

Cosplay

Material and Transmedial Culture in Play

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ABSTRACT

Through “cosplay” (costume play) fans perform existing fictional characters in self-created costumes, thereby enriching and extending popular narratives. Cosplay is a scarcely studied form of appropriation that transforms and actualizes an existing story or game in close connection to the fan community and the fan’s own identity (Lamerichs, 2011; Newman, 2008; Okabe, 2012; Winge, 2006). The activity can be read as a form of dress up. In the field of game studies, dress up is an often overlooked but significant category of play with its own affordances (Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007). While dress up can involve actual costumes or fantasy play, it is also encouraged in digital games and their user-generated content. Customizable characters and “dollhouse” structures in *The Sims* series are but one example (Wirman, 2011). Similarly, cosplay provides the player with the joys of make-belief and productive play.

This paper explores the possibilities of reading the costume itself as a product that facilitates performance and play. I analyze cosplay as a transmedial activity that is constructed at different online and offline sites through small-scaled ethnography and close-reading. The transmediality of cosplay is foregrounded in the methodology that, rather than adopting a player-centered approach, construes a cultural reading that involves both participants and spectators (e.g., photographers, fans, media professionals or outsiders such as parents). Through two case-studies, I focus on the costume’s materiality and emerging performances.

The first case details the materiality of cosplay through its consumption culture. Cosplay blurs the relations between labor and play. The activity takes shape at fan conventions but also increasingly at promotional events of the industry itself. Costumes are commodified by fans themselves as well that sell their cosplay photos, commission their dress from others or buy parts of them. Increasingly, costumes and accessories are sold over platforms as eBay and Etsy which will illustrate the dynamics between commerciality and creativity.

The second case explores the visibility of the costume through its mediation. While the costume can be experienced first-hand at convention sites, it is also remediated in photography, for instance, thereby extending its potential audience and performative

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possibilities. I exemplify this transmediality through cosplayer music videos (CMV) that are commonly produced at convention sites. These rich videos are created by and for fans and juxtapose different cosplayers and texts. Informed by work on other fan videos such as “machinima” (Lowood & Nitsche, 2011) I propose a reading of a selected corpus of videos. Thus, this study analyzes the dynamics of costume culture as it transcends the convention grounds.

Keywords

Dress up, fandom, cosplay, transmediality, cosplay music videos (CMV), labor, spectatorship

INTRODUCTION

The dress up of fictional characters or “cosplay” – a portmanteau of “costume” and “play” - has amply flourished in game culture the past years. Through cosplay, fans perform existing fictional characters in costumes that are generally self-created. The costumes are debuted at fan conventions such as DragonCon, London Expo or Comic Con International. These conventions are large meetings of fans that vary from several hundreds to half a million visitors who attend to socialize, shop, enjoy panels, meet celebrities, play games or watch videos together. At these venues, fans can also participate in cosplay competitions or enjoy creative workshops. Cosplay celebrates popular culture but also extends and deepens its narrative content. While fictional dress up started in science fiction fandom in the seventies, today it is commonly associated with the popular culture of Japan that heavily influenced the cosplay scene. By now, cosplay is a visible activity in media fandom that is performed at the fan convention ground and beyond it. It is popular across cultures and even within emerging economies such as Brazil and Taiwan. Especially the fandoms of American graphic novels and digital games have drawn more cosplayers the past years from different national backgrounds.

Despite its long history, cosplay is still not completely accepted at some prominent fan conventions. Part of the reason is that dress up has particularly flourished in the separate scene of anime fandom for a long time. Now that cosplayers actively appropriate the male spaces of Western comic books and games, some visitors have their first encounters with cosplay and form misunderstandings about the practice. Especially comic book author Tony Harris steered a debate in 2012 when he drew attention to female cosplayers in a blog post. Harris implied that female players only engaged in the activity for the attention and the kink, presuming that they had not even read the texts (Romano, 2012). Harris thus doubted their social and gaming capital (Consalvo, 2007). Ironically, the author critiqued women for wearing the skimpy designs that he and his colleagues were responsible for and doubted their fan loyalty based on their appearance. Within fandom, these and other situations led to a strong debate on the fraught “geek girl”. Cosplayers are now investigating new social protocols and are sharing their experiences through fan art, blogs and videos (e.g., FanServiceRenjin, 2013). These critiques are not only voiced towards other visitors – those who do not understand cosplay or have difficulty with its sexual appeal - but also feed back into the media industry whose designs cosplayers imitate.

Still, this debate does not tell us how media designs partly liberate women and spark their narrative fantasies. The current fan debates aim to defend cosplay and female fans but do not tackle the community itself, the craftsmanship and fan loyalties involved. I am interested in capturing the practice of cosplay further and understanding it at a deeper

level. I suggest that cosplay should be understood as type of play that flourishes particularly well among female audiences and crafters. This practice of play can inspire game designers and theorists. Within fan and game studies, cosplay is a scarcely studied form of appropriation that transforms and actualizes an existing story or game in close connection to the fan community and the fan's own identity (Lamerichs, 2011; Newman, 2008). The activity can be read as a form of dress up. In the field of game studies, dress up is an often overlooked but significant category of play with its own affordances (Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007). While dress up can involve actual costumes or fantasy play, it is also encouraged in digital games through "productive play". That is to say, the customization and creation of virtual objects by users is increasingly incorporated in game mechanics (Pearce, 2006, 2009). Customizable characters and "dollhouse" structures in *The Sims* series are but one example of productive play and how it relates to dress up (Wirman, 2011). Similarly, cosplay provides the player with the joys of make-belief through the creation of her own dress and the liberty to perform in it.

I propose to look at the structural elements of cosplay as well as the costume itself and how these reflect the player culture of cosplay. This practice is intensely embodied; a characterization that its proponents echo, albeit in negative and gendered terms. However, cosplay also depends on materialism and visuality; two structural devices of our media culture which are increasingly debated within cultural studies. I argue that the construction of subjectivity within cosplay can only be understood in relation to objects and mediation processes. This paper explores the possibilities of reading the costume itself as a product that facilitates performance and play by preliminary investigating the materiality and transmediality of the costume.

METHODOLOGY

The past years, I have tackled the topic of cosplayer through various angles, often supported by traditional field work and qualitative methods. This paper builds on my work on cosplay as a performative phenomenon that shapes the player's identity (Lamerichs, 2011) and as an affective process that reconstitutes the embodied and felt experience, as explored in my upcoming dissertation.

In this paper, I chart how dress up fits within discourses of labor as a fan-driven commodity culture and how it can be mediated to spectators that are not directly included in the space of play (e.g., the convention space). I thus emphasize the visual culture of the costume and its mediation at different online and offline sites through small-scaled ethnography and close-reading. The transmediality of cosplay is foregrounded in the methodology that, rather than adopting a player-centered approach, construes a cultural reading that involves both participants and spectators (e.g., photographers, fans, media professionals or outsiders such as parents). By focusing on online retail sites and cosplay music videos, I hope to direct attention to the costume's materiality and transmediality. My online ethnography is characterized by an observatory stance at both the market sites and YouTube where I analyzed the music videos. Moreover, I take the medium-specificity of the platforms into account.

I approach this topic partly through my own experiences as a cosplayer with a methodological stance that is best captured as that of a "geek feminist". This view point promotes the critical online activity of women and their engagement with media technologies. In her studies on female computer users, linguist Bucholtz (2002) coined the term *geek feminism* to outline a theoretical and socially engaged view point informed by the legacy of feminism while retaining geek identity: 'Geek feminism, like all political

affiliations and identities, is not a category with which to classify individuals but a stance that shapes and is shaped by social practice' (id., p. 282). Bloggers have been quick to pick up the term and developed the platform *Geek Feminism*, founded in 2009. This blog articulates female geek identity and critically assesses media representations and user cultures.

Ethically, my feminist stance also presses me to constantly define and re-define my relationship with my informants. I address my informants at an equal level and approach them openly in the shared space of fandom. I treated the market sites as public data during this study but refrain from mentioning usernames or shop names. I asked the video artists for permission to analyze their work as these art works border between the private and public. This is also in line with the code of conduct of the *Organization of Transformative Works* which recommends asking fans for permission to cite and analyze their material to protect the informants and their creative works.

COSPLAY AS COMMODITY

As a type of productive play, cosplay depends on the circulation and fabrication of objects. These include full attires, props such as weapons, and gadgets that can be commercialized, circulated, sold and given. The narrative content and performances of cosplay are highly “transmedial” - they flow across media platforms that together construct the meaning of the costume and its performance. Fandom and audience formation are increasingly understood through the commercial transmedia designs of the media industries that brand and spread their narratives across platforms (Jenkins, 2006). These commercial transmedia tokens oppose the gift culture of fandom. Fans freely gift each other art works, stories and feedback to create affective bonds and kinship (Scott, 2009, 2010). However, within cosplay, the commercial culture of transmediality and the gift culture of fandom do not exclude each other. That is to say, this type of productive play may involve gifts but generally implies lucrative activities through which budding or professional artists and even small factories can support themselves or at least refund their expenses.

I question the liminal status of the costume as it lingers between the creative domain of fandom and commercially-driven creative labor. To see how objects of cosplay circulate, I focus on two online retail sites: eBay (since 1995) and Etsy (since 2005). The first is an online auction site that is commonly used for e-commerce by fixing particular prices; the second is a site for handmade items, vintage and crafting. In both cases, I used the words “cosplay” to explore the first 100 items and examined their related items, comments and context. I searched by “best match” (eBay) and “relevance” (Etsy) rather than “most recent”. I paid attention to the media architecture of these two different platforms as one is structured as an auction and the other as an e-commercial art site. I relied on the search results of April 13th 2013 to obtain this preliminary data and suggest that these sites could provide key data on cosplay when observed for a longer duration of time.

eBay

The market site eBay offers a wide variety of cosplay accessories. In my preliminary search, I notice that the most popular items include many wigs and semi-commercial outfits from seamstresses from China rather than from Western fan artists. Particular dresses are character-inspired rather than imitations, such as the “Kigurumi” pajamas; a popular style of Japanese street fashion. The popular searches include many hoodies inspired by *Assassin's Creed* that imitate Desmond's actual clothing or are more liberal interpretations of the game outfits with the official logo on the back.

The classifications of these items already suggest a particular rhetoric. The top category for cosplay is “clothing, shoes and accessories” (120,430 items), its highest subcategory being “women’s accessories” (55,943). The second most popular category is “collectibles” (50,686 items) which shows that cosplay is not only related to dress but also intimately connected to the collection of fan items and memorabilia. eBay reveals some of cosplay’s gendered dimensions as “women’s accessories” ranks prominently in the categorization and the dresses appear to be catered to women as commissions, not to the men that also frequently crossdress or “crossplay” as female characters. For instance, a vendor of a Mami-outfit (*Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, 2011), suggests that the buyer wears the correct bra when measuring her bust size and provides an illustration of a female silhouette to mark the different measurements. Thereby, male crossplayers are excluded from buying or would have to bypass these images.

Since eBay is an auction site, which partly conflicts with the commercial intent of these vendors, users have to work around site’s architecture at points. Their tactics involve creating elaborate, professional profiles while others keep it simple and state the shipping and feedback policies. Many of the items are categorized with a fixed price and show a “buy it now” status rather than the amount of bids because vendors want to get a certain price for distributing these items. Interestingly, many of the vendors police the feedback of their users to maintain or boast a high-ranking status of their shops. They suggest that users provide positive feedback and if not, contact them personally with their complaints.

Thus, the site reveals cosplay’s commerciality as provides access to new goods from, amongst others, China to other countries and continents. This global market offers a web of stores that engage in professional impression management. The fan investment of vendors is obscure, though it appears that within the less popular search results, costumes that are worn once or twice are sold to other fans for low prices. eBay thus creates a dynamic site where play is aligned with labor and where emerging industries profit from fan interest in dress up.

Etsy

The popular commerce site Etsy offers a wide array of cosplay items that can be bought and sold at agreeable prices. Every artist can have his or her own “shop” at Etsy to sell items that fit within Etsy’s policies. Since Etsy is a site for distributing handmade items and art as well as vintage, the site befits many cosplayers that want to sell their works to earn some extra cash. The popular cosplay vendors at Etsy appear to be quite transcultural and include many Europeans and Americans. However, not everyone ships internationally, as opposed to most shops at eBay.

The site partly offers full attires for divergent prices (e.g., outfits from *Suckerpunch*, *Touhou Project*, *Batman*) as well as props and wigs. These cosplay items are crafted by fans themselves and include knitted hats, pony ears and crowns. Some props are objects that are quite difficult to craft, such as basic and well-fitting cat suits or foam armor for *Dragonball Z* cosplayers. My search offers a striking amount of material related to popular television content, such as *Adventure Time* (2010-) and *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (2010-) revealing that fan favorites also support the cosplay market. Especially pony ears and horns, sometimes with a wig included, compose 10% of the material. Moreover, glasses that are difficult to forge, such as those from the Japanese game *Ghost Trick* (2010), are popular objects. The site offers different wigs that are not

completely handmade but rather styled or painted to fit difficult hairdos such as Merida's red and bushy hair from Pixar's *Brave* (2012).

Etsy vendors also offer neutral objects for dress up that they categorize as cosplay. For instance, one shop offers goggles which are listed as "cosplay" but also as "steampunk". Similarly, elvish ears have elaborate titles that refer to "cosplay", "larp", "Halloween", "Vulcan" and "Hobbit", showing the cross-genre aspects of dress up. Most items are shown on a mannequin or with a neutral background. This seems to be favored over, for instance, wearing or modeling the props or outfits. This visual strategy makes the objects look neutral and easy to personalize with your own outfit or dress. Likewise, the eBay users often depict their objects through neutral imagery as well.

In terms of creative labor, the items are sold for affordable prices, suggesting that some money is made of the items but not a considerable amount. The descriptions often detail how they are made, with what material, and provide some background on the store owner and his or her craftsmanship or actual store. This grants validity and professionalism to these items; a certain status and guarantee of their quality. The vendors also go into detail about practicalities such as shipping costs and where they are willing to ship their items. They also provide tips on how to preserve, for instance, a wig or how to put on the Elvish/Vulcan ears.

Overall, the site shows a discourse of professionalism and craftsmanship but offers few signs of the performance of cosplay itself. The full attires sometimes display a picture of a fan modeling the outfit which may or may not be the vendor herself. The vendors aim to facilitate cosplay but their own loyalties are hidden behind professional impression management. Compared to eBay two main differences emerge. First, the descriptions and classifications of the fan objects at Etsy do not hint at their status as memorabilia. Second, craftsmanship is stronger valued at Etsy where the production process and materiality of the props and attires is often explained in detail.

TRANSMEDIALITY IN MUSIC VIDEOS

Today, the ludic context of cosplay is increasingly moving away from the convention space to new online environments and creative practices, such as music videos, tutorials and blogs about craftsmanship. Whereas fictional dress up is intimately associated with modeling and photography, we now see a development of different uses and mediations of the costume. Cosplay cannot solely be understood in relation to the convention space but needs to be charted across media.

Cosplay music videos (CMV) have increasingly become a means to extend and share the cosplay performance. These rich videos are commonly produced at convention sites, are created by and for fans, and juxtapose different cosplayers and texts. I analyze these works informed by studies on other fan videos, such as "machinima" (Lowood & Nitsche, 2011). While the stylistics of CMV's may differ per video, they have several commonalities. First, they often emphasize different aspects of the costume through long tracking shots while the cosplayers pose in front of the camera. Second, the videos are usually shot at the fan convention and are also a means of preserving the performances and making them accessible to a wider audience. While they clearly document the costume itself, they are also fan works in their own right. Especially for some fans, these music videos become a way of exploring the characters. Rather than stressing the costume, such videos may go deeper into the text and can be more aligned with other fan

videos. An example of this is *Teeth* (Faxen Cosplay, 2012), a romantic homage to two characters from *Black Butler* (2006-).

CMV's provide rich insights in the culture of cosplay. I explored the genre on YouTube where a rich participatory culture flourishes around "vidding" and user-generated content. Users interact through comments, favorites and play lists amongst others. However, for this short paper I do not explore the comments on the videos in-depth but rather analyze their form and content. I watched a corpus of 30 popular videos, found on YouTube through the key words "CMV", "cosplay" and "cosplay music video". I selected three videos from this set through a maximum variation sampling – a purposeful selection aimed at heterogeneity. These videos are approximately three minutes long and have drawn several thousands to hundred thousand viewers. I was careful in sampling video artists with unique styles and different national backgrounds. However, the most popular videos were generally Anglo-American which my cases reflect. This should be no surprise as some of the biggest fan conventions are held in The States and The United Kingdom whereas continental Europe, for instance, hosts local conventions in different language cultures. Videos based on prominent fan events draw the largest spectatorships because they are watched by audiences interested in the conventions themselves as well.

The format of CMV's is quite specific. Most prominently, they often include the spectator as cosplayers daringly look into the camera. This aspect also categorizes them as high-concept videos that are self-reflexive. The cosplayers imitate their characters - they pose and act as them - but through intense editing and clever shots, a unique video emerges. While some are very much narratives, such as the work of FaxenCosplay, others are edited to the lyrics by association or befit the styles of popular music videos or internet genres. Self-reflexive inclusion of the audience and dialogue with other popular content also discerns CMV's from art videos on cosplay, such as *Cosplayers* (2004) by Cao Fei. In Fei's video, cosplayers attend to their daily business as they prepare their outfits and finally play in them together in the urban domain of China. They do not look at the camera which increases their isolation. Through the cinematography, the idea is evoked that they are escapists without a sense of presence in the real world, succumbed to the dream world that they built together. However, CMV's emphasize presence and dare the spectator at all times. They show a glimpse of a culture that is self-expressive, daring and liberating.

Raise Your Glass

The colorful music video *Cosplay Fever Lip Dub: Raise Your Glass* (Cosplay Fever, 2011) is a montage to the famous song of Pink. Its qualification as a "lip dub" refers to a popular genre of music video. Jenkins, Ford and Green (2012) define it as: 'a form of high-concept music video featuring intricate lip-syncing and choreography' (p. 47). Lip dubs are commonly filmed in a single unedited shot that travels through different situations within a building or space. Vimeo-employee Jake Lodwick coined the term to describe his music video from 2006 but examples of earlier lip dubs can be found. However, the genre only went viral in 2009 when the lip dubs of a Canadian university and *The Today Show* on *I gotta feeling* spread widely, were appraised and imitated. By now, the genre has also been tested at the convention to detail the different situations and performances in cosplay.

Three elements characterize the video's representation of cosplay. First, the fan video offers a framed narrative to discuss cosplay. It starts with a black and white *Alice in Wonderland*-inspired opening in which Alice is taking a walk and finds a glass labeled

“drink me” (figure 1). So she does and she closes her eyes to enjoy the beverage. The scene becomes colored while Alice’s face is replaced by that of Dr. Mrs. The Monarch from *Venture Bros* (2005-). She opens her eyes and lowers the glass, realizing that she has been spiraled straight into a unique Wonderland – the fan convention. Then, the narrative is abandoned in favor of a filmic collage of different cosplayers. We sometimes see Alice in a shot with them (figure 2). The glass also reoccurs as a motif throughout the video. Jack Sparrow and Deadpool, amongst others, cheerfully raise it towards the camera to invite the spectator. The Alice-motif also leads to closure at the end of the video when we see her again on the street. The real world is now colored and bright which highlights the positive influence of the convention space.

Second, while lip dubs are commonly filmed in one shot, this video has been montaged from several scenes. It thereby emphasizes space less but still produces a lively atmosphere. The video is filled with small jokes that respond to the lyrical. Its literal interpretations include a cosplayer of The Joker playacting to “why so serious?” and a Panty-cosplayer from *Panty & Stocking with Garnerbelt* (2010) being dragged out of the camera to the words “panty snatcher”. The emphasis is on a diverse cast of characters that emerge at the convention floor. In terms of cinematography, the upbeat tempo and editing of the CMV stand out as well as its incorporation of close shots. The video pays attention to the cosplayers faces and expressions rather than lengthy poses as they sing to the camera. Thereby it creates a vibrant, jubilant atmosphere.

Third, the video represents mostly women. This is not striking as some cosplay scenes are predominantly female. Interestingly, these women do not shy away from highlighting their sexual confidence and allure. Similar gendered videos include *Call Me Maybe - Otakuthon 2012* (Cyorii, 2012) and *A Girl Worth Fighting For* (RealTDragon, 2012), inspired by a song from Disney’s *Mulan* (1998). These women cannot readily be understood as subjected to patriarchal structures; rather they comment upon them. They explore and add to their sexuality playfully within the space of fandom. The sexual and hyperfeminine partly construct cosplay but function on the level of the ironic and the parody rather than the serious or kink. *Raise Your Glass* offers a bright camp video of cosplay that invites us spectators to join the party.



Figure 1 & 2 *Cosplay Fever Lip Dub: Raise Your Glass*

On Top of the World

The *London Comic Con - MCM Expo- Cosplay Music Video* by sneakyzebra (2012) is edited to Tim McMorris *On Top of The World*. The video stands out in its cinematography on two levels: first, the camera and editing techniques and second, the

integration of space. First, the camera tilts around the subjects who are steadily posing at one place. Its style includes long tracking shots that follow the cosplayers' swift poses. The emphasis is on the subject in an enclosed space at all times, where movement is limited and suggested by the camera work and timing rather than by what the individual cosplayers do. The stylistic montage is achieved through the editing technique "time remapping" which mixes fast forwards with slow motions. This technique increases the suggestion of movement, thus complimenting to the cosplayers' gestures.

Second, the filmic space is a combination of convention ground imagery and urban spaces. While the video is not only shot on the convention ground, but also partly in London, as a scene of the Tower Bridge shows. Still, during initial viewings of the video this may not stand out. The emphasis is always on the cosplayers who look straight at the camera and dare the spectator. They are central in the framing and never out of the picture. Even when the shots take place at touristic hallmarks, the video highlights the movement of the cosplayers while the background functions as entourage. For instance, there are no environmental shots of London to position the players.

Though many cosplay music videos have elements of lip dub, this compilation does not. It is however edited to befit the rhythm of the song at all times and particularly follows the guitar line at several shots, thereby cleverly integrating the choreography and music. Like in the previous video, the poses and actions of cosplayers strongly correspond to the lyrics. To name but one example, at the lyrics "kicked them all out the door" Lara Croft seemingly kicks a fallen cosplayer and aims her gun at him. The video strongly incorporates viral videos of that year and includes several references to, for instance, *Gangnam Style* (2012) by Psy. The recognizable dance of Psy is performed by a crowd of players and the famous elevator scene from the video clip is mimicked by another Lara Croft cosplayer with a girl lying below her. While the original shot of *Gangnam Style* is played out seriously and with stern facial expressions, these girls smile and act charmingly in their parody, inviting us to join their palimpsest and laugh along.

The *London Comic Con*-video particularly emphasizes the empowerment of fans and explores their ambitions. The lyrics add to this and partly explain the competitive and ludic elements of cosplay. One passage, for instance, tells: 'We gotta be the best, the best we can be/ And though sometimes we don't wanna/ Still we gotta chase our dreams/ Reach up, and reach high, because we're gonna pull on through/ And give it all we got, even though it can seem so hard to'. The video explains the convention feelings just right and voices how cosplayers affectively live up to this moment to deliver the best performance that they can. Another important significant passage is: 'While the world is spinning/ It's a brand new beginning/ I'm here finally winning'. Read in the context of cosplay, the last sentence articulates the subcultural elements of cosplay and focalizes the player as someone who finally makes a difference; a winner rather than an underdog. Other CMV's, such as *Born this Way* (Marieke Versonnen, 2012), highlight similar themes of self-empowerment and stardom that are achieved through personal struggle. Like the previous video, this fan work celebrates cosplay but on a different level. While the first case narrates the social, outgoing motives of cosplayers, this video stresses their accomplishments and thereby their craftsmanship and affective performance. The cosplayers are chasing their dream of character re-enactment. These notions influence their identity; their self that has to be "the best it can be".

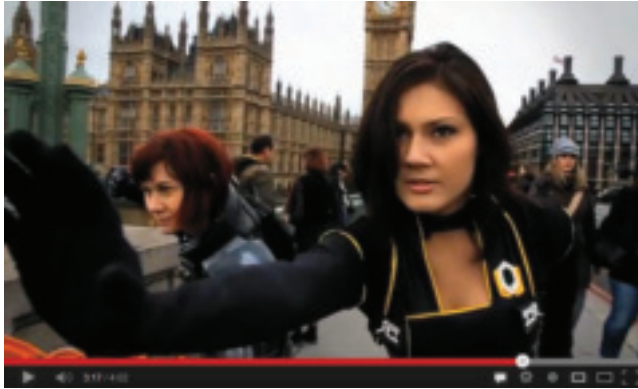


Figure 3 & 4 London Comic Con – MCM Expo - Cosplay Music Video

Lights

The video *Katsucon 2012 2-3* by acksonl (2012) is part of a series of separate videos and offers an almost imaginary, lucid interpretation of the convention floor. In contrast to the previous videos, this CMV strongly engages in storytelling as it follows the events of a villain and contrasts these to the player's own identity (figure 5). Edited on the song *Lights* by Ellie Goulding, the video artist explores light and darkness in conjuncture with the heroes and villains that star the clip. Moreover, the "lights" motif is explored in regards to the convention space that is fuelled with imagination and suggests a spark that can be contrasted to everyday reality.

The video follows an Asian cosplayer that performs the female villain Countess Carmilla from the anime *Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust* (2000). The anime portrays a lesbian vampire who is the patron of the villain Meier Link. She has died but became a ghost due to her unnatural bloodlust and now wants to be revived. The blood of the woman that Meier Link is courting, Charlotte, will serve this purpose well. The countess is a re-interpretation of the titular character in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's gothic novella *Carmilla* (1872). The story's main character is Laura, a woman desired by Carmilla. Carmilla can thus be understood as the proto/archetype of the lesbian vampire whose re-interpretations are deeply ingrained in both Western and Asian popular culture by now. These motives, perhaps unconsciously, structure the fan narrative.

The opening scene stages the cosplayer in backlight, filming her as a dark silhouette as she opens the curtains of her hotel room to let the sun in. We see a tracking shot of her outfit lying on the bed; then she carefully unpacks her wig (figure 5) and a woman with glasses helps her into her garment. The first lyrics are edited to the cosplayer putting her outfit and transforming her identity: "I had a way then losing it all on my own / I had a heart then but the queen has been overthrown". These lyrics also bring to mind the Queen of Hearts of *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) whose design can also be projected on Carmilla through similarities in color scheme and dress (figure 6). In her dark, royal costume, the player faces good and kind characters such as Pinkie Pie from *My Little Pony* and Supergirl, who comes to Pinkie Pie's rescue. Though Carmilla visibly shows hostility towards the innocent female characters, this could be interpreted as queer desire as well with the intertextual history of the character in mind. Like in the anime, and its origin novella *Carmilla*, the female vampire preys on young women.

Still, the video tries to go beyond the vampire stereotype to study the character more deeply. The light and dark motives are increased by Goulding's lyrics that echo the loneliness, misunderstanding and ambiguous intents of the main character of the video. Its opening lyrics: 'I had a way then losing it all on my own/ I had a heart then but the queen has been overthrown', underline a loss of self and emotions, as the heart motif suggests. As she leaves the hotel room, the lyrics 'I am not sleeping now/The dark is too hard to beat' are heard, reflecting her vampiric awakening and bloodlust. During the refrain, an addressee is hailed to help this main character: 'You show the lights that stop me turn to stone/You shine it when I'm alone'. While these lines suggest rescue beacons in the night, they also bring to mind the Medusa myth where the reflection of the mirror turns the monster to stone. In the video, the female character can be understood as a Medusa prototype as she shies away from the lights and addresses those that "shine" the light. Her loneliness and misunderstanding is amplified through this text.

The cinematography of the video relies heavily on slow motions and a figurative play with lights. The shots are elaborate and often emphasize the dress of Carmilla, including her long trail. At the middle of the movie, the narrative is lost as the focus shifts to diverse cosplayers posing while long tracking shots emphasize their costumes. The video is partly revealed as a fan work that also aims to preserve and document Katsucon as it showcases outstanding costumes based on *Sailormoon* (1992-1997) and *Princess Tutu* (2003). Unlike the previous two videos, *Lights* hails its audience less, though some of the characters respond to the viewer's gaze by staring at, or flirting with, the camera. However, the main images study Carmilla while she stalks the convention ground.

The end of the refrain 'And so I tell myself that I'll be strong' can be understood as the motivation of the fictional villain to find herself and redeem herself – not by relying on others to save her and shine the light, but by finding her own strength. In the video, these words are double-coded as they also speak to the sentiments of cosplayers themselves and their value in self-expression. The last words 'dreaming when they're gone' reveal that the lights are fleeting and only a figment of the imagination. While these lyrics are dark, and possibly suggest that the main character is beyond redemption, they may imply something different when read in the context of fandom. In the video, they also seem to befit the fictional and affective structure of the convention space where the protagonists emerge but only for a moment when they actualize fiction and then disperse again. The lyrics remind us of the very fictionality of the playful moment and its disappearance.

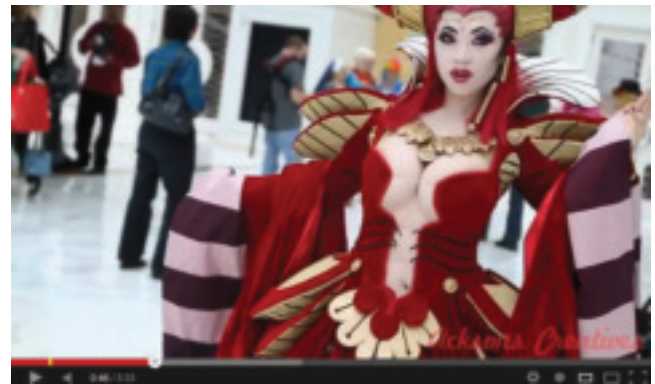
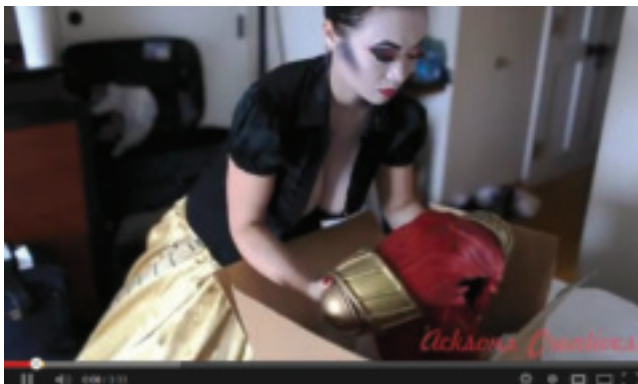


Figure 5 & 6 Katsucon 2-3 "Lights"

CONCLUSION

Cosplay is a shared, lived and embodied space of play. This space extends well beyond its predominant site - the fan convention - into the heart of online culture. The buying and selling of costumes is an active field where we can amply observe the materiality of cosplay. Interestingly, the two sites of eBay and Etsy, which may appear similar at first site, cater to somewhat different interests. eBay facilitates semi-professional outfits and wigs and its logic often seems separate from that of fandom. The platform forms an easy gateway from East to West to import cosplay items. Its sites are as professional as the eBay architecture allows and offer detailed information on shipping and expenses. The auction aspect often moves to the background. Etsy, however, is a site for handmade crafts. It is more popular among Western users who buy and sell small objects, such as ears or hats, but also full attires.

Whereas eBay took the fan out of the equation in favor of the professional, Etsy focuses on craftsmanship, artistry and maintenance of the fan object. The two sites offer us some idea of how cosplay circulates and how cosplayers get certain props and items that may be difficult to come by or create. Thereby, the sites foreground the materiality of cosplay and the labor of those involved. Some of these items may well extend cosplay beyond the performance of dress up as they also signify the collection of fan objects. The costume is revealed as a liminal object that gains its affective meaning through fandom and play but is also an outcome of commercial or non-commercial labor.

The CMV's turned out to be a different online research field altogether. These artworks intensely mediate cosplay at the convention space and well beyond it which potentially draws new audiences. The videos emphasize the performative aspects of cosplay and the subculture itself and do not simply rewrite existing outfits and characters. What is crucial about the CMV's is that they are double-coded. First, the videos provide vital insights in fandom itself as a lived culture and also aim to capture this culture. Second, they are creative works in their own right with lyrical dimensions and visual strategies that construct their meaning.

The three videos include positive views of media fandom and represent its community on several levels. The first video celebrates the convention space, specifically its sociality and intimacy; the second stresses cosplay in terms of "winning" and details its challenging and self-expressive nature; the third studies the imaginary and how it is actualized at the convention, speaking of "lights" and the loss of the self. These positive motives are partly a result of the development of the cosplay community and aim to validate the practice. I have shown that these videos can be used as theoretical objects that help us understand the dynamics of cosplay as they highlight the make-believe and performativity through dress. Particularly the *Lights*-video pays attention to how the costume is worn and preserved. These transmedia tokens of cosplay could be subjected to further analysis as they provide rich insights in the cultural relevance of costume play.

Ultimately, these cases show that the role of cosplay in fandom spills over into different online and offline situations. This brings its own theoretical constraints. For instance, it is difficult to pinpoint where the playful ends and where other social situations begin. Does playfulness extend to the commodity situations at eBay? Can videos draw the spectator into the playful moment? Cosplay raises these questions and many more but does not sit easy within the definitions of play as rule-bound or even as free play. Even the category of productive play fails when we consider that the cosplayer is not always a producer but also a consumer who may buy the outfit or parts of it. The hybrid nature of cosplay,

however, also makes it a fundamental activity to examine as well as a fertile testing ground for contemporary theories on play and fandom.

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