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Costuming the Imagination: Origins of Anime and Manga Cosplay

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All over the world, cosplay fans gather at conventions and parties to share their appreciation of and affection for anime and manga (McCarthy 1993; Napier 2001; Poitras 2001). These fans, who also refer to themselves as *otaku*,[1] wear detailed makeup and elaborate costumes modeled after their favorite anime, manga, and related video game characters (Poitras 2001; Richie 2003). Cosplayers spend immeasurable monies and hours constructing or purchasing costumes, learning signature poses and dialogue, and performing at conventions and parties, as they transform themselves from "real world" identities into chosen (fictional) characters. This is the essence of cosplay, or *kosupure* (Aoyama and Cahill 2003; Richie 2003).

The term *cosplay* combines *costume* and *play* (or *role-play*). Cosplay also refers to the activities, such as masquerades, karaoke, and posing for pictures with other otaku, that are associated with dressing and acting like anime, manga, and video game characters (Macias and Machiyama 2004; Poitras 2001). While the term *cosplay* encompasses various types of costumed role-playing, such as science fiction, fantasy, horror, mythology, fetish, and so forth, this chapter focuses only on Japanese and North American cosplay related to anime, manga, and video games.

My objective here is to provide the reader with an understanding of anime and manga cosplay, cosplayers, and their social structures. First, I explore the origin stories of cosplay to establish contributions from both Japan and North America. Next, I discuss the distinguishing characteristics of Japanese and North American cosplay to determine the similarities and differences between the two cultural settings. I contextualize four cosplay elements: (1) anime and manga cosplayers, (2) social settings, (3) character and role-playing, and (4) dress,[2] which includes clothing or costumes, makeup, wigs or hairstyles, jewelry, and accessories. Last, I offer an introduction to the anime and manga cosplay social structures (i.e., interactions, environments, and experiences) in order to provide the reader with an awareness of the complexities and dynamics of the cosplay world.

ORIGIN STORIES OF COSPLAY

The few sources that discuss the origins of cosplay are primarily found on Web sites, online publications, and weblogs. Constructed and maintained by anime and manga fans, these sources communicate information about anime and manga (most with a personal bias). Therefore, it is not surprising that the specific origins of anime and manga cosplay are highly debated topics among anime and manga *otaku* (Hlozek 2004). One side speculates that cosplay began in North America, during the 1960s, when people dressed as and role-played their favorite science fiction and fantasy characters, such as Spock from *Star Trek* and Robin from *Batman* (Bruno 2002a). This type of costumed role-playing (not yet called cosplay) spanned a variety of genres and may have inspired Japanese anime and manga fans to dress as their favorite characters. On the other side of the debate are those who speculate that cosplay was imported from Japan, coming to North America with the formations of anime and manga fan clubs (Bruno 2002a; Ledoux and Ranney 1997).

The origin story that appears to have the most evidence to support it actually blends the Japanese and North American contributions. In 1984 Takahashi Nobuyuki (known in the United States as "Nov Takahashi"), founder of and writer for Studio Hard, an anime publishing company, attended World-Con, a science fiction convention, in Los Angeles (Bruno 2002a; Hlozek 2004). He was impressed with the costumed science fiction and fantasy fans whom he saw, especially those competing in the masquerade (Bruno 2002a). Consequently, when he returned to Japan and wrote about his experiences at the convention, he focused on the costumed fans and the masquerade. Moreover,

Takahashi encouraged his Japanese readers to incorporate costumes into their anime and manga conventions (Bruno 2002a).

Takahashi was unable to use the word *masquerade* because this word translated into Japanese means "an aristocratic costume party," which is drastically different from the costume competitions seen at conventions (Bruno 2002a). Instead, he created the phrase *costume play*, which was eventually shortened to *kosupure*, or cosplay (Bruno 2002a). As a result, Takahashi added two new words to the subculture and pop culture lexicon: *cosplay* and *cosplayer*.

> AN ANIME OR MANGA COSPLAYER CAN BE ALMOST ANYONE WHO EXPRESSES HIS OR HER FANDOM AND PASSION FOR A CHARACTER BY DRESSING AND ACTING SIMILARLY TO THAT CHARACTER.

In 1980, at the San Diego, California, Comic-Con, several fans dressed as anime and manga characters in the masquerade (Ledoux and Ranney 1997). It was not long before anime and manga *otaku* were donning cosplay dress to Japanese conventions (Bruno 2002a). During the 1980s, there was a growing demand for Japanese anime (and manga) imports (Drazen 2003), and an increasing number of *otaku* attended North American science fiction and fantasy conventions (Hlozek 2004; Poitras 2001). As a result, these types of North American conventions began to include anime- and manga-focused activities, such as panels, guest speakers, anime video rooms, and masquerades (i.e., organized costumed performances). In time, *otaku* organized conventions expressly for fans of anime, manga, and related media. Overall, North American and Japanese cosplay have many commonalities, such as a dedicated fan base and the use of costumes. They also have distinguishing characteristics, such as variations within masquerade competitions, appropriate locations for wearing cosplay dress, and cosplay markets.

CONTEXT OF COSPLAY

The context of anime and manga cosplay is a combination of the presence of basic components and related interactions between those components. The four basic components are anime and manga cosplayer, social settings, (fictional) character and role-playing, and dress (e.g., hair, costume, makeup, and accessories, including weapons). Furthermore, these components facilitate complex interactions between people (e.g., cosplayers, spectators, masquerade judges, etc.), environments (e.g., personal, private, public, and virtual), and fantasy (e.g., imagination, fictional characters, etc.). The following four

sections are an overview of the basic components and complex interactions that create the context of cosplay.

Anime and Manga Cosplayer

Anime and manga cosplayers may be any age, gender, and ethnicity. They have varied educational backgrounds, occupations, disposable incomes, and resources. Essentially, an anime or manga cosplayer can be almost anyone who expresses his or her fandom and passion for a character by dressing and acting similarly to that character. Since the exact cosplay demographics are currently unknown, this is an area in need of further research.

A cosplayer researches and studies an already existing anime or manga character with a keen eye for detail, in order to create a cosplay character. The interpretation usually takes shape by reading or watching the chosen character within its given medium (i.e., manga, anime, or video game). The level of research and study is ultimately guided by the cosplayer's objectives (e.g., masquerade participation, socializing, etc.).

Cosplayers exist at various places along a cosplay continuum, which is based on their level of commitment. At one end are cosplayers content with dressing (e.g., wig, makeup, and costume) as their chosen character and attending conventions and events for socializing and having fun. At the other end are those cosplayers obsessed with a given character, re-creating that character with meticulous attention to detail and performing as that character as often as time and money allow. Between these extremes, there are cosplayers who research, study, and practice their characters and participate in cosplay events, such as masquerade and karaoke. Regardless of his or her place on the cosplay continuum, each cosplayer has an extraordinary level of dedication and commitment to the depiction of a chosen character, based on individual objectives that may include, but are not limited to, the following criteria: humor, accurate depiction, and casual participation.

Social Settings

Cosplay is primarily a social activity associated with various activities and conventions, where cosplayers gather to share their passions for anime and manga characters (Aoyama and Cahill 2003). The cosplay social settings may include, but are not limited to, the following: masquerades (i.e., character-based costume or performance competitions), photograph sessions, themed parties, karaoke, club meetings, and conventions. While the social settings for cosplay may vary greatly, conventions are often the primary space where large numbers of cosplayers gather, socialize, and perform.

Conventions are held at all times of the year, around the world, for fans of science fiction, fantasy, horror, anime, manga, and the like to share their interests and passions with like-minded individuals (Poitras 2001). The dedicated cosplayer may attend conventions on the average of one a month. As a result, many science fiction and fantasy conventions include a variety of activities, such as discussion panels, skits, film screenings, and masquerades specifically aimed at anime and manga *otaku*.

The convention activity that attracts the most interest from *otaku*, especially cosplayers, is the masquerade. Cosplayers compete in masquerades by posing or acting in skits relevant to their characters. At science fiction and fantasy conventions, anime and manga cosplayers compete against various genres of cosplayers. Despite slight variations between each masquerade, participants are generally judged on three main criteria: accuracy of the costume's appearance to the actual character; construction and details of the cosplay dress; and entertainment value of the skit and/or accuracy to the character.

Spectators play an important role in the social settings of cosplay. In fact, it could be argued that cosplay events, especially the masquerade, would be pointless if it were not for the spectators, even if they are composed of friends and other cosplayers. Spectators use applause, verbal cues, and laughter to encourage cosplayers to perform and interact.

Furthermore, the cosplay social settings exist beyond the stage of a masquerade. Cosplayers interact with each other, often role-playing their chosen characters while participating in hallway conversations, karaoke parties, and online chat rooms. These social settings take any shape or form desired by cosplayers. Often the settings extend beyond tangible spaces, into virtual spaces, such as Web sites, weblogs, and online journals (Poitras 2001). Cosplayers utilize Web sites to register and plan activities for conventions, as well as to promote and communicate about their fandom for anime and manga cosplay. They also use weblogs and online journals to confide in others, express opinions, and argue about the finer details of cosplay. Additionally, traditional print media, such as the magazines *Animerica* and *Newtype*, feature several pages per issue of cosplay photographs from recent conventions.

Character and Role-playing

An *otaku* chooses an anime, manga, or video game character to cosplay based on personal criteria. A resourceful cosplayer has few limitations in character choice, beyond his or her imagination. The pool of characters to choose from is vast, including characters from anime feature movies and serials, manga single image and series, and related video games. Some cosplay characters are

featured in all three media, such as *Dragon Ball Z* and *Fist of the North Star*. In fact, there are so many characters to choose from that they have been informally classified into subgenres.

Among these subgenres are mecha, cyborg, furry, and Lolita. Mechas (short for "mechanicals") are giant robot characters, often piloted or operated by humans (Napier 2001). Some examples of mecha characters are Gundam Wing Zero (*Gundam Wing* television series, 1995–96) and EVA units (*Neon Genesis Evangelion* television series, 1995–96). Cyborgs are part machine and part human, such as Major Kusanagi Motoko (*Ghost in the Shell*, 1995) and the Knight Sabers (*Bubblegum Crisis*, 1987–91). Furries are characters that have "fur," and the cosplay costumes for them are usually created from faux fur. Some examples are Totoro, a giant, gray catlike creature (*My Neighbor Totoro*, 1988) and Ryo-ohki

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(an alternate romanization of Ryôôki), a cute, furry cabbit (cat-rabbit) (*Tenchi muyô ryôôki* series, 2000, known by the alternate romanization *Tenchi Muyô Ryo-ohki* in the United States). A Lolita character attempts to convey a *kawaii* image, which is young, childlike, and cute (Aoyama and Cahill 2003; Schodt 1996). The character may don a baby-doll dress trimmed with layers of lace, kneesocks, and sometimes carry a stuffed animal or a parasol. A common anime reference for the Lolita character is the Wonder Kids' *Lolita Anime I: Yuki no kurenai keshô* and *Shôjo bara kei* (1984); however, this character has an earlier reference in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955). Both of these references for the Lolita character define and emphasize its sexualized imagery; however, not all Lolita cosplayers intend to communicate that image.

Certain anime and manga characters are more popular than others, which results in trends within cosplay. The popularity of anime and manga characters is most evident by the numerous observations of cosplayers dressed as the same character at a convention. For example, in the September 2003 issue of *Newtype*, there is a photograph of multiple depictions of Inuyasha (i.e., a half dog-demon and half human male, with silver or black hair and dog ears, wearing a red kimono–style garment with a sword) at the Anime Expo convention in Anaheim, California. Another example is the frequent sightings of Lolita characters at anime and manga conventions. The Lolita genre is so popular that there are numerous Web sites, costume shops, and publications dedicated to it.

FIGURE 1. Gothic Lolita, 2005, Cedar Falls, Iowa. Costume designed and constructed by Erin Hamburg. Photograph by the author.
FIGURE 2 (RIGHT). Rainbow Brite Lolita, 2005, Cedar Falls, Iowa. Costume designed and constructed by Erin Hamburg. Photograph by the author.

An additional cosplay character type is known as "crossplay" (Hlozek 2004). Crossplay is where a cosplayer employs gender reversal (i.e., a female who dresses as a male character or vice versa). Depending on the cosplayer's objectives, the crossplay may portray the opposite gender with accuracy or it may have humorous intentions within its display (e.g., dress, role-playing, etc.). For example, at CONvergence 2004 (a science fiction and fantasy convention held in Bloomington, Minnesota) there were several males dressed as each of the Sailor Moon Scouts (teenage heroines who assist Sailor Moon in her endeavors to save the world from evil), and a young woman was dressed as Tuxedo Mask (the young hero who often assists Sailor Moon and the Scouts in their quest). In this example, crossplay was utilized for humorous effect and social levity. These Scouts had deep voices and visible chest and leg hair, along with five o'clock shadows, and this Tuxedo Mask had a high-pitched voice and curvaceous silhouette. Moreover, the group was continuously making gender-related puns and jokes aimed at further identifying and establishing their gender role reversals.

Crossplay among cosplayers is not unusual, considering the many gender reversals, confusions, and ambiguities within anime and manga. For example, Oscar Francois de Jarjayes, from the *Rose of Versailles* (1972–74), was raised as a male; however, she is actually a female. The story centers on Oscar's ambiguity and duality. Another example is the Three Lights from *Sailor Moon*.

In the manga, the Three Lights females pose as human males in a rock band, but in the anime they transform from male pop stars into female sailor *senshi*—Sailor Starlights.

The cosplayer relies on dress and role-playing to display a given character. Cosplay role-playing is the ability to dress, walk, talk, and act similar to the chosen anime or manga character in order to portray a character in a desired fashion. Role-playing is an essential skill for a cosplayer, regardless if he or she is accurate to a character, creating a parody, or just having fun. Role-playing a character is greatly aided by cosplay dress.

Dress

Cosplay dress includes all body modifications and supplements, such as hair, makeup, costume, and accessories, including wands, staffs, and swords. This dress is often referred to as a "costume"; however, cosplay dress goes well beyond a simple costume. Cosplay dress may be the most important tool the cosplayer has to nonverbally communicate his or her chosen character and character traits. This dress functions as character identification and provides a basis for role-playing and interactions with other cosplayers. Cosplay dress also enables cosplayers to move from their actual identities to their chosen cosplay characters, and sometimes back again.

For example, "Sailor Bubba," a bearded male cosplayer (and crossplayer) dressed as Sailor Moon (i.e., manga and anime teenage, female heroine with magical powers), speaks with a deep voice, walks with a gait natural to a 6-foot-tall, 250-pound man, and has dark black chest hair poking out of the top of his schoolgirl uniform. Still, anime and manga cosplayers recognize the dress and accept his change in personality (and gender) when a man in a tuxedo and top hat, the costume for Tuxedo Mask, enters the room. Suddenly it is a cosplay version of Sailor Moon and Tuxedo Mask having a conversation about saving the world (with not-so-subtle references to a room party as the scene for the next battle with a villain called "Mr. Jagermeister").[3]

Each cosplayer determines the accuracy of his or her cosplay dress and character portrayal. For some cosplayers the costume must be an exact replica of that worn by an anime character, which is no easy feat, given the unrealistic aspects of animated costumes. These cosplayers take extreme care to get every physical detail correct, such as adding padding for muscles, dyeing hair to bright, unnatural colors, and wearing platform shoes. They often spend significant amounts of money and time to create the perfect replica of their character's dress (Aoyama and Cahill 2003). Still other cosplayers are content with the bare minimum of dress that communicates their chosen character.

Typically, cosplay dress is either self-created or purchased, or a combination of the two. Wigs, cosmetics, and jewelry are often purchased because these items are difficult to make or may be less expensive than construction from raw materials. The

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constructed portions of cosplay dress usually include the clothing, but may also include foam swords and (faux) gem-encrusted wands. Some portions of cosplay dress that usually are a combination of purchased and constructed often need to be modified, such as shoes and accessories.

JAPANESE AND NORTH AMERICAN COSPLAY

A distinguishing characteristic between Japanese and North American cosplay is the way in which cosplayers perform in competition. In North America, during masquerades cosplayers wear their dress onstage and perform skits, often humorous but not necessarily an exact mime of their chosen character. In Japan, cosplayers also wear their dress on stage during competitions; however, they usually give only a static display, such as striking their character's signature pose or reciting the motto of their chosen character (Bruno 2002b).

Another distinguishing characteristic is where cosplay dress is worn. In North America, cosplayers wear their dress in nearly any setting (Bruno 2002b). For example, fully costumed/dressed cosplayers may leave a convention and eat at a nearby restaurant. In Japan, cosplayers are not welcome in certain areas beyond the convention, and some conventions request that cosplayers not wear their dress outside the convention (Bruno 2002b). Both Japanese and North American cosplayers gather with friends for cosplay at conventions and private events.

Since Japanese culture values community above the individual, cosplayers exist as a subculture, outside the acceptable norms of the dominant culture, where acts of discrimination have occurred by the dominant culture (Aoyama and Cahill 2003; Richie 2003). As a result, Japanese cosplayers have a negative reputation as individualists within some areas of Japanese culture (Bruno 2002b; Richie 2003). In Japan, unlike North America, there are areas, such as the Akihabara and Harajuku districts in Tokyo, strictly designated for cosplay costume shops, cafés, and restaurants (Prideaux 2001). Although Japanese

cosplayers may venture into areas not designated for cosplayers, such activity is discouraged because of the negative reputation of cosplayers, and to protect young female cosplayers from unwanted attention (Richie 2003).

A final distinguishing characteristic between Japanese and North American cosplay is the available goods and markets for cosplayers. In Japan, there are districts where anime and manga cosplayers are the target market for consumable goods, such as cosplay costumes, accessories, and publications. North American anime and manga conventions feature dealers who sell a limited selection of cosplay items (e.g., magazines, DVDs, action figures, etc.). Within science fiction and fantasy conventions, anime and manga cosplayers compete with other fandoms, such as *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* fans, for a portion of the market. Outside the convention setting, anime and manga cosplayers must resort to catalogs and online shops for cosplay items, such as wigs, costumes, and makeup.

During the latter portions of the twentieth century, Japan and North America exchanged pop and subcultural ideas (Napier 2001; Poitras 2001). This is evident in Hollywood movies influenced by Japanese anime (e.g., *The Matrix* was influenced by *Ghost in the Shell*). An example of how Japanese anime and manga story lines have been influenced by North American subcultural activities is the *Record of Lodoss War* stories, which were influenced by *Dungeons and Dragons* role-playing games (Poitras 2001). This Japanese and North American exchange has extended to anime and manga and is apparent within the sources of inspiration for anime and manga cosplay.

SOCIAL STRUCTURES OF COSPLAY

Cosplay is a highly social activity that occurs in specific environments, such as anime and manga conventions, karaoke events, and club meetings (Aoyama and Cahill 2003). Therefore it provides significant social benefits for cosplayers, who are often labeled "geeks" (i.e., socially and culturally inferior individuals) by the dominant culture. As a result, the anime and manga cosplay subculture provides cosplayers with "social structures" (Merton 1968). This social structure is composed of social interactions, environments, and experiences.

Most of the social interactions take place via the cosplay character(s). The character provides a (protective) identity for the cosplayer, which may allow for more confident and open interactions. Moreover, cosplay dress and environment(s) permit the cosplayer to role-play the character he or she is dressed as and engage in such social activities within a "safe" and "support-

ive" social structure. In this way the cosplay social structure is established, developed, and maintained.

The environments and spaces created for and by cosplay provide cosplayers with a variety of spaces for social interactions. Some of these environments include, but are not limited to, the following: an intimate space (dress), a private space (solitary rehearsals and research), a public space (interactions with other cosplayers, both in person and virtual), and a performance space (ranging from small parties to masquerades). Cosplay merges fantasy and reality into "carnivalesque" environments and spaces, where individuals have permission to be someone or something other than themselves (Bakhtin 1968; Napier 2001; Richie 2003). It is here that cosplay characters, distinctive from their anime and manga origins, emerge and interact with other cosplay characters. This further suggests the malleable identities of the cosplayers created in these environments where people are "not themselves" but instead are fictional anime and manga characters.

Cosplay social interactions and environments provide cosplayers with unique and significant experiences. These experiences include making new friends to claiming a moment in the limelight. Moreover, cosplay experiences appear to have real benefits for the cosplayers, because of the continued participation and growing interest in cosplay and related activities. The variety of cosplay experiences contributes to the social structure of cosplay.

In summary, cosplay inspired by anime, manga, and related video games expands not only the anime and manga art form but also the interactions of two global cultures—Japan and North America. The interactions begin with origin stories of cosplay and continue as cosplayers share fandom from both Japan and North America (via surfing the Internet and attending conventions). The impact of these interactions is visually evident at conventions where the context of cosplay, which includes social settings, cosplayers, characters and role-playing, and dress, is on display. Moreover, these interactions contribute to, build on, and develop into the social structures of cosplay, providing cosplayers with unique interactions, environments, and experiences.

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Notes

1. In North America, *otaku* refers to an anime and manga (hardcore) fan or enthusiast. However, in Japan, *otaku* is an honorific and is used to address a good friend or the like (Schodt 1996).

2. In this chapter, I utilize J. B. Eicher's (2002) definition of *dress*—any body modification or supplement, which includes makeup, wigs, shoes, clothing, jewelry, and piercings—when I refer to cosplay dress.

3. Jagermeister is an herbal (anise) liqueur that is popular in North America.

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