self. This allows the cosplayer to willfully ignore the presence of Character on the internal scale, providing a respite from his or her performance. As Goffman writes,

By proper scheduling of one's performances, it is possible not only to keep one's audiences separated from each other (by appearing before them in different front regions or sequentially in the same region), but also to allow a few moments between performances so as to extricate oneself psychologically and physically from one personal front, while taking on another (138).

However, another respite may be found in the act of cosplay itself, as it may provide an outlet for the individual if he or she chooses a character that is completely unlike the Self. In that scenario, one has the relief of performing backstage behavior *ad libitum* because there is no personal expectation that it should match the front.

Long-time cosplayer Renee, who has represented the United States in World Cosplay Summit, the international cosplay competition, usually cosplays characters who fall into the "pretty girl" *bishoujo* or "pretty boy" *bishounen* type. The dancer's frame of her physical Self is aesthetically suited to the look, and many of these characters fall into her personal interests or identifying traits, thus the performance would be primarily sincere. However, in her interview, she informed me that her real pride and joy is her Garrus ensemble—a male alien creature from the video game *Mass Effect 2*, built like a linebacker. Its construction involved the sincere pleasure of using unfamiliar techniques for the mask and armor as she crafted for herself a new body that, when worn, obscured her physical Self, and with it her renowned cosplay persona. At conventions, those who knew her by acquaintance on the cosplay circuit were successfully hoodwinked, as she was able to pass them unrecognized. Like Tina, she found freedom in anonymity, in

being wholly “other” from the character archetypes that comprise the rest of her cosplay history. One would think that the performance would therefore have been extremely cynical, but Renee also loves the character of Garrus himself. The experience was an opportunity to enjoy accurately—and sincerely—representing him, while deliberately—cynically—misrepresenting her Self.



Although my interviews and queries generated backstage behavior, all participants presented rational Selves, articulating specifically what drew them to the characters they have cosplayed, and why. This manner of sincere backstage presentation comes from years of cosplay experience, associating with similarly levelheaded individuals in the community. Many of those interviewed were also in their mid-to-late twenties or older, an age bracket in which one has a life outside of cosplay due to work or other interests.

⁴⁰ “Umister.” *American Cosplay Paradise*. ACPParadise.com Network, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

What these cosplayers have developed is the performance of what Goffman calls, “decorum,” in which one maintains behaviors that reflect the values of the community. “The performance of an individual may be seen as the effort to give the appearance that his activity in the region maintains and embodies certain standards” (Goffman 107). The standards here refer to the main values of the cosplay subculture: accuracy, aesthetics, sportsmanship, and having fun.

By adhering to cosplay decorum, one may separate the high-level cosplayers from low-level ones, as those of a lower level are more likely to behave in a manner that is socially rejected, ignoring “rules regarding non-interference and non-molestation of others, rules regarding sexual propriety, rules regarding respect for sacred places, etc” (Goffman 107). This subjects them to derision by outsiders as well as other members of the cosplay community, yet it is encouraged by those who occupy the same base cosplay status: less stable individuals who would contribute to cosplay’s negative perception—instigators of the “freak” label, as it were.

Even in the self-professed nerd community, the line of social acceptability must be drawn somewhere. “When a performer refuses to keep his place, whether it is of higher or lower rank than the audience, we may expect that the director, if there is one, and the audience may well become ill-disposed towards him” (Goffman 191). To quote a member of the nerd community, as an audience to cosplay: “If people were going around acting like the character all day long, that was *weird*.”

The sincerity of the performance, the degree of commitment to presenting as Character comes down to how seriously does the cosplayer take his or her role as an impersonation of the character. In my on-the-fly queries at conventions, three

individuals—10% of the total participants—responded with total presentation as their characters, which is known as being “in character,” or IC. The most convincing performance went to a James cosplayer at Anime Expo, who introduced himself with his actual name, Collin, but proceeded to mimic the tonality and mannerisms of his character as he answered my questions of, “Who is James?” and “How do you feel as James?” He informed me that he was a grunt from Team Rocket, but gunning for a promotion; the second question provoked a melodramatic wail: “Frankly, I feel like a failure! All I want to do is catch that Pikachu!”⁴¹ It was as if James had stepped out of the brightly animated *Pokémon* world and into the convention center for our viewing pleasure. Considering how cosplayers possess the inherent desire for power garnered through attention, clearly

⁴¹ From the *animé Pokémon*, James and his partner, Jessie, make up a duo of villains from the evil Team Rocket. Their ongoing mission is to capture Pikachu, the electric mouse sidekick of the show’s hero, Ash Ketchum. However, the protagonists comically thwart each attempt; the end of the episode sends Jessie and James skyward with the fading cry: “Looks like Team Rocket’s blasting off again!”
The Pokémon Wiki. Wikia, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

the performance was for my benefit as well as his.



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“When a participant conveys something through interaction, we expect him to communicate only through the lips of the character he has chosen to project, openly addressing all of his remarks to the whole interaction so that all persons present are given equal status as recipients of communication” (178) says Goffman. As such, since he began the query with the performance, I expected Collin to answer the entire query “in character” or “IC.” However, once the questions focused directly on the cosplayer as an individual—“What kind of reaction do you get from guys? How about girls?”—the James persona was dropped and backstage behavior ensued. With complete nonchalance and sincerity, Collin answered the rest of the query, commenting on how well he and his Jessie-cosplaying girlfriend were received by other convention attendees.

⁴² Image by Natasha Nestic, 2012.

This type of backstage dialogue came from Collin having perceived my Self-related questions as an opening to disengage himself from the Character end of the scale.

One can become so habituated to one's front region activity (and front region character) that it may be necessary to handle one's relaxation from it as a performance. One may feel obliged, when backstage, to act out of character in a familiar fashion and this can come to be more of a pose than the performance for which it was meant to provide a relaxation (Goffman 134).

Collin was cosplaying James throughout the entire exchange because he was continually in costume, yet depending on the context—my questions initiating either sincere front region, or cynical backstage behavior—his presentation fluctuated between Self and Character. Thus, we see that the cosplay performance is a state of awareness governed by context.

But “cosplay” is not a switch that can be turned on and off the way that Goffman assumes for the mainstream, as the individual shifts between front and back regions. The “play” half of cosplay is relegated to specific settings, the physical zones where one is explicitly in costume and therefore has access to the character as a persona. One cannot point at someone and command, “You there, cosplay!” since it is a state of being instigated by the presence of the costume—the individual will be cosplaying from the moment they are dressed. In fact, ordering someone to cosplay on the spot may jolt the individual all the way to the Self end of the Self-Character scale, activating the awareness of the Self as a distinct entity from the character, and thus rendering the performance highly cynical.

If the exchange with Collin had taken place without the James costume, the dynamic would have been completely different. Collin would not have been cosplaying,

regardless of which persona he assumed, because his apparel served as the visual reminder of Character needed for the cosplay context.

In this particular situation, Collin was also demonstrating the “play” aspect of cosplay in its most lighthearted, informal sense—almost cynical in its performance, but wherein the individual may still derive a sincere pleasure from it. As he received the power from attention associated with the costume, Collin kept up the act by pretending to be an actual representation of James for amusement’s sake—cynically humoring himself and me, the audience.

Cynical cosplay performances may also appear at a convention or gathering. This was evident at the *Pokémon* mass photoshoot that took place at Anime Expo. During this type of photoshoot, cosplayers whose characters are all from the same series or fictional universe assemble at a predetermined time and location. The organizer of the shoot runs down a list of categories to be photographed by onlookers: character, pairing, gender, origin, and so on. When each category is called out, the corresponding cosplayers dash to perform Character as sincerely IC or cynically OOC as possible. They strike a pose in the central space of the shoot, and hold steady for about sixty seconds as cameras flash to capture the tableau. Then the organizer calls out another category for the next round of cosplayers to perform. Characters and categories often overlap, allowing individuals to pose repeatedly for multiple combinations of group shots. Within the days following the convention, attendees upload their photos to public galleries, thus allowing cosplayers to obtain pictures of themselves in cosplay without having to arrange a private, personal photoshoot.

At the *Pokémon* shoot, I overheard a Brock cosplayer remark how the previous year he had failed to get the phone number of a Sailor Venus cosplayer, though at least he had managed to get a picture with her. Now, in *Pokémon*, Brock as a character is known for constantly chasing the ladies in spite of his horrible luck with them. Hearing that this Brock cosplayer had similar misfortune in the female department, the sincerity of his performance was revealed. Presenting as Brock was an expression of the traits that his Self shared with the character. The cosplayer's actual costume indicated a lesser cosplayer persona status, as it showed an extensive lack of both accuracy and aesthetics and would thus be as marked as sub-par or cynical in the eyes of more experienced fellow cosplayers. Instead of an actual wig, he wore a construction paper hat shaped like Brock's spiky hair, and his clothes were pre-made garments that could be purchased from any commercial store.

Yet at a karaoke contest later that day, the Brock cosplayer captured the adoration of the audience with a rousing rendition of one of his character's songs. He belted it out like a champion, as raucously as Brock himself, and every verse was met with approving whistles and applause from the attendees, which contained an equal mix of cosplayers and street clothes. It was a performance that utterly convinced the audience of its sincerity. The individual's genuine enthusiasm for the character transcended the shoddy workmanship of his attire, inspiring the audience to accept his performance and react with praise. In essence, the costume's lack of accuracy and aesthetics were ignored because his presentation of Character was true to the concept of Brock, therefore his performance was accurate and aesthetically pleasing.

The karaoke number was an instance of real-life role-playing⁴³ in cosplay. However, it is exceedingly rare to find individuals who take the extra step beyond this sincere Character state of performance, actually believing that they embody that character entirely. For as Goffman says, “We find that the individual may attempt to induce the audience to judge him and the situation in a particular way, and he may seek this judgment as an ultimate end in itself, and yet he may not completely believe that he deserves the valuation of self that he asks for or that the impression of reality that he fosters is valid” (21). This further proves the impossibility of total sincerity or cynicism in one’s performance. Brock and Collin portrayed their characters with the greatest gusto, but when the context shifted to a non-performative sphere, they slid comfortably back into behaving as their personal Selves. Even in the heat of performance, they were still aware of *not* actually being the character. The Self-Character scale thus serves as an auto-regulator that keeps the concept of Self—“Who am I at this moment in time?”—tied to the performance, preventing the individual from losing him- or herself in the role of Character.

Private photoshoots and judged competitions offer additional front region settings in which the cosplayer may perform an intense expression of Character. In these settings, the cosplayer engages in a public one-on-one with his or her character for audience approval or disapproval.

⁴³ To be distinguished from Live Action Role Playing, or LARP, which is the practice of taking Dungeons and Dragons-type role-playing games and executing them in the actual world. Like cosplay, it involves creating a character and impersonating him or her, but this is for the sake of an organized narrative game. *LARP.com*. The Live Action Role Playing Community, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

For private photoshoots, the cosplayer and photographer work together to create a real-world representation of the fictional universe from which the character originates. As such, they are not necessarily located in open or natural areas, but the space must appear free of human presence. This is so as to maintain the illusion that the shoot is a sincere performance of the character, taking place within that character's fictional world. Even if that world is familiar and public, such as a city street or a hotel room, the background must be empty of passers-by in order to simulate a world that focuses on its own characters as inhabitants. This exclusivity is what makes private shoots preferable to cosplayers, for it produces the most sincere effect of being submerged in the fictional universe—the individual is in a controlled, character-centric environment. It also offers the opportunity to showcase one's cosplay persona without the heckling and rowdiness of mass photoshoots.

However, the enclosure causes its own effect on the Self-Character scale. The more a cosplayer focuses on accurately and attractively representing the fictional persona, the further the individual may find his or her Self from the Character. “As Sartre suggested: ‘The attentive pupil who wishes to be attentive, his eyes riveted on the teacher, his ears open wide, so exhausts himself in playing the attentive role that he ends up by no longer hearing anything’ ” (Goffman 33). If the cosplayer gets caught up in the element of Self-presentation during the shoot, worrying about an unsteady wig or exposed seams, then he or she loses sight of the “play” aspect of cosplay: personal enjoyment, lack of seriousness, and having fun. This also results in losing the capacity to be sincere in the performance and unable to truly enter a Character frame of mind. Thus a

shoot has the potential to become an act of deliberated, cynical Self, rather than the expression of sincere Character that has been originally intended.



The above image shows Tina as a character from the *animé Bleach*. At first glance, we perceive the immediate visual layer, which is the character itself. Upon this sight, fans of the series instantly know who and what is being represented: “Hichigo”; a super-powered alter ego belonging to Ichigo, *Bleach*’s protagonist. In addition to Hichigo’s appearance and narrative within the series, other elements of the character layer include the fan discourse and popular knowledge surrounding the character. The

⁴⁴ “Pork Buns.” *American Cosplay Paradise*. ACPParadise.com Network, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013

name “Hichigo,” for example, is a fan-produced moniker derived from “Hollow⁴⁵ Ichigo.”

A second glance offers Character, the cosplayer’s personal interpretation of the fictional entity. Tina’s take on Hichigo is a product of long-time obsession, as she has made a total of four separate Hichigo costumes over the course of her cosplay career, each being one of his various incarnations throughout the series. Hichigo is a particular favorite because it plays on her Self’s love of masks, and she enjoys the similarities in their personalities. With this as motivation to sincerely “do justice” to the character, she has completed the costume to the highest degree of accuracy and aesthetic appeal, producing a wearable garment and prop ensemble that resemble professional artifacts.

Meanwhile, the image also reflects Tina as a cosplayer, or her “cosplay persona.” Here, the construction, application, and presentation prove her years of experience and artistic skill, altogether which are recognized by both fans and cosplayers as the hallmarks of a high-level cosplayer. Given her established reputation of cosplaying Hichigo and other masked characters, such inferences in regards to her cosplay persona could be made by those who have encountered her via the cosplay community, whether in person at a convention or her online presence⁴⁶.

Tina’s cosplay persona is also granted a high status from her past involvement in cosplay competitions, such as the Hall Cosplay Contest that Christine entered with her Kirin costume. These judged competitions have two types: hall contests and Masquerade

⁴⁵ “Hollows” being the supernatural nemeses found in Bleach. The wild “Hollow Ichigo” serves as an antithesis to the stalwart, hero-type protagonist. Tina fondly calls him “batshit insane.”

⁴⁶ “Pork Buns.” *American Cosplay Paradise*. ACParadise.com Network, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013

Last night I drew a funny man. tumblr, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

events, and are organized by the convention event staff. High-level cosplayers with reputable cosplay personas are pulled from the community to serve as judges, usually individuals who have many cosplay awards under their own belts.

Hall contests are conducted in relative privacy. Upon entering the judging room, the contestant fills out a form that describes how he or she made the costume, citing the original design, methodology, and sources of inspiration. The judging room is removed from the rest of the convention, which means that the true test is how the individual performs the sincerity of their love for the character while in a back region setting.

When examining the garment, judges look for the earmarks of a successful costume: accuracy and aesthetics, as detailed in the previous chapters on making and wearing cosplay. The contestant is encouraged to explain as much of the construction process as possible, as resourcefulness and the use of unorthodox methods and materials is considered valuable in a cosplayer—to return to the equation in Chapter 1, quantifying the skill and effort that produces the success a costume, the most unusual and cost-effective measures are likely to receive greatest praise. This, however, does not undermine traditional sewing, wig-making, and prop-building practices, which are also rewarded if they have produced an impeccable ensemble. By understanding the process of the costume's construction, the judges may then gauge the level of sincerity in the cosplayer's performance.

The other type of competition, the Masquerade, is a massive nighttime event open to all convention attendees. Abbreviated as “Masqs,” these spectacles are a combination of a front region hall cosplay contest and a variety show. Unlike the constant performance of Self and Character as the individual cosplays within the convention

center, this is the opportunity to choreograph a performance of Character that may be presented onstage. The website for Anime Boston, touted as “The Northeast’s Largest *Animé* Convention,” describes it as: “The Masquerade is a Saturday night theatrical performance in which groups of fans display their costuming and acting skills. The participants create and perform short skits based on their favorite anime or video game. These skits can be dramatic, comedic, dance-based or just plain wacky! A panel of staff and celebrity judges present awards to the best performances and costumes. The Masquerade is just as fun to watch as it is to participate in!”⁴⁷

Each convention has its own Masquerade traditions and rules, but all follow a basic format. Unlike the hall cosplay contest, Masquerade participants must register online in advance to compete, and if they do not wish to be judged on craftsmanship—for those individuals whose costumes had to be purchased rather than handmade—their skits may be entered in a division that focuses only on the stage performance itself. The “celebrity judges” are usually voice actors or other noted faces in the *animé* and comic industry. They form an audience with a half-inside, half-outside perspective; they are no strangers to fandom and convention culture, yet they are not cosplayers themselves. Their validation of an individual’s performance carries more value than that of the fellow cosplayers acting as the other judges—if these “celebrities” deem the contestant’s performance sincere, then a greater level of status-power is accorded to the cosplay persona.

The Masquerade also allows cosplayers to perform Character on a grand scale. Here, instead of the immediate performance that occurs while cosplaying in the ever-

⁴⁷ *Anime Boston – The Northeast’s Largest Convention*. The New England Anime Society, Inc, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

shifting contexts of the convention hall, they may present their fictional entity as an actual world manifestation before a static audience. Thus, many skits are based on the premise of, “Wouldn’t it be funny if X happened in this series?” This grants countless possibilities, as long as the final performance fits within both the standards of the cosplay community and the convention’s standards of appropriateness. This can be as mild as choreographing a dance sequence to the latest popular tune, or as nonsensical as enacting “crossovers” which involve characters from unrelated series meeting in person. Some skits have no plot at all, and are usually met with disapproval due to the inherent cynicism of such a performance.

In order to ensure an award-winning skit, the individual or group must incorporate a number of elements: flawless costumes, a coherent plot, and seamless choreography. Sincerely performed, such a skit will elicit a favorable reaction from the audience of judges and attendees.

There are often other Character-performing opportunities at conventions, such as Cosplay Chess, in which cosplayers act as life-size chess pieces directed by a separate set of players, interacting and doing battle as the situation demands. Here, it is imperative for the pieces and players to be IC during the whole stage performance, as this creates an overall narrative for the game.

For the older crowd, some conventions offer a Dating Game in which Character-performing cosplayers participate in a faux game show, where the goal is to have two characters find romance—regardless of what series they are from—while shooting off as

many sexual innuendos as possible⁴⁸. The cosplayers perform both IC and OOC behavior with varying cynicism or sincerity, depending on what type of performance will entertain the audience the most. If a character is not given to sexual innuendos or otherwise amusing behavior, it is up to the cosplayer whether to maintain sincerity to the original entity, which will be less entertaining, or to act cynically OOC and win power from a more favorable audience reaction.

Unlike on the convention floor, where the cosplayer's personal Self may be performed in conjunction with Character, Masquerades and other such theatrical events serve to highlight the character as a construct of the material garment and props, brought to life for a captive audience by the cosplayer's performative interpretation.

However, these events can only be conducted live and in person at the convention or other cosplay setting—front regions literally grounded in the physical, actual world. In a cosplayer's ongoing quest for audience validation, attention, and the resulting cosplay persona power, he or she must seek greater exposure elsewhere.

⁴⁸ Given that many cosplayers fall into the unfortunate social category of sexual inactivity, this type of event carries with it the caveat of copious second-hand embarrassment among audience members. This is avoidable if, like in the case of Brock's karaoke venture at Anime Expo, the cosplayer pulls off his or character so pleasingly that no one cares.

CHAPTER 4

“Play”: Part Two

The audience’s presence is a necessary element in the function of the Self-Character scale. When an individual steps out into a public space wearing a costume, the sight immediately invites the audience’s gaze, so that the wearer of the costume must anticipate and withstand a multitude of stares from both inside and outside observers. Convention culture has developed such that it is not enough to simply be seen in costume—it is expected that the audience will be inclined to request the individual for a picture as well.

For those who do not engage in formal competitions such as the Masquerade, this practice of picture-taking is the ultimate validation of a cosplayer’s performance. For fans, cosplayers are part of the convention experience, representing the audience’s chance to interact with their favorite characters in the actual world. The cosplayer thus serves as a stand-in for the character, and as seen during Brock’s karaoke spectacle at Anime Expo, a sincere Character performance will cause the audience to ignore the construction or quality of the costume itself in favor of simply enjoying the character’s supposed presence. Thus, in order to capture that experience of enjoyment, as well as collect proof of a fictional entity’s “real-life” presence, the audience may record these successful cosplay performances via camera, video, phone, live stream, etc.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Before recording, it is considered polite to ask the cosplayer’s permission first. This serves two purposes. The primary purpose allows the cosplayer to knowingly consent to have his or her image potentially made public. The secondary purpose is a social cue for the individual to pose as the character, so that he or she may produce an image that satisfies both the cosplayer and the photographer. Additionally, some cosplayers may be

With the audience and cosplayer free to directly interact in person, the convention thus represents not only a front region setting for cosplay, but the central point of this subculture's physical community. Lesser physical community settings exist during the late autumn/early winter, considered the cosplay "off" season, as fewer conventions take place during this time. These lesser settings are usually cosplayer-arranged gatherings or photoshoots in a public space. Yet unlike the all-inclusive atmosphere of conventions, these events are smaller and characterized by a sense of exclusivity, based on the social ties—markers of cosplay persona status—among the cosplayers who took it upon themselves to arrange the gathering.

Physical cosplay communities exist for limited periods of time; conventions last a few days, and gatherings merely hours. By recording their performances in costume, rendering memories as images, fans and cosplayers have the means to extend the presence of their community—and their cosplay personas—across time and space. This empowers the cosplay persona as it generates excitement for future cosplay endeavors and the conventions where they will be performed, thus perpetuating the cosplay/convention phenomenon as individuals may be continually planning the next costume for the next convention.

attending to their own agenda at the time of the request, and are unwilling to stop and pose. Therefore the question permits a civil refusal, so that all parties may go on with their business. Those who are not familiar with the cosplay community, such as curious photographers from mainstream media, betray themselves as outsiders by recording whatever strikes their fancy, without asking permission from their subjects—a social blunder. This results in out-of-context shots that do little justice to the cosplayer, for they deny him or her the chance to pose and thereby perform a sincere expression of Character. Such candid images—i.e.: what is seen in *Fandomania*—portray the un-costumed Self lurking under the garment, reducing Character presence to suit whatever social commentary is intended by the one behind the lens.

In order for these recordings to be successful, however, they must be accessible for the community at large, beyond the physical gatherings and events.

Enter the Internet. Like the Force, there is a Light Side and a Dark Side.

On the Light Side, the Internet is the catalyst enticing fans into the hobby as they learn that yes, there exists a community in which they can dress up as their favorite characters and be accepted—or better yet, *praised* for the sincerity of their performance. It also encourages their continued participation in the subculture as they suddenly have access to other individuals who exhibit similar interests and passions, plus the ever-morphing knowledge base from which they may learn to improve and progress within the hobby. Regardless of physical location, cosplayers may virtually unite over the performative region of the web. *Homestuck*, for example, is considered to be a purely American phenomenon, yet one may find its characters cosplayed in France thanks to *l'Internet* granting universal access to the series, as well as the surrounding fandom⁵⁰.

Since the Internet is an international region of performance, cosplayers may be viewed by anyone with Internet access—inside audience members and outsiders of the cosplay community alike.

The scope of this audience generates a vast viewing pool. When a cosplayer, pursuing the power of audience attention, manages to saturate this viewing pool with his or her own image or cosplay persona, “cosplay fame” occurs. Cosplay fame makes the cosplay persona recognizable, lauded across the Internet and in-person at conventions as they deliver an overall appealing or engaging presentation both on- and offline. With this

⁵⁰ *Facebook.com*. Facebook, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

type of reputation within the cosplay community, the individual's cosplay persona develops a personal audience who may follow his or her every move.

To maintain this audience, individuals may use social media to document their cosplay activity in extensive detail throughout the year, sincerely performing their cosplay persona's dedication and involvement in the hobby. Facebook, Twitter, tumblr, and YouTube are the most popular sites to broadcast one's cosplay persona, as well as cosplay-centric forums doubling as costume portfolios, i.e.: Cosplay.com and American Cosplay Paradise. Each of these virtual settings carries a different audience, which means that most cosplayers are active on more than one website at a time. This results in what Goffman terms "audience segregation," in which "the individual ensures that those before whom he plays one of his parts will not be the same individuals before whom he plays a part in another setting" (Goffman 49). The cosplay audience is thus segregated according to virtual front region. The main four social media platforms mentioned above allow the Self to be performed with informal, as-you-will postings, for the audience is nearly universal. Cosplay-specific websites, with the portfolio option, offer a front region where the individual can post photoshoot images that may more effectively show off the performances of Character.

In the virtual setting, cosplayers may post anything and everything related to cosplay. One may update his or her page with reference images and pictures of WIPs—shorthand for "works in progress"—of upcoming costumes, along with experiments and tutorials that, by being made public, ensure the continued evolution of the online cosplay knowledge base. It is also common to contribute inspirational posts featuring fellow cosplayers or future "bucket list" costumes.

Thus, the individuals of the cosplay community exhibit their cosplay persona to the world. By maintaining an influx of updates, the cosplayer receives validation for their sincere performance, as friends and fans lend their support through their feedback on each post. For example, Cassi's Facebook status mentioned in Chapter 1, in which she remarked on having gotten blood on her Castiel costume, was met with several "Likes" and joking comments about accuracy, her audience offering a self-deprecating and slightly cynical awareness of cosplay's many hazards.

Yet where there is cosplay fame, there also lurks cosplay infamy, and the dreaded—but secretly relished—: "drama."

Within the cosplay community, "drama" has little in common with Shakespeare, although it may similarly involve cross-dressing and scandal. It begins with a social transgression, which Goffman calls a "scene", in which the individual goes beyond standard backstage behavior or other inoffensive expressions of cynicism, and "acts in such a way as to destroy or seriously threaten the polite appearance of consensus, and while he may not act simply in order to create such dissonance, he acts with the knowledge that this kind of dissonance is likely to result" (210). Among cosplayers, this dissonance may be then publicized throughout the physical and virtual regions of performance, by virtue of rumors and trolling⁵¹. The initial transgression may be as minor as a rude comment on an online forum, but some instances of conflict have led to ongoing grudges and the development of heady inter-cosplayer politics that would make Jane Austen blush. These events may be contained within the cosplayer's immediate

⁵¹ Thanks to decades of this practice on the Internet, "the definition of trolling (through eliciting an argument) has devolved into anyone trying to elicit an argument altogether." "Trolling." *Encyclopaedia Dramatica*. MediaWiki, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

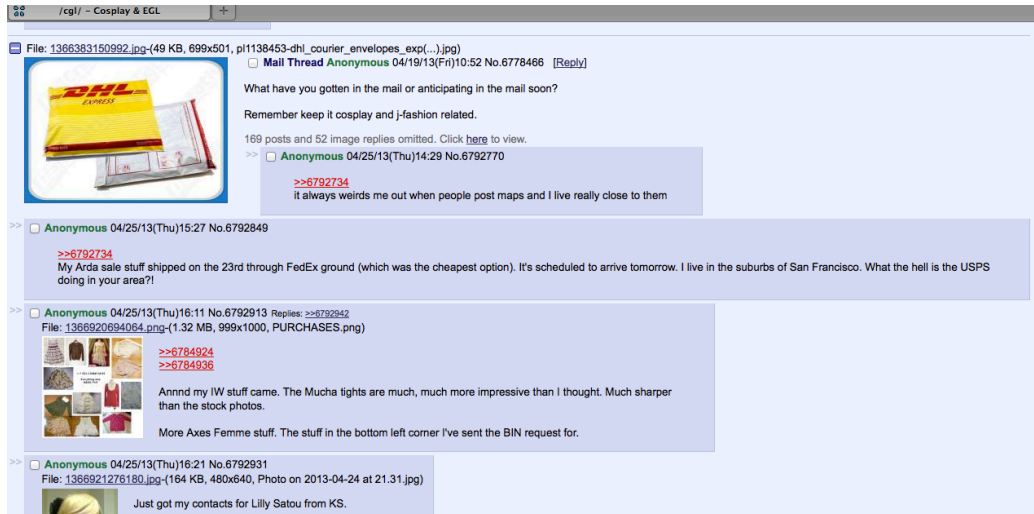
social circle, but there is equal chance of it becoming spread across the Internet thanks to a loose-lipped friend or cryptic Tweet.

Thus, the Internet's Dark Side functions as a public back region of the cosplay performance, where cosplayers may engage in backstage behavior knowing that the audience is still present. This does not stop them from derogating the audience as part of that backstage behavior, sparking drama by trolling and insulting other cosplayers—an overall cynical performance of the Self's less admirable qualities.

Among the many virtual backstages that provoke such drama, there is a particular dark hole of the Internet dedicated to trolling cosplayers: the /cgl/ board on 4chan.org⁵², short for “cosplay and gothic Lolita⁵³.” This forum, located in Anonymous's motherland, is a haven for trolls and a minefield for unsuspecting cosplayers, the latter of whom are swiftly introduced to the unsavory side of their beloved hobby. Although some /cgl/ threads contain valuable cosplay tips and information, similar to family-friendly forums such as Cosplay.com, the majority of the board riffs on cosplayers in a take-no-prisoners free-for-all. Race, craftsmanship, body type, sex, class—all may be rendered cynical in the eyes of this audience, and thereby subject to ruthless criticism. Due to the anonymous nature of the board, plus the ambiguity of online dialects, it is often impossible to discern whether this criticism is made in jest, or if the commenter sincerely finds fault with the individual being examined.

⁵² The online forum known for spawning Anonymous, a community of hackers, trolls and bored teenagers. It contains several sub-boards for specific interests such as comics, animé, and cooking.

Olson, Parmy. *We Are Anonymous: Inside the Hacker World of LulzSec, Anonymous, and the Global Cyber Insurgency*. Little, Brown and Company, 2012. Print.



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In this situation, cosplay fame can offer the benefit of “white knights,” or fans defending the cosplayer whose reputation is at stake. Such is the power that comes from a high-status cosplay persona. “When performers make a slip of some kind, clearly exhibiting a discrepancy between the fostered impression and a disclosed reality, the audience may tactfully ‘not see’ the slip or readily accept the excuse that is offered for it” (Goffman 231). More often than not, however, the fans’ sincere effort serves only to bait the cynical denizens of /cgl/ even further. The drama thus escalates until someone gets too bored to type another response.

One sees how cosplay fame, like Hollywood fame, allows cosplayers to attract drama like a magnet. Sometimes this can occur without apparent rhyme or reason, as if the status of the target’s cosplay persona gives the audience a paparazzi-esque disregard for personal privacy.

I interviewed a former cosplayer who, during her “cosplay famous” days, had been at a café with her friend in New York City and later discovered that someone had

⁵⁴ /cgl/. 4chan, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013

snapped a photo of them, which was posted on /cgl/ for the public's viewing pleasure. This picture had nothing to do with cosplay. Both girls were out of costume, engaged in a typical urban social activity, fully and sincerely presenting as their personal Selves. Drama ensued; the social transgression of the individual behind the lens—invasion of privacy—was spread across the Internet as the offended cosplayers posted their outrage, further compounded by responses from other friends and viewers of the image.

At Otakon, I interviewed another long-time cosplayer, Rob, and the topic of cosplay fame came up frequently. His cosplay persona, “Robtachi Kosplaywerks” has its own page on Facebook, with 50 Likes as of this writing. For him to be considered quantifiably “cosplay famous,” his page would need at least 100 Likes, yet when one disregards attention, validation, and power, these Likes can be empty numbers.

As Rob and I discussed the pros and cons of cosplay fame, it had to be asked: what was the point? After all, cosplay fame seems only to foster increasingly cynical performances of Self and Character, serving Goffman's point that “to the degree that the individual maintains a show before others that he himself does not believe, he can come to experience a special kind of alienation from self and a special kind of wariness of others” (236). This emotional distance goes against one of the main values of cosplay: *having fun*.

Cosplay fame requires full-time performance of the cosplay persona, a similarly exhausting pursuit as maintaining Character when in costume, for it ultimately becomes a constant, cynical Self performance. As described by Goffman: “The individual may privately maintain standards of behavior which he does not personally believe in, maintaining these standards because of a lively belief that an unseen audience is present

who will punish deviations from these standards. In other words, an individual may be his own audience or may imagine an audience to be present” (81-82). The cosplay persona has become so strong that it ceases to be a social status hovering over the individual on the Self-Character scale—it becomes ingrained in the Self. The cosplay famous individual thus finds him- or herself in a perpetual state of cosplay, constantly checking his or her performance before that real, virtual, or imagined audience.

Definitely not having fun.

In my earlier exchange with Mario at Anime Expo, he offered a plethora of sociological reasons for the phenomenon of cosplay fame and its subsequent drama. Cosplayers originate from the “nerd” or “geek” community, a marginalized social group marked as such because it is largely composed of individuals whose behavior demonstrates a disregard for social norms. These individuals are disempowered by being excluded from mainstream culture, which may thus foster a desire for wide-scale attention and the resulting power. That desire may be then assuaged within the safe performative setting of the convention and cosplay community. Once there, they may perform their nerdiness—their passion for fandom—in the company of their fellows within the subculture. This audience is obliged to react in a positive manner due to the sincerity of their performance, whereas *any* performance of nerdiness in mainstream society would be shunned, regardless of sincerity or cynicism.

Furthermore, the cosplay scene maintains its insularity due to the stereotype of escapism and childish fantasy associated with dressing as a specific character and its ensuing persona. This marginalization instills a knee-jerk reaction of, “I’m a person,

too!” By cosplaying, the individual may thus validate his or her sense of personhood and Self.

Furthermore, cosplay famous individuals perpetuate their hobby’s alien reputation by allowing their cosplay personas to take over Self presentation, acting as the subculture’s spokesmen on social media—which is received directly by the mainstream media. As the world at large witnesses the cynical performance of the cosplay famous, it is no wonder that artists such as Dorfman fire back a skewed perception of cosplay in general.

There are other side effects that may result from becoming cosplay famous, as individuals’ personal Selves are added to the virtual display. When posts on costume progress become infused with remarks on home life and relationships, the cosplay persona and individual may coalesce into a single Self, which has been fueled by positive feedback from the online audience.

Cassi, for example, has elected to use tumblr as her primary cosplay page, where she describes herself as:

Cassi
NYC area cosplayer and beginner photographer
IRL: Travel Agent
Loves: Cosplay, sewing, reading, traveling, photography
Fandoms: Doctor Who, Sherlock Holmes (in every way), SuperWhoLock, Sengoku Basara, Sailor Moon, Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, DC Comics, Disney⁵⁵

At a glance, we are informed of her location, occupation, and passions. The blog centers itself around these elements. We see images of her costumes in various stages of completion, post-costume-completion photoshoots, and inspirational pictures related to

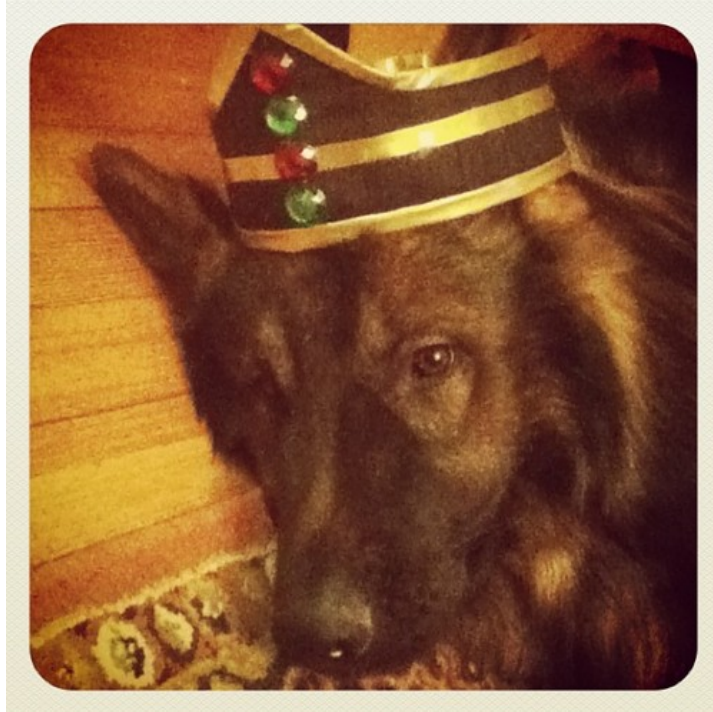
⁵⁵ *Adventures with you*. tumblr, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013

the various fandoms of interest. Through cosplay, one sees how Cassi is able to participate in the subcultures of the series she loves, while sincerely performing the Self as she presents herself within these spheres.

A Google search of her cosplay nickname, “Kiyasea,” yields additional cosplay-centric accounts on Deviant ART, Cosplay.com, Livejournal, and American Cosplay Paradise, altogether an extensive cosplay résumé. However, her “personal” social media profiles—Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, plus a separate tumblr—contain a similar amount of cosplay-related news and updates as those sites meant specifically for cosplay. Many images have been cross-posted, so that an in-progress shot of a wig may be found not only on her cosplay tumblr, but on her Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram accounts as well. All audiences of these accounts—no matter the proximity to the cosplay community—are thus able to access her current state of affairs.

These updates also contain smidgens of Self as we glimpse her personal life. In one image found on both Twitter and the cosplay tumblr, her dog looks balefully at the camera with a future costume’s crown perched on his head. It appears that the home setting has become another front region for cosplay. Goffman notes: “A price, of course, must be paid for the privilege of giving a performance on one’s home ground; one has the opportunity of conveying information about oneself through scenic means but no opportunity of concealing the kinds of facts that are conveyed by scenery” (96). By performing on the home front, Cassi gives the audience a Self-performance that leaves little to the imagination⁵⁶.

⁵⁶ *Facebook.com*. Facebook, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013
Adventures with you. tumblr, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013
“Kiyasea.” *American Cosplay Paradise*. ACParadise.com Network, 2013. Web.



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Due to her lack of awards and public recognition that would grant status to her cosplay persona, Cassi is not actually cosplay famous. Yet a number of famous cosplayers may be found among her 222⁵⁸ Facebook friends. Their pages and social media profiles are similarly constructed to Cassi's, the only difference being that they offer a more constant influx of updates—proof that their cosplay persona and personal Self have indeed merged. For the cosplay famous, only those within their most intimate social circles will have access to the Self that is unrelated to cosplay. Thus dominated by the cosplay persona, the personal Self is reduced to a forgettable entity that the greater audience of the virtual region may ignore entirely.

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Twitter. Twitter, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

Livejournal. Livejournal, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

"Kiyasea" *Deviant ART*. Deviant ART, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

⁵⁷ *Instagram*. Instagram, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

⁵⁸ As of this writing.

When the audience and the cosplayer develop this type of relationship, it affects the audience's perception of the characters that the cosplayer has become known for, which had initially attracted them to that cosplayer. Cosplay famous individuals come to represent their own brand of Character, so that fans and anti-fans regard them as sincere representations of the actual fandom characters whom they portray, and deeply associate them with those characters.

Some fans approach a famous cosplayer with the expectation that they will be talking to the character rather than a fellow human being. Even among cosplayers aware of the Self-Character distinction, this can evolve to the point where inter-cosplayer relationships can be forged or broken simply by logic of, "You're the X to my Y." Translated: "You are like Character X and I am like Character Y, and these characters have a type of relationship that resembles ours, which I hope for us to emulate." One recalls Cal and Max as Madoka and Sayaka; their relationship functions so that each is audience to the other's sincere performance of Character.

This type of relationship between cosplayers and characters may become perilous. In extreme cases, sincere audience association of the individual with the character results in lasting consequences should the relationship turn sour. Grudges against certain series or characters may spawn due to an individual equating those fictional entities with another individual. This is particularly dangerous for couples like Cal and Max, who often choose to cosplay characters that are romantically involved, such as Cooking Mama and Cooking Papa, from the Nintendo game *Cooking Mama*. In the event of a breakup, they may come away from it with an altered perception of the fandom from which they

used to cosplay together. This is the cosplay equivalent of Our Song Syndrome⁵⁹ and, like other social practices within the hobby, is dependent upon the individual Self's capacity for rational behavior⁶⁰.

Cosplay fame may be as fraught with excitement and intrigue as the Hollywood fame of mainstream culture, yet unlike the celebrities populating our tabloid, famous cosplayers do not win monetary profit from their notoriety. In fact, cosplay is guaranteed to be a negative investment. The individual spends time and money on making the costume, plus the additional cost of attending a convention—badge, transportation, lodging, food, etc. Someone who is cosplay famous may accumulate a very impressive cosplay résumé in the form of exquisite costumes, awards, and photoshoots, but none of this receives lucrative compensation. Their audiences may still worship them as they continue to win more power and social status within the subculture, but this cultivated adoration fills no wallets. It is thus understood in the cosplay community that one cannot make a living off of cosplay—one makes a living *in order to* cosplay.

There are a few individuals, however, who have successfully capitalized on their cosplay fame and profit on an actual, quantitative level. Cosplay celebrity Yaya Han⁶¹ is one such fortunate⁶² entrepreneur. From her Facebook fan page:

⁵⁹ Found commonly in the relationships between individuals, both in mainstream and fandom communities alike, Our Song Syndrome, or OSS, is the Pavlovian association of a song with a certain person or memory. This was seen in the recent movie, “Silver Linings Playbook,” when the protagonist could not hear a particular song without flying into a violent rage, since he associated it with the night his wife cheated on him.

⁶⁰ In the end, it comes down to personal maturity. Most cosplayers are within the high school – college age bracket, therefore prone to drama-producing social misconduct by default. However, this behavior, if encouraged by continued involvement with similarly-minded members of the cosplay community, may last well past adolescence. At that point, short of clinical diagnosis, the individual has run out of excuses for being a douche canoe.

Yaya is one of only few cosplayers in the world to build a business in this hobbyist community, but even after a decade of success, she strives to stay true to what got her into this field originally - fun and creativity. To this day, Yaya has made a myriad of costumes in the genres of anime, manga, video games, sci-fi, comic books and of course from her own original designs. Her intricate and lavish creations have won awards and acclaim worldwide, and she has been invited to appear as a Guest, Panelist, Judge, Performer and Host to over 100 conventions and other events all over the globe.

Through hard work, unmatched passion and infectious enthusiasm, Yaya has helped Cosplay gain respect and integrity as an art form in the fandom world and art communities, and her decade long campaign for creativity has helped raise Cosplay to the standards we know today. Everyday, Yaya continues to pave the path for the beloved art and lifestyle we know as Costume Play.⁶³

Yaya exemplifies the Light and Dark sides of Internet cosplay fame. When presenting her panel at Anime Expo, entitled “The Sociology of Cosplay,” she demonstrated poise and articulation while maintaining a sense of warmth that connected her to the adoring audience—a packed room full of individuals who had waited at least an hour in line for this particular event. Her sincere passion for cosplay and its discourse was clear in her performance, as she delivered basic knowledge and phenomena surrounding the hobby, peppered with personal anecdotes from her extensive experiences as a cosplayer and spokesmodel. Although she did not have time for an interview, she received my request with interest and did not fail to recognize me and give me a hug at

⁶¹ Yaya goes by her given name, which is uncommon but not necessarily rare for a cosplayer with an established cosplay persona. Usually, cosplayers have a “cosplay name,” a nickname used exclusively in the context of cosplay that often becomes the moniker for the cosplay persona itself. Most other individuals I interviewed at length, whether privately or in a query, also referred to themselves by their given names, yet a large percentage of these included their cosplay name as well. The more significant the cosplay persona, the more likely it is to be thus included in the overall self-presentation.

⁶² Pun count: 5

⁶³ “Yaya Han.” *Facebook.com*. Facebook, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

subsequent conventions. Every fan that approached her booth to engage with her was met with equally personal treatment from this cosplay persona.



versus



However, when one mentions the name, “Yaya Han” to seasoned cosplayers, the reaction is mixed: love, hate, or tits. This is from individuals with well-established cosplay personas of their own, who have been part of the community long enough to remember Yaya’s pre-celebrity days—or rather, pre-breast-augmentation days. Yaya herself refuses to comment on the matter; her message keeps to the approved cosplay values of having fun and being true to oneself.

Yet one cosplayer, while being queried during my on-the-fly interviews, cynically remarked at length on how Yaya’s fame coincided with a certain increase in chest size—as well as a decrease in costume coverage. One recalls the “skin” and “spectacle” of the previous chapter; Yaya proves to be a living example of how the latter plus the former generates attention, which is followed by power and thus, cosplay fame. This fame has obviously not come without its price in drama, given the fact that Yaya’s breasts have

⁶³⁻⁶⁵ *Yaya Han: Costume Designer and International Model and Cosplay Entertainer.*
Yaya Han, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013

proven to be a valid topic in the cosplay community—the audience seems to enjoy using them as physical evidence of the sincerity versus the cynicism present in her cosplay performances.

Yet for most cosplayers, Yaya Han's level of cosplay fame is unattainable due to the hobby being exactly that—a hobby, which can only be supplemented by a paying real-world profession; Cassi, for instance, supports her cosplay habit by working as a travel agent.

Occasionally, however, cosplay may serve as a gateway skill towards a functioning career. Tina, when unmasked, is a graphic designer, who had caught the eye of Nickelodeon while cosplaying Prince Zuko from *Avatar: The Last Airbender* at a past New York Comic Con. This led to an internship with the studio, which has been the foundation for her highly successful freelance career. Her artwork and cosplay tutorials, circulated primarily through tumblr, are sincere expressions of love for fandom and art, which add to her credibility and reputation in professional and fan communities alike. This audience has thus generated a percentage of income, which she uses towards charitable efforts.



66

Similarly, the previously mentioned former famous cosplayer⁶⁷ from New York had initially become cosplay famous due to her impeccable craftsmanship and sewing ability. The experience culled from cosplaying, combined with her sincere passion for costuming in general, granted her entrance into the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City. Since then, her experiences have included costume work for Broadway, Off-Broadway, and recently culminating in her dream job: seamstress for the Cirque de Soleil.

⁶⁶ “Pork Buns.” *American Cosplay Paradise*. ACParadise.com Network, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013

⁶⁷ This cosplayer requested to have her identity omitted, as she no longer wishes to be associated with the cosplay scene. However, the intimacy of regional cosplay communities—often bordering on incest—makes no guarantee of anonymity or privacy.

As for Renee, who bears the World Cosplay Summit⁶⁸ on her extensive cosplay résumé, she is also considered cosplay famous. She receives invitations to attend conventions as a craftsmanship judge; at the time of her interview, she was heading to Paris in a few weeks for France's premier *animé* convention, Japan Expo 2012. Yet her excitement was not at the prospect of being in costume yet again. Rather, it was for the experience of traveling abroad, the opportunity to visit Paris and absorb everything the city entailed: art, culture, the sheer Parisian-ness of it all. It was merely a bonus that she would also have the chance to reconnect with other former World Cosplay Summit competitors, with whom she is still in contact. Altogether, Renee was looking forward to this trip for its social benefits, infinitely preferring to treat it more as a tourist than a cosplayer.

This speaks to the difference between older-generation cosplayers versus the current crop of enthusiasts. Older cosplayers, those of Mario, Rob, Tina, and Renee's age and experience, have seen it all, which lends to a certain cynicism every time they step into costume once more. They all possess careers and passions well outside the cosplay zone. However, they sincerely continue with the hobby as it maintains cherished friendships and relationships, even if it is no longer the be-all and end-all of their existences. Cosplay remains a constant on their lives for the time being, with no intentions to halt involvement in the community, but their priorities have shifted towards enjoying fandom for simply fandom's sake.

⁶⁸ The annual international cosplay contest held in Japan. Contestants are chosen from around the world and flown to Tokyo to represent their countries in a massive Masquerade event.

Chris, another older-generation cosplayer, spoke of his eventual desire for a family. He had met his wife through cosplay, and they currently still actively participate in the community and convention scene. Having children factors into the hobby, as it is well accepted for parents to make miniature costumes for their progeny and incorporate them into a group of characters for the whole family to cosplay. Yet for the moment, Chris's cosplay plans, like many others of his age, are relegated to a few costumes per the few conventions he will attend throughout the year, if he chooses to cosplay there at all. His continued involvement with the cosplay community was based more on the Self-driven desires for friendship and entertainment. This resulted in the most cynical of my six private interviews with cosplayers, as Chris showed no great commitment to certain characters or fandom passions—no compulsion to “do justice” to anything in his cosplay performances.

However, despite this cynicism, we must recall that Chris is one individual within the cosplay community. Others of the same age bracket and relative cosplay persona status, such as Tina and Renee, still maintain a sincere love for the characters and the act of construction, even if they may be jaded with the drama of the cosplay community. That sincerity outweighs any cynicism, for it is what inspires them to continue cosplaying. Thus, the cosplay scene still possesses the Light side that Carlo McCormick praised so fervently in *Fandomania*: “positive, liberating, and surprisingly free of orthodoxy.”⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Dorfman, Elena. *Fandomania*. Aperture, 2007. Print.

CHAPTER 5

Cosplaying

One time, I was Wonder Woman.

This was on October 13th, 2012, at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center: New York Comic Con.

That morning in the hotel, I wriggled into a bustier and bloomers, put on a full face of makeup, and zipped up a pair of spanking-new boots. Before clunking out the door, I took a look in the mirror.

An Amazon stared back at me. She smirked. She posed. Not just an Amazon, but an Amazon *princess*.

October isn't prime weather for walking out in one's underwear, so I threw on a coat and packed a small suitcase with a change of clothes for the evening chill. When I looked in the mirror again, the Amazon's dark mane and battle gear were safely tucked away—though her face remained. It was as if I was undercover as her demure alter ego, Diana Prince. But if I'd had any hopes of passing as an uncostumed lady on the street, the tiara would be a dead giveaway.

And it was. On the way to the convention, that red star was a beacon to anyone who saw it and knew comic book heroes.

“Yo, are you Wonder Woman?”

“Yup.”

“Great costume.”

“Thanks!”

As of Thursday, New York Comic Con had already been established as an event where people were going “dressed up.” Around the city, there was the vague awareness that some crazy business was going on, which meant that Wonder Woman’s appearance was explained by proximity.

Once inside the convention center, no explanations were needed. I checked my excess baggage and added to the array of Wonder Women diffused throughout the crowd. Due to the nature of comics, where heroes’ costumes change with the times—new artists, new storylines, new generations—none of us looked alike. My outfit was based on the New 52 design, her current costume. It was a streamlined, minimalist affair featuring silver accents instead of the classic gold.

“Whoa, that’s legit Wonder Woman right there,” a guy said as I passed him in the Exhibition Hall.

He saw Wonder Woman’s costume walking around on a body that looked like Wonder Woman’s. In that moment, for him, I was sincerely Wonder Woman. He saw my performance as the Amazon walking among mortals, doing this mortal thing of “going to a convention,” and at any minute I could blast through the walls of the convention center and go flying off to save a civilian.

Except I wasn’t Wonder Woman.

I wasn’t Wonder Woman from the instant I started getting dressed that morning. The guy in the hall saw my ensemble without any idea what it was made of, how it was made, and by what witchcraft it stayed on.

My Wonder Woman was a culmination of the necessary elements of cosplay: the “costume” being the construction and wearing the physical garment, plus the “play,” as it was presented in a front region public setting.

The construction had been the first step. To make it, I scrolled through pictures of Wonder Woman on tumblr until I found reference material that would not present too much of a challenge to replicate in real life. Although I had been cosplaying and attending conventions since 2004, that time span didn’t qualify as continuous years of costuming experience—I was not quite a sincere cosplayer. During the “off-seasons” between events, I had never bothered to invest extra time and effort into improving my cosplay-specific skills. I could make my sewing machine start and stop, which was enough for me. Any other technical know-how was a product of haphazardly gathering tips and tricks over the years, perusing tutorials and conducting collaborative experiments with other cosplaying friends. Every new costume was a shot at putting those scraps of knowledge to use, going on the faith that someone out there with more experience had done this before, therefore it should work—or at least produce something slightly less mediocre than previous endeavors. Overall, my technical skills cynically left much to be desired.

Therefore, I needed a design that didn’t offer too many bells and whistles—complicated seamstress work that would have me at a loss without outside assistance—but was still effectively, recognizably Wonder Woman. Her current costume, the “New 52” getup fit the bill.



Fabric shopping in New York’s garment district with Cassi allowed us to discuss the construction process, breaking the costume down into manageable tasks. I would need to sew the bustier and bloomers, construct the accessories, then buy the wig, shoes, and undergarments. Having already made a costume with a bustier, Cassi explained how she had built it and what I would need to do for my own creation. I had also once made a costume with a bustier, but it had serious structure issues that, due to the encroaching convention deadline, were never solved⁷¹. With Cassi’s guidance, this new attempt would yield better results. The rest of the components seemed simple enough that I could manage them on my own.

By now I was thinking of the costume as “her.” This was partially after having revealed my plan to a coworker, who exclaimed, “You’re doing Diana?!” Thus, while I

⁷⁰ *tumblr*. tumblr, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

⁷¹ Thank god for dress tape.

worked on her she was “Diana,” and occasionally “Wondie” after another friend’s favorite nickname for her. If I referred to her aloud, though, it was “Wonder Woman.”

Why cosplay Wonder Woman, anyway?

Because she is awesome.

Wonder Woman is an icon. You hear “Wonder Woman” and you think strength, confidence, assertiveness. No other female name in comics carries the same reverberation of power.

I sincerely craved that embodiment of strength. Plus, I liked her updated look. It was sexy, but still respectable. Sex-spectable.

Making Diana, however, proved to be a trial worthy of the Amazon herself. I crafted a new bustier pattern from the one I had used for previous costume, and cut out three sets of pieces as per Cassi’s suggestion: one set of gold satin for the lining, one set of canvas for the stiff inner layer, and one set of cherry red spandex for the outer, visible layer. Then came the pinning. And the re-pinning. And the snipping. And the re-re-pinning. Over and over, until finally I had a structure that fit around my torso and seemed as if it would stay there without any help. I cut out my trimming—from another fabric shopping excursion, in which I discovered that no one sells stretchy silver trim in the width and weight I needed, therefore one must buy a full yard of the stupid silver spandex and make one’s own trim out of that—and affixed it in such a manner that it resembled the metal edges of Diana’s outfit. When I checked my reference image for accuracy, I realized that the neckline and bottom hem were completely the wrong shape. I hacked the bodice into the correct silhouette and re-affixed the trimming. Once sewn, the structure

may have been accurate and sincere to the design, but the aesthetically pleasing-ness of it was debatable.

At least the accessories were relatively easy. I pinned together Diana's signature armbands⁷² out of the silver trimming fabric, backed by foam sheets left over from bygone prop-making adventures. Wonder Woman was a chance to recycle excess material that I had in abundance; her bloomers would be a navy spandex from one of last year's New York Comic Con costumes: *The Last Airbender: The Legend of Korra's* titular heroine. My sewing machine whizzed through the seams until, with a crunch, it decided to go on strike. This was a week before I was headed back to Mount Holyoke College for the first semester of my last year as a student. I had been hoping to complete the costume before moving in.

I gave up. I wasn't going to put myself through the madness of rushing the machine to be fixed, then ripping through the rest of the costume and cutting more corners, only to have it turn out more shoddy than it was already destined to be. Already I had abandoned the lining to save time, and the necklace and armband would have safety pins for clasps—costume work at its most cynical. Plus, the bloomers weren't started and to boot⁷³, I hadn't even ordered her shoes.

With the convention next month and unwilling to haul the sewing machine with me to school for the added stress of costume-making on top of homework, there was nothing for it but to pack away Diana and sigh, knowing that at least I had Korra to fall back on. I had grown biceps over the summer that, at the very least, resembled Korra's— all the better for a sincere performance of Character.

⁷² Wonder Woman's primary weapon and signature accessory.

⁷³ Pun count: 6

Diana sat in my room in Ardsley until October break, when I came home to the happy news that the sewing machine had been repaired and was waiting on my desk. I pulled Diana out again and got to work, completing the accessories and bloomers within the next few days. Luckily, I could rush-ship the boots straight to Mount Holyoke—as next weekend I would be heading straight to the convention from there—and the wig was already bought earlier in the summer.

The finished costume wasn't quite “finished,” but as far as I was concerned, I was *done*. I had put in the necessary effort. The ensemble fit enough to stay in place. It looked like Wonder Woman's attire. Altogether, it was good enough for my purposes. I wasn't looking to enter any craftsmanship competitions, just to walk around the convention center dressed as an Amazon. If the ensemble could live through a day of being worn and photographed, I was content. No need for Korra; just one costume at this con would be sufficient.

This attitude is what marked me as a mid-level cosplayer. I had my priorities, and none of them were Make The Best Cosplay Ever. Rather, they were Make A Decent Cosplay, Wear It Well, and Call It A Day. Call it cynical, perhaps. It would have been different if I was cosplaying with friends, in which case there would be the added pressure to perform sincerely—looking good for the group as a whole, not to let anyone down by putting in less effort than they did. But as it was, I was going to New York Comic Con largely as a solo venture, for the sake of the thesis as well as personal enjoyment. A working vacation, so to speak, engaging in the “participant” half of participant-observation, as I had not cosplayed at any of the previous conventions during my summer of fieldwork at AnimeNEXT, Anime Expo, and Otakon.

When the weekend of the convention rolled around, everything seemed to go according to plan. The trip to New York City from South Hadley was uneventful, and I arrived with enough time to check in at the hotel before killing the rest of the evening at the convention.

The next morning, I woke up around 9 AM, but it was nearly noon when Wonder Woman left the hotel and made it down to the Javits Center. The costume had only a few components—how did putting it on consume over two hours?

Morning things like yoga, showering and coffee aside, the act of getting dressed up in cosplay is a time commitment. I didn't plan on making frequent trips to the bathroom to touch up my appearance during the day, so everything had to be fixed in the hotel to be as close to perfect as it was going to get.

The underlayer went on first: underwear out of necessity; tights for coverage and uniform skin tone, then a silicone backless bra for another kind of necessity—since the bustier was cut too low in the back to hide a regular strapless bra, and only an actual comic book heroine would have been sufficiently endowed to support the top on her own. I then affixed the wig cap with bobby pins to keep my hair concealed and started on the visible garment layer.

Having tried everything on before leaving home, I was confident that it all would fit, barring the unlikely event that I had gained or lost weight during the week. The bloomers went on fine, but thanks to the silicone bra, which seemed like such a good idea at the time, I hit a snag with the bustier. The problem was that I had tried it on at home with a different bra, one that was strapless, fabric, and a cup size bigger than the silicone

model. Without that extra padding taking up space in the top, the structure of the bustier was compromised.

In cosplay, we subscribe to the Project Runway credo of, “Make it work.” Thus, just in case this type of situation occurred, I had packed boning and handsewing equipment with Diana. I pulled it out now to whip-stitch support into the bustier, learning in the process that if one has strong teeth, then it’s okay to have forgotten scissors at home. The top thus reinforced, along with some strategically placed duct tape on the inside of the structure, allowed me to wear the bustier with minimal discomfort.

Then came the makeup. I had scheduled a photoshoot with a talented photographer whom I had met during my fieldwork at AnimeNEXT, therefore I had to pull off a look that would do well both in front of the camera and in person. If I lacked costume-building skill, I made up for it with cosmetics, which allowed me to sculpt a set of proud cheekbones, alluring eyes, and fierce lips into my face. Extra *oomph* came from false lashes and circle lenses, contacts that hid my brown eyes in exchange for Diana’s blue.

Last were the accessories, wig, and boots. These went on with the least amount of fuss, and as luck would have it, the long tendrils of the wig could cover up the crinkly, less-than-attractive top of the bustier. When Wonder Woman stood in front of the mirror for a final once-over, it looked like I had “made it work,” after all. The structural failings of my costume were adequately concealed, and the overall effect wasn’t half bad. At the very least, I was not going to New York Comic Con to make a fool of myself.

Fast forward to the convention, where the “play” half of my cosplay began. This was where cosplay became a visible performance in public. The labyrinth of hallways in

the convention building served as a grand theater space, which in turn allowed the massive, undulating audience of attendees to be constantly in motion and in contact—both visual and physical—with everything in the vicinity.

I became a part of this performance, along with thousands of other con-goes and cosplayers. Throughout the day I spotted other Wonder Women, many of whom elected to do her classic costume, plus a jovial male Wonder WoMan. There were also countless cosplayers presenting as big comic heroes like Batman, Superman, and the Avengers—a huge number of Avengers, in fact, due to the recent summer blockbuster. These costumes were dominant, as it was indeed New York *Comic Con*, therefore cosplayers took the chance to put their Western fandoms on display, which also included *Homestuck* and *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. Since Japanese animation is considered a parallel form of media to comics and graphic novels, *Animé* and video game costumes were fewer in comparison, but still present at the convention.

After a few hours of flying solo, during which I milled about with other cosplayers and was asked for a few photos, the patchy cell phone service in the Javits Center finally let through some texts I had been hoping for. One was from my friend Katelyn, who was there that day cosplaying Disney's Cinderella, with her friend as Belle. The other text was from Tiffany, the photographer from AnimeNEXT, who I looked forward to working with. Since her text said that the shoot wouldn't be until later, I was free to meet up with Katelyn and indulge in some Self performance unrelated to Wonder Woman: hanging out and catching up.

I located Katelyn near the back entrance, where groups of other cosplayers were posing for pictures in their own photoshoots. Since she and her friend had placed

themselves in this photo-friendly spot, they became targets of, “Oh my god, Cinderella and Belle! Can I get a picture?” *ad infinitum*. Even though Disney Princesses are not traditional comic book characters, cosplayers receive fan responses at conventions due to the classic and well-loved nature of the costumes. Parents and non-parents alike are eager to capture the memory of a *real live Disney princess!* that they would otherwise be unable to access outside of a licensed, commercial Disney establishment like Disney World. Considering how successfully Katelyn’s handiwork had turned out for both costumes—she had made the gowns and accoutrements from scratch—it was no wonder that they were treated with as much adoration as the hired face characters employed by Disney.

Upon joining them, it was as if Wonder Woman became an honorary Disney Princess herself. When people asked for photos, it was with the logic that our characters were compatible and could fit together in a picture, still being IC even if we came from different fandoms. Given our setting, the audience considered it perfectly plausible for Cinderella and Belle to team up with Wonder Woman—epic women simply fit together with other epic women. We made a triad of unexpected power and femininity, and plenty of attendees loved the shot.

Here, I ran into another Wonder Woman who had also done the new 52 variant. We compared notes on construction and execution, and although we had worked off the same reference image, she and I had produced two completely different ensembles. Hers had a professional-looking corset as the bustier, the top of which was accented by actual sheet metal that she had welded into place. She had also chosen to use her natural hair, even though it was less accurate for being dark brown and straight whereas Diana’s is

black with voluminous waves—such waves that don't exist in the real world without extensions and great styling fuss, hence the decision to cover my own cropped hair with a wig. Perhaps her performance was more sincere than mine, since it incorporated her natural hair and bust as sincere elements of Self, whereas I had gone to great pains to obscure mine.

At length, Tiffany tracked me down for the private shoot, and was willing to get pictures of Katelyn and her friend as well. The next hour was spent traipsing all over the convention center, indoors and out, while Tiffany sought locations that had the look and lightning she was going for, often pausing to catch an inspired shot, or wait for us as we were periodically flagged down so that other attendees could snap their own photos. Although not a cosplayer at the time, Tiffany had cosplayed in the past and continued to be involved with the convention scene for the photography opportunities, shooting regularly for cosplayer friends like Tina.

Before we all parted ways after the shoot, Tiffany gave me a preview of the pictures. I was floored. Despite having seen myself in the mirror before leaving the hotel that morning, and despite being conscious of what I was wearing and where I was, the Wonder Woman caught in the pixels of Tiffany's camera was unrecognizable—I could scarcely connect the images of this character's face, her body, to mine. The Self to Character scale had already been in effect for the entirety of the day, and now I began to feel the weight of its presence.

During the shoot, I had fluctuated between performing Self and Character in the quest for really spectacular shots. On the Character end, questions pervaded my mind: *What would Wonder Woman do? What are her signature looks? How would she pose?*

How can I replicate it? As I arranged myself in front of the camera, however, there were moments when I allowed myself pure fantasy: I was looking off into the distance not because Tiffany instructed me to, but because there was a helpless civilian on the horizon and I was about to leap into the air and save him. Or I was crouched, arms crossed, ready to take down a villain with my trusty Amazon weapons.

On other side of the scale, the Self end, I was held in place by the fact that I needed to question myself at all, rather than simply embodying the heroine without doubt or concern for the effect. This kept me rooted in the personal, physical Self: Natasha Nesic, 20-year-old college student and part-time cosplayer—someone who was definitely *not* Diana Prince. Tiffany's tips and adjustments were Self anchors as well, reminders that the light was hitting this way or that, or how my proportions would be altered depending on my angle towards the camera. There was a lingering worry that I looked too muscular or mannish.

These were all mortal concerns, things that Wonder Woman herself would never have to deal with, since she was always drawn in a flattering, dynamic pose by her artists at Detective Comics. As a result, my performance of Wonder Woman was all the more cynical.

The shoot was followed by backstage behavior: the two very *not*-Wonder Woman experiences of eating lunch and using the restroom. The former, being such a human act tied to the physical, cynical Self, removed me nearly entirely from any character frame of mind, regardless of what I was wearing. The latter act of going to the ladies' room finished the job, kicking out Diana completely from my concept of self-presentation. This occurred primarily because the trip to the bathroom resulted in my tights ripping. All

further presentation would be cynical as a result, for a broken costume meant I could no longer sincerely present as Wonder Woman.

It was time to change into Natasha clothes and get comfortable for the last couple hours of the con. These last few hours were spent seeing other cosplayer friends and retrieving the suitcase that I had checked earlier in the day.

When I returned to the hotel for the night, my friends Lizy and Clara were in the room working on their own costumes, which were scheduled to debut tomorrow in their first New York Comic Con experience.

Yet unlike the “costume” half of cosplay, “play” does not have a marked moment of completion. In fact, it is an ongoing stage, lasting as long as the cosplayer in question feels the need to perpetuate his or her cosplay persona.

Although the cosplay persona is continually present on the Self-Character scale, I had spent the convention occupied primarily by my performances of Self and Character—Natasha Nestic and Wonder Woman—which were determined by the degree of sincerity or cynicism involved in each. The cosplayer persona only became relevant when the audience addressed me as a cosplayer, a member of the cosplay community and subculture—not as Natasha or Wonder Woman.

That persona did not lack for exposure outside the convention sphere. Like my other friends who were excited to debut new costumes at New York Comic Con, during the months before the convention I had posted progress pictures of Diana on the virtual cosplay region of the Internet, and received feedback from my audience on Facebook and tumblr.



“asd;lfj;asldkfj It looks so good! Can’t wait to see you darling <3”

“I tried really hard to think of a pun in response, but I couldn't. You look amazing! Looking forward to a super hug (pun?)! Which day are you wearing this costume?”

“OH GOD, SO GOOD. slkdjfa;ijfow I WISH MY MUSEUM WOULD’VE SENT MEE TO NYCC BUT AAAAAHH ;__; I MISS YOU.”

“Look at those arms, girl. Babe babe babe <3”

In the months that came after New York Comic Con, I received the pictures from Tiffany’s shoot. These I did not have to circulate myself, for she published them on her own blog as part of her photography portfolio for that convention.

⁷⁴ Image by Natasha Nesic, 2013.



These pictures remain online to this day, and their existence, along with the continued existence of all my other cosplay profiles on Facebook, tumblr, Cosplay.com, and American Cosplay Paradise, indicate that although I do not currently identify as a cosplayer, I still have an accessible cosplay persona on the Internet, where one may find all evidence of my cosplay history. Since I cynically don't bother to update these accounts regularly, and likely will not update them in the future, it is therefore not an active cosplay persona.

Unless I were to eliminate all evidence—deleting every cosplay profile and all references to cosplay on social media—my cosplay performance continues to be enacted on the virtual front, even though I no longer supply it with input. My cosplay persona lingers in a state of limbo. I keep contact with cosplayer friends and they still perceive me

⁷⁵ *Tiffany Chang Photography*. Locket-heart.org, 2013. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.

as a cosplayer because that status is associated with our acquaintance—but they have no clue as to the true cynicism of my performance.

But at least I was Wonder Woman for a day.

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