CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# Cosplay & Conventions

## Exporting the Digital

NICOLLE LAMERICHS

Videogame fans and players do more than just couch-surf. While popular culture demands an increasing degree of participation via social media and platforms in general, games (as inherently interactive media) are even more apt at engaging their audiences. While videogames engage users to extend themselves into the gameworld, users often extend these digital worlds as well. In such participatory cultures, audiences of all kinds enjoy reworking existing material on digital and traditional platforms (Jenkins, 2006). Contemporary audiences are producers who combine production and usage, and thus engage in acts of "produsage" which have elements of both (Bruns, 2008). Through these acts, media are increasingly lived, rather than consumed, Deuze (2012) even argues.

This also holds true for videogames, such that gaming has become a wide subculture with its own repertoires, events, and communities, which export this digital culture to offline networks. Gaming fan cultures are a pivotal example of these emerging cultural dynamics. These active audiences engage with the games originating from different cultures, from the United States and Canada to Korea and Japan. Gamers are also active in communities that have been theorized as "fandoms," describes term referring to the social and creative communities around a specific slice (e.g., title, series, genre, character) of popular culture (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007).

Fandoms are characterized by their creativity, online and offline sociality, and their affect for the media text. Fan cultures are rich and thriving cultures, both online as well as offline, where different creative practices flourish that rewrite and subvert popular culture (Hills, 2002). The creativity of fans can be read as a type of appropriation that borrows and repurposes existing cultural materials to produce something new. Fandom fits a historical tradition of storytelling as an active,

dynamic, and often oral tradition, which relied on appropriation, and audience input. In that sense, it is akin to a folk culture where myths are shared and retold.

Cosplay or "costume play" is an iconic example of fan creativity. In this practice, fans construct and wear costumes that allow them to re-enact existing fictional characters from popular culture. These outfits and subsequent performances are a physical manifestation of their immersion into the fictional realms of videogames. In a sense, they extract avatars and other characters from digital space and *exporting* them into physical space—often into conventions where fan cultures gather to celebrate game characters, stories, and worlds.

## COSTUMING AND CONVENTIONS

Cosplay can be understood as a culture of costuming that occurs beyond the institutional remit of the theatre. The purpose of cosplay is to create a look-a-like of a character—whether a game-defined character or one's own customized avatar—to create a unique performance and connect with others. Fans mimic the character not only through dress but also through the styling of wigs or hair, make-up techniques, and more recently through high-tech special effects. For instance, during Blizzard Entertainment's annual cosplay competition, you might see a carefully sculpted Orc mask complete with dramatically furrowed brow and intimidating tusks or a genderbent Lich King (from *World of Warcraft*, 2004) with theatrical smoke emanating from the character's iconic sword (BlizzCon, 2016). In many cases, fans may spend hundreds of hours crafting a single costume by hand. Importantly, although an important part of cosplay is to temporarily take on a game character's persona, cosplaying differs from roleplaying: whereas roleplaying involves a longer, joint project of telling a story and playing out one's own character, cosplaying is short term, and involves less narrativity. Fan costuming revolves around representing the digital through deeply visual performances of a character for other fans and for photographers who capture these activities.

Fan costumes also go hand-in-hand with other performances. Fan musicians often dress up in ways that suggest character performances (Jenkins, 1992). For instance, musicians like Taylor Davis perform themes from *Skyrim* (2011) and *The Legend of Zelda* (1986), often wearing costumes of those games' characters in performances and promotional media, creating a full performance around the game. Similarly, key chains, jewelry, shirts, and other game-related apparel are increasingly popular, inspired by franchises such as *Portal* (2007), *BioShock* (2007), and other classics. Dress functions as subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995)—cultural knowledge, symbols and artefacts which signify a visual and social way of belonging within subcultures. Through cosplay, gamers can connect to each other.

Theoretically, one way to view cosplay is through the concept of transmediality—a transfer or combination of form and/or content that translates an individual media

text to other media texts of the same or a different medium. Gamers are apt in transmediality. In their practices, they move betwixt and between fictional, visual, and corporal texts to rework digital texts, including creating fan fiction (McKnight, this volume), fan art, spin-off games, roleplay, and even hacking and cheats. In terms of cosplay, this movement includes the *exporting* of digital videogame characters into physical space, making them manifest through creative interpretation, crafting, and performance. While such fan practices are organic, bottom-up examples of transmediality, the media industry itself also increasingly uses transmedia designs but in a strategic, top-down fashion. For example, in the videogame industry companies such as Valve stimulate fan creations by allowing official mods (see Stevens & Limperos, this volume), and sometimes even license official game character costumes. Importantly, transmediality requires a certain literacy of the fan culture and texts, such that non-fans may not grasp the meaning of fan productions or practices. Because of this, fan costumes are frequently misunderstood by outsiders, as well as by fans. Especially costumed female fans are seen as attention seekers or inauthentic fans (Hernandez, 2013). Understanding the motivations of cosplayers, and its merit as a performance, is essential to avoid such sexualized debates.

Due to the rise of internet platforms, fan activities have become associated with digital culture, however these activities also take place offline. For instance, a key space for cosplay performance is at fan conventions: meetings at large public spaces, such as hotels, where fans can purchase merchandise or attend events related to fan practices and the original text (e.g., panels with a character designer). Such conventions are exemplary sites to observe the global dynamics of how gaming practices export to offline environments. Large conventions draw countless visitors. San Diego Comic Con (2015) had more than 167,000 visitors, many of whom attended in costume.

In these spaces, cosplay takes place in formal settings (e.g., sanctioned competitions) as well as informal settings (e.g., convention hallways). In this way, cosplay is both intimately related to festivals or urban environments in its emergent production, but also akin to sporting events in its formal production. International competitions, such as World Cosplay Summit in Japan, create a global community around this practice. Within the convention space, cosplay is a deeply explorative and social play. Fans wander through the convention both to admire the spectacle and to experience it first-hand by becoming part of the crowd and embodying the fiction itself. In media studies, fandom has primarily been studied as digital fandom and related to the emergence of online communities (Booth, 2010). However, offline spaces—and offline bodies—are crucial to cosplay.

## EMBODIMENT IN COSPLAY

Fan costumes have a long history and its predecessors include historical reenactment (Kalshoven, 2012), drag (Senelick, 2002), and gothic subcultures

(Atkinson, 2014; Spooner, 2004). In its modern form, cosplay can illuminate the ways that gamers engage avatars as characters as playful identities; cosplayers may experience a sort of transfer of a character's identity to the player's own identity, in large part through the presence and activity of the fan's physical body (Lamerichs, 2011) such that intimacy and affect are constructed through customing (Lamerichs, 2013). This embodiment, or making-visible and -tangible an avatar-as-character through one's physical body—is not well understood.

Academic discourses on "the virtual" (e.g., see Zylinska, 2002) give the impression that the physical body has become obsolete, transparent, or wired through human engagement of technological advances. For instance, in media theory, the body is often neglected or is merely a material ground for enlightened, mediated activities (McLuhan, 2003) or a cyborg, enhanced by media technology (Haraway, 1991). However, these models do not include the fact that the body is a medium in and of itself (see Westley, 1994). Fashioning and embodying media is emblematic of our current consumer culture, where the body is part of a larger media network (Featherstone, 2010).

The costumed body of the fan and gamer is playful and present. Cosplayers mediate, articulate and flesh out what they see on the screen through costumes and performative postures, gestures, and movements (see Popat, this volume)—a dagger-drawn crouch for an RPG rogue, a sensual over-the-shoulder wink for *Bayonetta* (2009), or an athletic parkour postures for Faith (*Mirror's Edge*, 2008). Because of the intimate interplays of the cosplayer's physical body and the character's exported body-concept, embodiment in cosplay is deeply complex since, temporarily through make-believe, the cosplayer's physical body could be considered an avatar for the character, allowing it to play out its persona in physical space.

Through re-enactment, cosplay can provide players with the joys of make-believe through the creation of outfits and the freedom to perform in them. Moreover, cosplayers engage in pretend-play, or *mimicry* as Caillois (1961) defines it, as a category of play in which reality is transformed into an alternative scenario. In other words, the cosplayer's physical body and environment become fictionalized accounts of those in a gameworld. Other forms of adult make-believe include live-action roleplaying, which also actualizes imagined characters and mediates them through costumes and props (Murray, 1999). For some cosplayers, however, cosplay is less about developing or performing a character and more about constituting a visual resemblance with it. Although a cosplayer can perform the character in part, for instance, by walking around with that character's attitude, the overall conveyance is a visual one (Newman, 2008).

Like customizing one's avatar, cosplay allows for a degree of appropriation in embodying a character, and in many ways, it is about establishing your own version of its persona (Crawford, 2012). Although cosplay is mainly a reenactment of limited designs of arguably flat characters, it still manages to include narrativity

conveyed by both the visual qualities of the costume, the body of the cosplayer, and the space of performance. As such, this narrativity does not depend only on the character *qua* avatar: "Cosplay scenes remind us not only of the comparatively limited presentation of game characters but also of the rounded lives of the players that embody them" (Newman, 2008, p. 88). This multiplex narrative emerges, in part, because cosplay hovers between the digital and the physical in a complex way—it constitutes different types of realness (Newman, 2008; cf. Mitchell & Clarke, 2003). Cosplay re-contextualizes a game in a different play setting: the physical world, where its characters interact with other cosplayers and new surroundings.

Critically, the division between physical and digital perhaps does not fully capture the diverse, and highly mediated spaces of cosplay. In recent studies, scholars have criticized the dichotomy between physical and digital as the "real" and the "virtual," and have shown that both frequently draw from each other (Kozinets, 2010; Pearce, 2006), especially in relation to player-avatar synergies and emergent identities (Banks, 2013). Cosplay is not only about making the avatar physically real but about personalizing it and drawing it close. It is as much related to the game and its characters as it is a creative practice that has its own rewards. Moreover, for some cosplayers, the practice is about engaging with one's own felt body more deeply by relating it to fiction. In other words, cosplay can foster affect.

## EMBODIMENT AND AFFECT

Through cosplay, avatars can obtain a degree of physical realism, which can perhaps be best understood through the lens of the emotions it may create. Although we know quite a bit about the digital, social, and participatory dimensions of fandom, we know much less about the *personal*, the embodied, and the emotional life associated with gaming and fandom. It is important, then, to understand the very feelings that ground gaming, and the embodied practices that are central to gaming and acts outside the game, if we are to better understand how videogame avatars play a role in contemporary life.

Cosplay is an "affective process"—a process of different intensities and emotions that raises awareness for the felt body and the media text as it is lived (Lamerichs, 2011). This affect involves a range of emotional experiences that can lead to investments in the world through which we constitute our identity. In other words, if we feel a thing and see a thing as important to who we are, those experiences lead us to become invested in that thing—so if we feel and identify with avatar made real through cosplay, we might be more invested in that avatar as a consequential thing. Through this lens, the emphasis is on cosplay as *process* (rather than on space or practice) because it can be both something social constructed as well as something we undergo when we are touched by other fans, characters, and games.

In an affective process such as cosplay, one may constantly work through feelings for narratives again through references and re-reading—through active involvement with the fiction. Importantly, this affective process does not end or begin at a cosplay performance. Much attention is paid to creating costumes, an artistic process that may generate emotion, and might require players to go back to avatars and their videogames as source-texts. Similarly, after having cosplayed a character, players may feel new connections with a videogame, and a personal spark because they physically embodied that character (see Gn, 2011).

This emphasis on affect calls to question related notions of gender and sexuality, which are socially constructed around embodiment. The social construction of bodies is important since they lead to social constructive *discussions* of bodies. Norms about gender may influence how we look at cosplay, as well as how we consider related acts which involve cross-dressing such as crossplay (see Leng, 2013). One way in which cosplay shapes who we are is through the emancipation and representation of gender and sexuality—fan costumes support the celebration of both cosplayer bodies and those of avatars. These expressions are, however, frequently misunderstood by some convention visitors and spectators who see cosplay outside of the convention. Event organizers struggle with unwanted behavior of visitors and press toward costumed fans, because cosplayers may adopt norms that some mainstream visitors do not buy into, especially norms associated with gender and the sexualization of costumed bodies.

For example, a *Daily Star* article by Laura Mitchell (2015) on the convention NEC in Birmingham stirred debate, by stating: "These scantily-clad sci-fi and fantasy nerds had pulses racing as they flashed their flesh in racy comic-wear." When cosplayers threatened legal action, *Daily Star* hired a legal advisor, Barbara Ludlow. She concluded: "[…] in choosing to dress up as characters that are highly sexualized representations of women, they will unsurprisingly be viewed as such. This is sadly a problem of our culture and not the fault of the Daily Star." By accusing women of exhibitionism, and enablers of unwanted behavior, this debate fits into discussions on rape culture in which women are not framed as victims, but as provocateurs (see Burt, 1980).

Such positions are characteristic of a wider debate about negative affect associated with fan costumes as undesirable, gendered performances. Women and men empower themselves through videogame characters, which may sometimes have designs, which are read as "highly sexualized" by society (cf. Fox, this volume). However, the cosplay-friendly convention is ideally framed by fans as a safe space where they can also experiment with expressing themselves in new ways (Lamerichs, 2011). Embodying avatars through cosplay, in other words, is not without restrictions. The avatar is both a protagonist and character as well as a digital puppet, which symbolizes the player. Cosplayers may identify with characters, interpret them as protagonists, and feel for them as representations of themselves.

However, this affective process can be misunderstood by society and even misunderstood within gaming cultures themselves.

## COSPLAY AS A "THIRD LAYER"

An avatar is simultaneously a "heavy hero" (a character that can be read and interpreted) as well as a "digital dummy" (an agent of interaction and a representation of the player; Burns, 2004). Cosplay fleshes out existing videogame characters and texts through re-enactment, and this physicality also changes the function of the avatar. Cosplay teases out both hero and dummy functions of the avatar, but adds a third layer by embodying and personalizing the avatar. In this form of dress up, players engage in an embodied and affective process. The interchange between player, game, and costume is central, and each of these domains is continuously constructed across media forms. In a broad sense, cosplay is exporting the digital and mapping it on humanity's oldest media: fabrics and skin. In this way, avatars are made material through cosplay, and this materiality is of great importance. Pixels are exported and fleshed out, allowing fans to touch, feel, and *be* these characters. Cosplayers take gaming beyond the digital, and make it into a personal and embodied practice.

Following, it may be important to extend these considerations to other forms of avatar embodiment. These affective processes could be mirrored in the customization of one's game character or avatar, since this is understood as a digital form of dress-up (Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007; Wirman, 2011). Similarly, the body may be used to signify game or character fandom, as with tattoos (Jones, 2014). In other words, broader notions of avatar-related costuming include digital and physical acts of self-fashioning, and may reveal how important this form of transformative play can be.

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