

Express Yourself: An Affective Analysis of Game Cosplayers

Nicolle Lamerichs

Introduction

In the summer of 2011, I travel to the USA. I have brought with me a costume that I have sewn during the weeks before and delicately packed for this trip across the Atlantic. The wig, which I dyed myself and which is extremely curly, has been layered in several bags. Dressing up has been my hobby for many years. This specific practice is called *cosplay* (short for costume-playing), in which fans of popular culture dress-up as the fictional characters they know and love. Transporting your costume and wearing it properly takes some time and is an emotional investment. When I see my suitcase at the airport, I immediately check to see if the dress is okay and if I have brought my contact lenses, something which I already did at least five times back home. My nerves settle down. I am going to Otakon, the cosplay event of the year.

This fan convention is held each year in Baltimore and is visited by over 30.000 fans of Japanese games, comics and animation. These events are gatherings where fans meet up to socialize, discuss related issues in panels, attend video screenings, buy merchandise, and meet celebrities to get their autographs. Fan conventions are also an important stage for fan practices; new forms of play and creativity inspired by existing texts. In fact, the fan convention is the moment supreme for any cosplayer. Most fans only wear their complete outfit at the convention and perform or pose in it. Though the footage or pictures are often uploaded online, the event itself is the central playground.

At Otakon, almost everyone is dressed up. The character that I represent is called Fourier. She stars in *Tales of Graces* (2009), a Japanese role-playing game that has not been published in the West. The game is part of a franchise of role-playing games, some of which have been translated in English (e.g., *Tales of Symphonia* (2003), *Tales of Vesperia* (2008)). Though I enjoy some titles of this series, I would hardly call myself a fan. In fact, the reason to represent myself as Fourier is much more pragmatic. My sister has bought a Pascal costume; a playable, giddy character in the game, and Fourier is her sister. Fourier – a researcher, a good fighter, the older and more mature sister – is exactly the fit for me.

It took me a while to make that decision. Since I do not know Japanese, it was difficult to decide whether I really liked the character. I loved her design, but I was unsure whether I really wanted to portray her, since I had not played the game. Granted, with some effort, I could have done. My sister, for instance, played *Tales of Graces* in Japanese and relied on other media to make sense of it. She mimicked YouTube movies of the game play and read translations while playing. When she did not get past a difficult point, she went to online boards and asked people for advice. To get a better impression of Fourier, I watched the game play online and looked into Wiki-pages constructed by fans. As a result I got more and more interested in *Tale of Graces* and its characters.

At Otakon, other *Tales*-fans address me as Fourier, ask me to join their photo shoots and compliment my character choice. I am invited to be the fan that I am not. Then again, maybe I am. By familiarizing myself with *Tales of Graces* in new ways, and by creating and wearing the costume, I have grown to love Fourier. During this trip, I reflect on the many questions that are at stake in this chapter. What does it mean that I claim to like a character from a game that I have never played? Can a costume feed into one's infatuation with a game? Is cosplay really an

expression of love for a game or to its narrative or its designs? For that matter, where does playing a game start and where does it end?

Design and Method

I have based my research on ethnography and on my insider's experiences as a cosplayer. The data that I explicitly collected for this chapter stems from the Dutch convention Abunai! (2011, over 3.000 visitors) that focusses on Japanese culture but also attracts cosplayers of Western games. Some of the examples stem from the before-mentioned Otakon and the Belgium FACTS (2011, over 20.000 attendees), which is a convention centred around games, science fiction, comics and Japanese popular culture. In total, I interviewed over thirty cosplayers about their feelings towards games and their motivations in portraying certain characters. Furthermore, I have taken my own participant-observations into account.

Since this data was collected at conventions, which tend to be very crowded places, I only had a short amount of time to talk to people. Many of the talks were barely five minutes long, sometimes with a group of cosplayers, where I briefly explained my research, asked a few questions and took a picture. Therefore I supported the data with four longer, in-depth interviews of informants recruited at these conventions. Due to issues of locality, two of these interviews took place via Skype, which posed little problems for this project since I had already met these cosplayers in real life and had established a bond of trust with them. To protect their identities, I have opted for pseudonyms rather than their real names.

I analyze cosplay as a practice through which fans of popular culture (e.g., television series, games, movies) display their attachment to games by producing their own costumes inspired by fictional characters. Cosplay is a creative act that has distinct stages. As I shall discuss below, fans have various entry points to a media-text, then they create or buy the costumes, perhaps already take some pictures of it, and finally wear it at a convention or meeting as the moment supreme. There are hardly any other venues for cosplaying. Though fans may upload photos of their costumes online, the activity is entwined with traditional fan spaces. Though cosplay can be inspired by different kinds of media texts, I am solely concerned with game cosplays. This type of cosplay raises many specific questions about game reception, play outside of the game space and the identity of gamers.

Cosplay shows game love in practice and reveals the personal, affective relationship that gamers develop with a media text. To keep the terminology clear, I do not use 'love' as an analytical term but as a generic one. I only explicitly use 'love' when the actors speak of it or to reflect upon game love as the subject of this book. Based on theories of affect, as defined below, I claim that cosplay is an affective process that has different entry points. Whereas some cosplayers are interested in a game first and cosplay it as a homage, others learn to love games through the community or other media. As in my own example, the cosplay interest can supersede the game interest.

Importantly, actors do not only undergo this affective process passively, but also actively produce affects. They evoke them in anticipation of the fan convention or enact it when creating the costume. Through different media and derivative texts, fans foster purposely foster their own affect towards particular games. Thus, I show that affect is actively given shape and is more complex than current theories account for.

Costumes and Productive Play

Historically, the fan tradition of dressing up is extensive and goes back to historical reenactment and Renaissance Faires, where earlier time periods are a source of inspiration. Dress-up in media fan communities dates back to American science fiction conventions in the '60s and '70s, at which fans wore outfits from series such as *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*. In game communities, another example of dress-up is live-action role-playing or larp, originating from the '70s, where fans started to re-enact their favorite table-top games, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. In larp, enthusiasts base costumes on genre-fiction (e.g., fantasy) or historical periods in a co-creative game for which original characters are designed and reenacted. In all of these examples, fans of speculative or historical fiction re-enact their interests in cloth. In virtual communities, dress-up is an equally important and pertains to the physical construction and customization of one's avatar (Fron et al. 2007; Wirman 2011) . This can even be furthered in doll-play, in which the player dresses up different characters that s/he controls (e.g., *The Sims*). Here, the player can even make the avatar resemble characters from other texts that s/he enjoys.

The term “cosplaying” was coined in the eighties by the game designer Takahashi Nobuyuki when he encountered the costuming practices of American fans on a visit to the United States (Bruno 2002; Winge 2006, 66–67). In Japan cosplay has become very prominent. Many Western fans nowadays learn about costuming not through science fiction or fantasy genres, but through Japanese fiction. As a fan practice, cosplay is associated with Japanese fans of *anime* (cartoons), *manga* (comics), and games, who are called *otaku*. In Western settings, there seems to be much overlap between cosplay and other forms of dressing up such as (live-

action) role-playing, but also customizing one's avatar. In cosplay, games are embodied and transposed to new, physical settings. Players explicitly relate their own body and behaviour to fictional characters (see also Lamerichs 2011).

Cosplay is gradually influencing the professional game industry. Some media companies are already very aware of the quality of fan's costumes and use them for promotional activities. Cynthia Leigh (2007) draws attention to the fact that the game conference E3, once dominated by 'booth babes' - professionally hired models - 'ha[s] now become a mix of both agency girls and cosplayers'. Photographers and artists also show an interest in cosplayers, not just as models, but also as subjects for installations, as in the work of Cao Fei, or as portraits of players or fans themselves (Austin and Correa 2006; Hancock 2011).

Thus, cosplay cannot be analyzed without understanding its role in fan and game communities. Fan costumes are one example of how fans express their appreciation of existing stories and rework them through various media. Like fan fiction, fan movies, and fan art, cosplay motivates fans to closely interpret existing texts, perform them, and extend them with their own narratives and ideas. Previous research on media fans has often looked at fan fiction in particular (e.g. Bacon-Smith 1992; Pugh 2005; Busse and Hellekson 2006). When authors do discuss cosplay, it is often via a wider discussion of fan practices and fan conventions (e.g., Bacon-Smith 1992, 3–43; Taylor 2006, 1–11; Pearce 2009, Crawford 2011). Still, these forms of mature dress-up in game communities deserve more attention (see also Fron, Fullerton, Morie, Pearce 2007).

I analyze cosplay as a type of play in its own right, which embraces both its embodied, physical dimension and its relations to the digital games that it is inspired by. Cosplay can be categorized as two types of play: pretend-play and productive play. Firstly, pretend-play, or

mimicry as Caillois (1961) defines it, is a category of play where reality is transformed into an alternative scenario. Other forms of adult make-belief are include live-action role-playing, which also actualizes the imagination in daily life and mediates it through costumes and props (Murray, 1997, notably Chapter 4). However, it seems to me that cosplay is less about developing or performing a character and more about constituting a visual resemblance with it. Though a cosplayer can perform the character in part, for instance by walking around with his or her attitude, the overall idea is a visual one. Cosplay is based on recognition, more than re-imagining.

Fans stroll around in their outfits in the hallways of fan conventions. Reminiscent of Baudelaire's urban explorer, the *flâneur* (Benjamin 2006), these fans wander through the convention to admire the spectacle but also to experience it first-hand by becoming part of the crowd and embodying the fiction itself. However, cosplaying also involves other types of performances. The outfits are used in specific events such as cosplay competitions, fashion shows or photo shoots. The competitions, also known as masquerades, are often theatre skits in which the player acts out the character. Here, the cosplayer is an actor rather than flâneur, even though the skits are only a short-term exploration of a character. In this sense, cosplaying also differs from role-playing as a longer, joint project of telling a story and playing out your own character (Brown, this volume). Since the visual is stressed in cosplay, it should be no surprise that photography is also a part of the hobby. Fans enjoy having their picture taken in their outfits. Amateur photographers can in turn specialize in photographing cosplayers as a creative hobby.

Secondly, cosplay can be understood as productive play in which gamers take up creative activities for their own sake. Luckily, there is abundant research on the productivity of gamers that theorizes how these practices enrich game play and become integral to the pleasures that

result from the game (Pearce 2006). Examples of this are studies on machinima (Lowood and Nitzsche 2011), user-generated content in games (Pearce 2009), and modifications (Banks and Humphreys 2007; Martin and Deuze 2009). These activities are often framed as the result of gamers' attachment to the text, even if they are a vital component of the game play, such as in *The Sims* or *Minecraft*. Moreover, some forms of productive play are pragmatic. Players, for instance, can design modifications to make a game more manageable or write a walkthrough to document their game play or to help out others.

This makes the study of productive practices problematic, since there can be many motivations at stake. Some scholars therefore categorize types of productive play. Andrew Burn (2006) has made a study of *Final Fantasy* fan fiction and fan art. He argues that the fan practices of gamers are fundamentally different from those that are based on other media, such as television series. This is related to the modality of the game. Gamers can both focus on the game state, which results in more *instrumental* products such as walkthroughs, and the narrative, a practice that is for instance explored in *expressive* products like fan fiction. Newman (2008) has adopted this division by discerning between fan practices based on games as stories or configurative performances. This division has been put under scrutiny by Wirman (2007) and Albrechtslund (2010). In practice, it is not so easy to discern whether fans are actually invested in the game play or the narrative. A walkthrough, for instance, can be a goal-oriented tool to beat a game but also a narrative by itself.

Cosplay has specific qualities and limits when compared to other game practices. Like customizing one's avatar, it allows for a degree of appropriation and the embodiment of a character. In many ways, it is about establishing your own version of a character (see also Crawford 2011, 133-137). Notably James Newman has paid attention to cosplay as a visual

phenomenon (2008). Even though cosplay is mainly a reenactment of limited designs of, arguably, flat characters, it still manages to include narrativity. This narrativity, however, does not only depend on the game. “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, 88). Following Mitchell and Clarke (2003), Newman remarks that by mediating a game, cosplay hovers between the virtual and the real in a complex way. He argues that it constitutes different types of realness (Newman 2008, 88). It additionally re-contextualizes a game into a different play setting; the physical world, where its characters interact with other cosplayers and new surroundings.

Still, terms such as real or virtual do not fully capture the cosplay experience. Within recent studies, scholars have often criticized the dichotomy between the real and the virtual, from internet platforms to games, and shown that both draw from each other all the time (e.g., Pearce 2009; Kozinets 2010). Cosplay is however not about making the game real – one can even argue a cosplay is never the real thing, no matter how good it looks – 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 rewards of its own.

Affect as emotion and being

Philosophical theories have often framed affect as a kind of aesthetic touch, a moment in which the subject is “affected”. Affect is particularly present in the discourse of Deleuze and Guattari (1988) who see it as a pre-personal intensity, a bodily state that is independent from the subject that undergoes it. Inspired by this theory, their translator and philosopher Brian Massumi (2005) formulates affect as distinguishable from emotions as its predecessor, an unqualified bodily state

or intensity in which we are touched by art. The artwork supposedly initiates a spark and the spectator responds to this. Problematically, these theories actively detach affect from the subject by separating it from the emotional qualification that follows. The subject is thus put in a passive position which resonates less with my understanding of affect.

In fan and game studies, affect is still underexplored and the few studies on the subject echo this philosophic discourse. Affect or affection is taken for granted as an integral part of fan practices that pay tribute to existing fiction, but it is hardly ever theoretically accounted for. In his study on fans, Lawrence Grossberg (1992) carefully divides affect from emotions: “Affect is not the same as either emotions or desires. Affect is closely tied to what we often describe as the feeling of life” (56). Grossberg speaks not of affect as an embodied state, but rather as an abstract drive of fan investments. Here, affect is narrowed down to a textual response. However, the reception of fans cannot be divided from the social community that thrives around these texts. One analysis by Matt Hills understands fandom as an “affective space” (2001) by explicitly taking the fannish community into account.

Hills’ study looks at fan communities through the lens of Anderson’s “imagined community” (1991), that supposes that communities, such as the nation, are constructed because people envision their membership based on a shared affinity with the group. Hills, however, explains that fandom is a community of imagination in which fans direct their affection towards a text first and foremost, and not towards the community itself or its members. By dividing text and social context, Hills neglects many affective relations in communities (e.g. the relation between fans; the recommendation of texts to each other). Though these relations are mentioned in the article and in his other works (e.g., Hills 2005), they should also be embraced in this affective theory. Moreover, Hills is not very concrete about how affect functions in practice. He

only mentions that it thrives on “attachment rather than desire” (ibid., 148). Here, he suggests, like Grossberg, that affect in fandom operates in the domain of identity but hardly describes how fans experience this.

Affect is a more complex play of affinities than these theories suggest. When I cosplayed as Fourier, my interest in the character did not spark from the game, but was constructed actively in relation to the cosplay community and to different media. Based on my empirical data, which I present in the next sections, I am convinced that a new idea of affect is needed to account for the diversity in fan practices. Thus, I speak of an “affective process”: a range of emotional experiences that can lead to investments in the world through which we constitute our identity. The emphasis is on process rather than on space or practice because it is something we undergo and socially construct at the same time. Process also highlights the dynamics of our relation with fiction, in which some elements matter more at one point in our life than at another. We constantly work through our beloved narratives again through references and re-reading. This understanding of process comes close to Grossberg’s “mattering map” (1992, 60), which suggests that we can chart different intensities at different points of our life through which we make sense of the world and ground ourselves in it. In this sense, affect is closely entwined with our identity. As Kamphof summarizes: “Affect makes us belong” (2010, 5).

My definition of an affective process charts the emotional as well as the aesthetic. First, the emphasis on emotional experiences is important because players carry a wide range of emotions towards games. I mention affection as a broader term when I speak of the cosplayer’s passion for games, but I suggest that often this affection is critical. As Flynn-Jones (this volume) also explains, attachment can also stem from oppositional tastes for bad games. A gamer may dress-up as a game character he likes while he hates most of the game, or can represent a

character to mock it. Such “negative” feelings have been neglected in media studies for a long time (e.g. Hermes 2005, 96-114). In addition, one game can foster several types of affects that partly depend on the modality of a game (Burn 2006; Newman 2008). For example, a player might be ambivalent about a certain character’s background story but might like his or her visual design.

Second, this affective process can also be captured less as an emotional chart towards a personal, aesthetic pursuit. Even though fans may want to rationalize this affect within fan communities, fandom appears to be grounded in an aesthetic moment that is constantly re-lived (Jenkins 2006, 23). Fans do not throw a text away, but keep it and go back to it and even seek for elements of re-interpretation and surprise (Hills 2005). Here, it is important to consider that affect is not something that just arises but something that is prepared. Creating the right circumstances for wearing the costume, and being that character, is central here as part of the aesthetic experience. This is comparable to Gomart and Henion’s research (1997) on music fans. They argue that music fans and drug addicts have a striking similarity in that both of them want to create an optimal aesthetic experience to consume the products that they love. Similarly, cosplayers live up to the convention as a special moment that is to be prepared for. They take on an active disposition and want to be overwhelmed.

Fans attach personal meaning to the success of their cosplay and the process of creating it. They closely relate this to their identity and to some extent claim an exclusive relation with a particular media text. Especially in games, this attachment to characters is perhaps even stronger because the avatar is so closely related to a player’s identity. This personal relationship is captured by James Paul Gee (2007) as a projective identity: we pour our emotions and state of being into the avatar. The characters that we play matter to us personally and we associate them

with ourselves. Can this perceived personal relationship with fictional content cause friction and if so, how does that operate in cosplay? Fans want to have an exclusive relationship with media content but at the same time, they want to see this relationship validated in a group. The character becomes a mediator of love between players.

To find out how affect works in practice, I spoke to many cosplayers. I shall frame their feelings in three ways: as feelings for the game, for the character and for the costume or activity itself.

Game love as media love

At first sight, cosplay can be understood as an embodiment of a fan's affect towards a media text. It is a public performance of game love. Many cosplayers see their costumes as a sign of attachment to a game and a tribute to it. Sometimes they intensify this relationship by creating more outfits from one game. A few *Ace Attorney* cosplayers that I talked to enjoy portraying various characters from this game series and even exchange outfits amongst each other. They relive their experience of the series and are happy to talk about the positive qualities of the game. Here, it becomes clear that a gamer can invest in different elements of the game in different points of his or her life. That is, the affective process entails a subjective articulation that is ever shifting and targets specific elements of the game while the subject is less interested in, or familiar with, other elements.

One affective stance towards the game, for instance, is a nostalgic one in which fans contextualize game experiences according to their life histories. Various *The Legend of Zelda*

and *Final Fantasy* fans told me that the games hold a special place in their heart as series that they grew up with. In a conversation with a Zelda and Link cosplayer, Zelda mentioned: “We have been fans of the games for years!” Particularly in these cases, affect is closely related to nostalgia as a sentiment towards past experiences that are reminisced and re-enacted (e.g., Gordon 2003). “Being a fan for years” is at the same time a statement of how close a game is related to one’s fan identity, and a sign of status. In this sense, it is not only a token of one’s attachment to a game but to the context in which one played it. The meaning is derived from what the game meant many years ago.

Surprisingly, many of the cosplayers interviewed had in fact not played the game that they represent, or had played only parts of it. However, they do consider themselves to be fans and rely on different repertoires and media to ground their fandom. These non-players have familiarized themselves with a game’s content through specific social situations or through other media. This can be captured by the concept *transmediality*, that highlights how different relations are established across media content and platforms. Henry Jenkins (2006) derives the term *transmedia storytelling* from this discourse to explain narratives in which parts of the plot are purposely expanded through different media platforms. Every medium serves its own audience groups but can also form an entry point into the franchise as a whole. In cosplay, connections between games and other media are also furthered by their audiences, who perform game characters through other media (e.g. costumes). I shall mention four examples where non-players use other media to experience parts of the game and express that love through cosplay.

First, cosplayers may not have played a game at all, but enjoy its design nonetheless. The visual mode of a game can be accessed through other media, after all. Fans learn about the game through other players or through the fan practices that surround it. Some of the players spent

quite some time looking for characters to perform and told me about their ideas and wish lists. Cosplayers familiarize themselves with a game through traditional or online communities. Sometimes, they group together online or offline when peers are still looking for characters of a particular game that they want to perform at a convention. The non-player who joins these groups will often make a decision based on the visual features of characters that s/he sees in other media (e.g., internet sites).

Second, cosplayers can enjoy the narrative of the game to some degree. They watch YouTube playthroughs, read summaries, or enjoy watching others play it. As one *Final Fantasy XIII* cosplayer who was cosplaying Vanille while her sister portrays Light told me: “She plays, I just watch.” Like my own experience of cosplaying Fourier, she was fond of the character despite not having played the game herself. Such practices of social gaming and watching games are very common, but have until now hardly been studied as a way of engaging with games or as a mode of reception (e.g., MacCallum-Stewart 2014). Video game audiences are not necessarily players but can also be spectators that can still watch a game and enjoy it without playing it (Crawford 2011, 33-34).

Third, sometimes the game can be consumed through other media. Cosplays of popular franchises are sometimes based on anime or movie versions of the content rather than the original games. As Jenkins’ theory on transmedia storytelling (2006) suggests, other media become entry points to a fictional world and the audience will look into the other parts of the narrative as well. One group of four *Final Fantasy VII* cosplayers, only had one member who had actually played the original game. The others had watched *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*, an animated movie-sequel to the popular RPG, but also had ample understanding of what happens in the game. Similarly, the *Tales of the Abyss* cosplayers that I met had also often

based their outfits on the anime, rather than the original Playstation game, which has not been released in Europe.

Fourth, the division between player and non-player cannot always be so easily made. Many cosplayers do not have a relationship with a game *a priori* but will start playing it once they consider cosplaying a character. Many of them admit that they will need to have some connection with the game and its characters and try it out at the same time that they are conceptualizing their cosplay. Interviewee Sara started to play *Kingdom Hearts II* during time spent as part of a traditional cosplay group, where she learned to sew outfits and create patterns. Since they were portraying the villains from the game, who all wear the same coats, she could pick a different character if she did not like the one that she had opted for. “You were making that coat anyway, so you could still change. It didn’t really matter.” Here, the reception of the game goes hand in hand with the creation of the costume.

Sometimes, it is the other way around. Many cosplayers admit that they have played parts of the game but have not finished it because the game play did not appeal to them. The before-mentioned *Final Fantasy XIII* cosplayers, for example, told me that they “love the characters and the story” but when I asked them if they actually enjoy the game, they told me that they found it very difficult. It turns out that they were stuck in the game at an early point “at some kind of ice plain where you have to switch roles”. In terms of play, then, a game might be annoying, too difficult or boring for some players so that, instead of feeling challenged, they simply put it down. Though the narrative and characters might appeal to the gamers, the system of the game or the time that it consumes does not always motivate them to continue. Here, there might be a click with the characters or a kind of game love but the functionality of the medium also hinders it part and frustrates the players.

Character love as choosing and identifying

In cosplay, the character is foregrounded. Fans have their favourites and portray them in many contexts; as icons at forums, as customized avatars in games, or in costume. Sometimes, a player enjoys being that character so much that s/he creates different outfits that the character wears, refines one costume for later venues. At first sight, it would seem that cosplayers identify with characters quite heavily but this would be a wrong assumption. Identification in cosplay is deeply connected to game fans' individual reception. The activity is not just a projection of the self but an interpretive process of engaging with the character. In many cases, cosplayers suggest that the activity is not so much about being the character as getting to know him or her. The character is given an independent existence. Fans speak of the characters favourably, carefully distinguish them from themselves, and often entitle them with a sense of personality that is consistent or "in character". When there is an anomaly in the plot of the game that portrays a character differently, fans often justify these actions or explain them by pointing to the conditions of the media production (e.g., different writing teams).

Choosing a character is part of the affective process that cosplayers engage in, but it is often comprised by the cultural context. First, physical appearance or preferences play a role since cosplay is a highly visual practice. Gender and sexuality are for many cosplayers not a real issue, as in fan communities at large. For the purpose of this study, I do not elaborate upon this here, but other accounts of gender and homosexual fiction in fandom have shed light on this (e.g., Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992; Pugh 2005). Specifically Broussard (2009) has looked into the ways that male cosplayers construct their masculinity through cosplay. Cross-gender

cosplay or *crossplaying* is also a fairly common activity at fan conventions. Some cosplayers have strong gender preferences and enjoy crossplaying more than others, whereas some look at the physical characteristics of specific men and women.

Primarily, fans base themselves on the way that the character is situated in the narrative and respond to that. For some, the character is clearly an object of devotion. Sometimes, female fans voice this as love quite clearly by calling the character a real “bishie” (from the Japanese *bishounen*, which means “pretty young boy”). Women can appreciate these men by becoming them and staging them as subjects but also adore them as objects of affection, as the handsome men that they are. One *Ace Attorney* cosplayer for instance portrayed prosecutor Gavin, the opponent of the main character in *Apollo Justice*, and told me how much she liked the other prosecutors in the previous games as well. She adores the character and also invests in homosexual interpretations of him. Her feelings towards the character seem to be a mix of adoration and identification, a theme that came up in many of the interviews. Taking on alternative roles, mimicry, is not a simple play-pretend here but also a sign of one’s attachment to a particular character that can resemble genuine love for another human being and the wish to cherish and understand this person.

Size, posture and attitude are categories that cosplayers often mention as restrictions in representing a character effectively, rather than classic identity features as gender or ethnicity. Sara explained that gender matters to her but is not always what she considers first. “I wouldn’t like to be a Japanese thin girl. I’m just not that small, thin or young, but I could still pass for a Japanese guy.” Ria, like Sara, mentioned age. She cosplayed as the ten-year old Misty from *Pokémon* but had turned twenty recently. She felt that this was the last time that she could portray a young character, “before it is too late”.

Some cosplayers have pragmatic reasons to choose a character. Ria had also cosplayed the titular character from *American McGee's Alice* because she did not want to wear a wig and already had boots that looked like the ones from the game. In many cases, such pragmatic considerations also help limit cosplay decisions. Ria did not feel related to the character, for instance. "I don't really identify with Alice," she told me. "Though I guess that in similar circumstances, I would have acted the same as her." Interestingly, she did mention that she sometimes felt like Alice when she wandered through a physical environment that reminds her of the game. That is, game space is something that she related to more than the character itself.

Importantly, cosplay culture itself helps narrow the choices down. Especially when their favourite character has already been claimed by many other cosplayers, fans are not always motivated to portray them. They find their own strategies in dealing with this, for instance by making their own original versions of the characters or opting for extraordinary versions of a character. Many *Zelda*-fans raised the point that *Zelda* and *Link* have been amply cosplayed and felt that they need to carve their own niche. One *Zelda* cosplayer had created a black *Super Smash Brothers* outfit of *Zelda*, another had created an outfit of her alter-ego; *Sheik*. Two other players had already made *Zelda* and *Link* outfits from *Skyward Sword* long before the game was released. Here, cosplay culture interferes with the affective process, but this is tackled by the fans in inventive ways.

This pretend-play is not just limited to cosplay. It often extends to other domains such as the game itself. After all, a game character is usually also an avatar that is playable and positions us in the game (Burn 2006). In some cases, the love for a character is innately tied up to the experience of being the character in-game as well. As cosplayer Ron told me: "I always participate in the *Soul Calibur* compo with *Tira*. She is one of the most difficult characters to

play with. I always drop out the first round, but I always try again next year anyway.” Even though Ron is not the best player of *Soul Calibur*, he persists because the social activity and the game itself mean a lot to him. Investment in a character can additionally be performed in other types of play or creative fan practices. Interviewee Miranda has for instance cosplayed Xemnas from *Kingdom Hearts* but also played him in LiveJournal role-playing games, where she interacted as the character with other users. Others create fan art of the characters or fan fiction. Being a fan means establishing these kind of performances in which the character is foregrounded (see also Pugh 2005).

The performance of the character is also entwined with the creation of the costume. Interviewee Sara told me that the character is very much alive when she creates her cosplays. She described a wall in her bedroom that functions as a cosplay mood board. “For me, it’s like, you play a game and someone is cool – at the moment, Ezio (from *Assassin’s Creed II*) is really cool – and then I put up pictures from art books and other things on my wall and he really starts to live until at some point, suppose I’ve created and worn Ezio, he’s put in the closet and I’ll do something else. It evolves.” Like others that work in groups or duos, she tells me that constructing a cosplay has a very particular atmosphere to it in which footage from the game is re-watched, the soundtrack is played and the characters are re-enacted. “If you work together with someone, you have this atmosphere and you are partly in character. I’ve never seen something like that before. You already start to go in character while that character is just there as fabric on the ground. That’s something really special.”

The creation of the outfit becomes a way of already enjoying the cosplay and the aesthetic experience it fosters. Many cosplayers are sceptical about transforming into the character at a convention itself, though. Performing the character is limited in this space and

mostly consists of having the proper attitude and posing correctly on pictures. Furthermore, the activity is often compromised, for instance, because of the stress of competing with others in a fashion show or because physical discomforts make the outfit a burden. “Then you are more concerned with your wig than the fact that you are walking there as Grell,” Miranda said. Cosplayers describe their anxiety regarding parts of the outfit that break, grime that comes off and other trivialities that break the magic of being in costume. Sometimes, it is more difficult to pinpoint why a transformative moment falls short and how a cosplay does not always feel a positive experience. With some cosplays, Ron told me, “this does not fit.” “On a personal level?” “Yes,” he answers me. “70% of it was okay and wearable but the other 30% lacked.” He simply missed that extra click with the outfit. However, there is no reason why he does not relate to the costume, other than the inability to experience affect during the performance itself.

In general, however, identity in cosplay is a highly relational phenomenon that depends less on the self and more on the social context. The cosplayers explained that they feel like the character because they are addressed as such or because of the costume’s association with that character. Ron described: “It’s kind of like I leave behind part of myself in the hotel room. (...) I start to behave more feminine, more elegant. That’s partly due to the costume and partly an attitude.” Others told me that they experience the characters as roles that they can learn from and that inspire them. They relate them to their own identity closely and tell me that the cosplay somehow has worn off on them. “If you really like a character,” Sara told me, “you learn what aspects of yourself you don’t know so well. Sometimes you see a character and you think: “Why does this person appeal to me?” Then it often turns out that he has a connection with you, at least, that’s how I experienced it.” By cosplaying strong, secure characters, Sara learned to be less shy because she saw that people reacted to her differently when she was playing.

Costume Love as Creating and Cherishing

A final part of the aesthetics of cosplay relies on the creation process and the outfit itself. The outfit and its construction can fuel the relation with a character or game, but can also give ground to affective experiences that are not related to the game context *per se*. Like in other creative domains, the process of making or combining the outfit is not only preparation for a performance but also a meaningful act by itself. Some cosplayers explained their love for sewing as an activity and their passion for learning new skills. Interviewee Ron told me that in some cases, outfits “outweigh” characters for him because he is interested in new sewing challenges and also picks his outfits based on difficult designs. He wants to make a new outfit of Tira from *Soul Calibur V* that will involve latex, which he has never worked with, many pieces of cloth, and a complex styling of the wig.

Creating the costume involves many feelings. Sometimes, it can be quite bothersome when an outfit is not turning out as it should. When you are sewing the outfit all by yourself, this can be particularly frustrating and though you may turn to the internet for help, it does not always go well. “I used to let these nerves guide me,” Ron confessed, who has recently started to construct difficult outfits. Some cosplayers have similar insecurities but resolve them by cooperating with friends. In fact, most cosplayers learn to sew by appropriating existing outfits or by sewing with friends or family. Some look for patterns online and try to make sense of these, but this is usually at later stages. Interviewee Ria even created her first cosplay, Alice, by putting her favourite dress on the fabric and drawing its contours. Thus, the creation process can depend on other people but this is certainly not always the case.

Even though cosplaying can be challenging at first, cosplayers become more at ease with it as they gain more skills. Creating itself is an affective process in which you grow and feedback of the community on your costume can be supportive and maybe even decisive to continue (e.g., Gauntlett 2011). Still, not all cosplayers create their outfits. I stumbled upon many cosplayers who had bought their costumes at internet sites or commissioned them from art sites or other cosplayers. However, the process of looking into diverse costumes or finding the right seamstress also requires effort. Cosplayers that buy their outfits tell me that they are often quite picky, negotiate with seamstresses that sell custom outfits, and wait in suspense until their wig or outfit arrives. When you create the costume yourself, finding the right utilities is also challenging and involves similar shopping experiences even before the costume is sewn.

Thus, creating, or buying, the costume and wearing it solidifies one's relation towards the character and game. The costume itself usually takes up a special place in your heart afterwards. Many cosplayers wanted a cosplay experience to be exclusive. Others wear their outfit several times, especially when it fits well, but are equally likely to refine the costume each time. Cosplayers have very different opinions and even norms about this. Many players with free time on their hands, usually those that start cosplaying when they are still in high school or college, will create several outfits for a convention and find this very acceptable, while others might invest more time in one outfit and wear that for the duration of the event or at several conventions. These attitudes towards wearing the costume also convey that costume love depends on the community as much as one's personal, creative goals.

After its debut, the outfit is preserved or worn again at a later point. Some of the interviewees had so many costumes that they had to sell some of them. "That was quite difficult," Ron told me, while Sara said: "It is weird to put your memories in an envelope and

send them off to someone else. It's somehow unnatural." The memories related to a costume are not only personal but also the result of a creative process that players have undergone and accomplished. "When I see my costumes," Sara said, "I immediately know where the sewing machine stopped and where I spilled coffee. You see bits and pieces of your life in it." This attachment also results in the wish of cosplayers to preserve their outfits properly. Though some cosplayers care about this less, or only put the outfits on display when they are working on them, others exhibit them on a tailor's dummy for months or dream of having a separate closet for their outfits.

However, the need to preserve the outfits is not only related to the idea that they are carefully constructed artworks. It also stems from the very real idea that these outfits are a part of you. "They are more than just costumes," Miranda argued. "They remind me of the convention, where you meet people and do nice things." The costume is a memorabilia of the convention experience, like photographs and videos. On top of that, they are a reminder of the narrative or character that you have grown to care about. The costume is a combination of your own life and the people that you have met at a convention. At the same time, it is a reminder of the character and game that holds a special place in your heart as a story, as visual art that touched you or as something that you have played and been through. The outfit is a token; one of the few material remainders of a deeply personal experience.

Conclusion

Cosplay is an affective process with different affective entry points and results. The media-text is not central here but rather the interchange between player, game and costume. This project led

me to believe that the reception of games is wider than gaming only. This notion ties up with recent transmedia phenomena. First, as the theory of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2006) suggests, audiences increasingly find entry points to a game narrative through other franchises such as movies of the same franchise. Second, games have different modes that gamers rely on and that motivate this transmedial activity. The enjoyment of games through other media is a common state of reception that we tend to overlook in audience studies. These different audience positions are possible because some modes of games can be stored and enjoyed individually. We can listen to the music of a game, look at its designs, watch the cut scenes or game play, and enjoy its reviews. What we capture as paraludic in this book - secondary practices or texts that reside outside the game - becomes a primary text as the only text that audiences rely on.

The informants did not perceive this as a problem. This can be explained, firstly, by understanding that these modes of reception are a voluntary choice of their audiences who only want to enjoy a product to some degree or within a certain social context. Furthermore, cosplay is a very visual performance where it is possible to invest in a character without investing in the game. Some cosplayers just want to make a nice outfit, cosplay with their friends or convey something other than a positive relation towards a game. What remains of these diverse experiences are the costumes that players cherish along with photographs or videos, a residue of the performance but also media texts that can be interpreted in their own right.

In terms of affect, a cosplayer's attachment to a game can be directed towards specific elements of the text and the context in which it is consumed. This affective process has different entry points and affective moments that range from the costume to the game itself. This relation does not necessarily precede a passion for the original game. In fact, the cosplay is often created parallel to the familiarization with the game or the replaying of it. As opposed to existing

theories on affect that presume it is a pre-personal state, it becomes clear that these audience members take on an active disposition and partly construct the affective process. Fans purposely advance their attachment by making a costume and wearing it. Affect is not only articulated, then, but nourished, created and performed.

References

Albrechtslund, Anne-Mette. 2010. "Gamers Telling Stories: Understanding Narrative Practices in an Online Community". *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 16, 112-124.

Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (Revised edition). London and New York: Verso.

Austin, Evelyn and Correa, Bea. 2006. "The Cosplay Show. Portrait Gallery". *Mediamatic*. Accessed 20 November 2011, <http://www.mediamatic.net/page/11843/en>

Bacon-Smith, Camille. 1992. *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Banks, John and Humphreys, Sal. 2007. "The Labour of User Co-Creators: Emergent Social Networks Markets?" *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 14. 401.

Benjamin, Walter. 2006. *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*. Eds. Jennings, M., Eiland, H., Jephcott, E., Livingstone, R. and Zohn, H., (trans.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Broussard, Jonathan. 2009. "(Ad)dressing Masculinity: The Performance of Male Cosplay in the South". *Southern Anthropologist Society*.

Bruno, Michael. 2002. "Cosplay: The Illegitimate Child of SF Masquerades". *Glitz and Glitter Newsletter, Millennium Costume Guild* (October). Accessed 20 July 2010.

<http://millenniumcg.tripod.com/glitzglitter/1002articles.html>

Burn, Andrew. 2006. "Reworking the text: Online fandom". In eds Carr, Diane, Buckingham, David, Burn, Andrew, Schott, Gareth. *Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 88-102.

Caillois, Roger. 1961. *Man, Play, and Games*. New York: Free Press.

Crawford, Garry. 2011. *Video Gamers*. New York, London: Routledge.

Fron, Janine, Fullerton, Tracey, Morie, Jacki, and Pearce, Celia. 2007. "Playing Dress-up: Costumes, roleplay and imagination". *Philosophy of Computer Games*. 24-27 January 2007.

University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. <http://www.ludica.org.uk/LudicaDress-Up.pdf>

Gee, James Paul. 2007. *What Video Games Have to Teach us about Learning and Literacy* (Revised edition). New York, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gomart, Emilie and Hennion, Antoine. 1999. "A Sociology of Attachment: Music Amateurs, Drug Users". In: *Actor Network Theory and After*. Oxford, Blackwell: The Sociological Review.

Gordon, Ian. 2003. "Superman on the Set: The Market, Nostalgia and Television Audiences". In eds. Jancovich, M. and J Lyons. *Quality Popular Television: Cult TV, The Industry and The Fans*. London: BFI Publishing.

Grossberg, Lawrence. 1992. "Is there a Fan in the House? Affective Sensibility of Fandom". In ed. Lewis, L. *The Adoring Audience*. London: Routledge. 50-65.

Gunnels, Jen. 2009. "A Jedi like my father before me": Social Identity and the New York Comic Con. In *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 3. Accessed 20 July 2010.
<http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/161/110>

Hancock, David. 2011. *Cosplay*. Accessed 13 November, 2011: <http://www.david-hancock.com/cosplay/index.html>.

Hermes, Joke. 2005. *Re-reading Popular Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Hills, Matt. 2001. "Virtually Out There: Strategies, Tactics and Affective Spaces in on-line fandom". In *Technospaces: Inside the New Media*. Ed. Munt, Sally. 2001. London, New York: Continuum. 147-160.

Hills, Matt. 2002. *Fan Cultures*. New York and London: Routledge.

Hills, Matt. 2005. "Patterns of Surprise: The "Aleatory Object" in Psychoanalytic Ethnography and Cyclical Fandom", *American Behavioral Scientist*, 48(7).

Jenkins, Henry. 1992. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Jenkins, Henry. 2006. "Excerpts from 'Matt Hills Interviews Henry Jenkins'". In: *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers. Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 9-36.

Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.

Kamphof, Ike. 2010. "Webcams to Save Nature: Online Space as an Affective and Ethical Space". *Foundations of Science*, 16, 2-3.

Kozinets, Robert. 2010. *Netnography. Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC: Sage.

Lamerichs, Nicolle. 2011. "Stranger than Fiction: Fan Identity in Cosplaying". *Journal of Transformative Works and Cultures*, 7. Accessed 12 November 2011, <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/246>

Leigh, Cynthia. 2007. "Cosplay Models: Real Life Japanime Characters". *Helium*. Accessed July 20, 2010. <http://www.helium.com/items/207818-cosplay-models-real-life-japanime-characters>.

Lowood, Henry. and Nitsche, Michael. 2011. *The Machinima Reader*. Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Massumi, Brian. 2002. "The Autonomy of Affect". In: *Parables for the Virtual*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 23-45.

Martin, Chase Bowen. and Deuze, Mark. 2009. "The Independent Production of Culture: A Digital Games Case Study". *Games and Culture* 4(3), 276-295.

MacCallum-Stewart, Esther. 2014. *Online Games, Social Narratives*. New York: Routledge.

Mitchell, Grethe and Clarke, Andy. 2003. "Videogame Art: Remixing, Reworking and Other Interventions". In: *Level Up Conference Proceedings*. November, 2011:

<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.83.8755andrep=rep1andtype=pdf>.

Murray, Janet. 1997. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. New York: Free Press.

Newman, James. 2008. *Playing with Videogames*. New York, London: Routledge.

Pearce, Celia. 2006. "Productive Play: Game Culture from the Bottom Up". *Games and Culture*, 1(1). 17-24.

Pearce, Celia. 2009. *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer games and Virtual Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Pugh, Sheenagh. 2005. *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context*. Bridgend: Seren.

Taylor, TL. 2006. *Play Between Worlds. Exploring Online Game Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Winge, Theresa. 2006. "Costuming the Imagination: Origins of Anime and Manga Cosplay". *Mechademia* 1, 65-76.

Wirman, Hanna. 2007. "'I Am Not a Fan, I Just Play a Lot' – If Power Gamers Aren't Fans, Who Are?". In *Situated Play, Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference*. Available at http://www.digra.org/dl/search_results?authors_index=Wirman%20Hanna.