COSPLAY
Performance, Participation, and Play

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Synopsis

Cosplay is an activity where fans of popular culture attempt to recreate the appearance of characters; a portmanteau of the terms “costume” and “play”. Over the past decade many forms of “nerd-culture” have entered mainstream popular culture. The aim of this study is to focus upon the UK cosplay community in particular and to understand the motivations and experiences of those who choose to partake in the dress practice. With reference to theoreticians Erving Goffman, Claude Levi-Strauss, D.W. Winnicott, and Dick Hebdige along with contemporary research of cosplay, subcultures and fan communities, this research aims to understand the spaces in which a cosplay is worn, the audiences who observe it and the different ways that identity can be negotiated by appearance.

Chapter 3 explores cosplay as a subculture and as an avenue for adolescent identity negotiation. Chapter 4 details creativity and bricolage in creating a cosplayer identity, and discusses theories of adult play. Chapter 5 analyses the spaces in which a cosplayer identity is active; physically and online, and considers the boundaries between performance and performativity.

Through a combination of participant observation at conventions and cosplay events taking place in July and October 2015 and January 2016, and oral testimony through interviews with cosplayers, it was possible to understand the contemporary personal experience of cosplay in the UK, and why so many people enjoy dressing up as fictional characters.
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1. Introduction

Cosplay is an activity where fans of popular culture attempt to recreate the appearance of characters; a portmanteau of the terms “costume” and “play”. Western fan cultures, such as fans of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* have collectively replicated costumes to wear to conventions, however the contemporary phenomenon is widely regarded as stemming from South-East Asia during the 1980s as form of fan-appreciation specifically for anime and manga.\(^1\) The phenomenon has spread gradually throughout Europe and United States and evolved over the past two decades.\(^2\) Cosplay now includes characters from comics, literature, video games, television, film and theatre. Currently there are countless large communities of cosplayers across the globe.\(^3\)

Cosplay is one aspect of so-called “nerd-culture” or “geek-culture”, terms here used to refer to media considered unpopular, obscure, or non-mainstream, such as video-games, comics and science-fiction. There are long-standing stigmas surrounding individuals with particular interests in nerd-culture, as they defer from more mainstream interests, and fans have been regularly pathologised as deranged or out of touch with reality, though these perceptions are changing.\(^4\) Over the past decade many forms of nerd-culture have entered mainstream popular culture; comic

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3 Winge “Costuming the Imagination,” 65
Leng, “Gender, Sexuality, and Crossplay,” 90
publishers DC and Marvel have recently had a string of blockbuster films and successful television programmes, media databases such as Netflix provide easy access to foreign content such as anime, and video gaming has become an increasingly popular pastime for all ages. As a result of this, the popularity of film, gaming and comic conventions has greatly increased with more conventions and events established each year. Despite nerd-culture being accepted into the mainstream, cosplay is still considered extreme or bizarre to many, and is widely associated with alienated individuals lacking in common sense social skills. This is particularly exacerbated through negative media coverage and misunderstandings of the cosplay community.

The aim of this study is to focus upon the UK cosplay community in particular and to understand the motivations and experiences of those who choose to partake in the dress practice. As Hodkinson suggests of fan cultures, it is not simply the primary text or source material which is of importance but it is the “way that the common references facilitate social interactions and networking, enabling extra-televisual fan activity and facilitating the carefully-monitored boundaries that separate the ‘us’ from the ‘not us’.” For this reason, it is vital to understand the complex costumed activity as more than fanatical celebration of a favourite character. A key aspect of this study is understanding the spaces in which cosplay is worn, and the different ways that identity can be negotiated by appearance. Through a combination of participant

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5 Katie Rife, “Simon Pegg is worried that our obsession with nerd culture is “infantilizing”” A.V.Club, (2015)  
Marcel Danesi, *Forever Young: The 'Teen-Aging' of Modern Culture* (Toronto: Toronto UP, 2003) 23  
7 ‘Toxi’, personal interview, 19th Nov. 2015  
observation at conventions and cosplay events taking place in July and October 2015 and January 2016, and oral testimony through interviews with cosplayers, it was possible to understand the personal experience of cosplay in the UK.

This study follows a framework of contemporary ethnographic study of subcultures, such as Paul Hodkinson’s research into the Goth subculture, where the participants themselves serve as the source of information. An ethnographic approach is the most appropriate way to research the dress practice as the dress is inseparably situated within a cultural context.\(^9\) There have been ethnographic studies of cosplay, the majority taking place in South-East Asia, in cities such as Taiping, Tokyo, Beijing and Hong Kong, where the phenomenon has been established for longer.\(^10\) Other studies take place in the USA and centre on large conventions (or ‘cons’), such as DragonCon, and recognise cosplay as a participatory and communal culture.\(^11\) Costume or fancy dress among adults as an area of research is still relatively new and requires more investigation. Existing studies place focus upon historical fancy dress balls, masquerade and disguise or theatrical costumes. Contemporary research of cosplay therefore has connected sparse “Dress-up Theory” with subcultural theory, fan culture theory or identity theory to develop sophisticated ideas surrounding the dress practice.\(^12\) This study will also explore cosplay as a community

\(^12\) M. Hale, “Cosplay: Intertextuality, Public Texts, and the Body Fantastic” Western Folklore, 73:1 (2014) 5
\(^\) Leng, “Gender, Sexuality, and Crossplay,” 90
\(^\) Peirson-Smith, “Fashioning the Fantastical Self,” 85
of practice and consider theories of participation, play and performativity. Some of the key theoreticians used to support this study are Erving Goffman, Claude Levi-Strauss, D.W. Winnicott, and Dick Hebdige. These have been supported by recent journal publications and studies upon cosplay, such as Anne Peirson-Smith, as well as contemporary fan theory by Matt Hills. As the dress practice is relatively current and still evolving, online sources provide immediate information about cosplay, however due to potential for inaccuracies and misinformation, online sources are referenced to suggest opinion and subjective perceptions rather than fact.

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14 Kawamura, *Doing Research in Fashion and Dress*, 41
2. Methodology and Case Studies

As Lamerichs observes in a 2011 paper, the community is more complex than simply “cosplayers and noncosplayers”, as cosplaying can be a multi-layered activity.\(^\text{15}\)

Some wear as little as novelty t-shirts printed with a character’s clothing, or accessories that can be removed to return the outfit to regular clothes, known as “closet-cosplay”. Others will spend an entire day in elaborate costume and in character, while some will cosplay for a few hours then change back to regular clothes for the rest of the day.\(^\text{16}\) Each is a valid expression of participation and so it is important to reflect this diversity through informants to interview, however it is important to take into consideration the various criticisms and drawbacks to both participant observation and oral testimony within research. Participant observation is particularly difficult to navigate as it requires prior knowledge and understanding of a culture, but also an impartiality to it.\(^\text{17}\) Considering this it is vital to remove personal bias or preconceptions of the dress practice and pursue only leads from the selected informants and relevant scholars.

Through attendance at cons and online correspondence through cosplay Facebook pages, six informants were interviewed on their personal experiences of cosplay and the community. All informants were aged between 19-28, white, cisgender or transgender, and all currently based in the UK. Each had been involved with cosplay for different lengths of time, had differing motivations, allowances, spare time and creative skillsets, though by no means are an exhaustive example of the many layers


\(^{16}\) ‘Altria’, personal interview, 28\(^\text{th}\) Nov. 2015

\(^{17}\) Kawamura, Doing Research in Fashion and Dress, 50
which constitute the UK cosplay community. The interview questions were intended to understand various aspects of cosplaying as experienced by different people without relying heavily upon assumptions and common misunderstandings, as seen in many contemporary media sources. Though the accounts may not be factual and are subject to the unreliability of memory, they nevertheless will provide information on the meanings and personal aspects of the community which could not be researched through other methods.

Altria and Sketch were contacted at *The Costume Games* in Brighton where they held a panel on cosplay. Sketch has cosplayed for 5 years, and Altria (on and off) for 10 years. Both have previously represented their country in international cosplay competitions and both currently have careers in prop-making and special effects for film and television. Fox and Magpie are a couple who were contacted through their Cosplay page on Facebook. Both university students, they have cosplayed for 4-5 years, and first met each other at a convention. Drewett was contacted following a cosplay panel held at Brighton Film and ComicCon in October, she is a freelance writer with a feature for “I’m With Geek” called “Cosplay With Me” and has been cosplaying for just over 3 years. All 5 were interviewed via video-call platform Skype. Toxi was found through a cosplay forum on Facebook and contacted through Facebook, then interviewed in person. She has been cosplaying for about 10 years,

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18 Hannah Barr, “The Secret World of the Weekend Superheroes”, *The Sun*, [n.d]

“Are these the worst Cosplay costumes ever at Comic Con 2014?”, *Metro*, 13 Oct. 2014


‘Toxi’, personal interview.
‘Drewett’, personal interview, 23rd Nov. 2015

20 ‘Altria’, personal interview.
‘Sketch’, personal interview, 18th Nov. 2015

21 ‘Fox’ & ‘Magpie’, personal interview, 8th Nov. 2015

22 ‘Drewett’, personal interview.
and uses her costumes outside of cosplay as a children’s entertainer. All informants are referred to by their cosplay monikers as stated on their Facebook pages instead of real names. The informants were also asked to provide images of themselves cosplaying, which is beneficial to further understand what images they considered to best demonstrate their cosplayer identity, though has a limitation in that not all images are high quality due to the various conditions in which they were taken, such as on smartphones.

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23 "Toxi", personal interview.
Figure 1. Fox and Magpie taking part in a masquerade, cosplaying Marvel character Loki and Sherlock, Newcastle Film and Comic Con, Personal photograph provided by subjects.
Figure 2. Drewett cosplaying Rik, a character from TV series “The Young Ones”. Personal photograph provided by subject.
3. Developing Identities: Subculture and Adolescence

Many recent papers have recognised a link between subculture and cosplay, providing a cogent theoretical approach to the contemporary dress practice.\(^\text{24}\) Rauch and Bolton in particular say that “Subculture fashion may involve role-playing or acting the part, but it is not about imitating a specific character at conventions or in other fan context; rather, it is about creating an individual look that becomes part of an everyday lifestyle and identity.”\(^\text{25}\) However it could be argued there is more than the imitation of a specific character, that in fact cosplayers could be practicing new identities. For a typically reserved participant to cosplay a character who is known to be confident or assertive, the participant must emulate these qualities to accompany their worn costume, consequently they learn how to present confidence. Such qualities will not necessarily appear through their everyday dress though will influence their personality and social identity long after the costume is gone.

Through participant observation at conventions, it is apparent that the cosplay community is comprised from a spread of ages and there is certainly no clear age demographic at first glance, though there does appear to be a pattern for beginner cosplayers. Many informants commented that their first experience of cosplay was during adolescence.\(^\text{26}\) Whether commencing individually or as a result of already

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\(^{24}\) Osmud Rhaman; Liu Wing-sun; Brittany Hei-man Cheung. “‘Cosplay’: Imaginative Self and Performing Identity” Fashion Theory 16:3 (2012) 318


\(^{26}\) ‘Altria’, personal interview.
    ‘Fox’ & ‘Magpie’, personal interview.
    ‘Sketch’, personal interview.
    ‘Toxi’, personal interview.
active friends, there does appear to be a demographic for new cosplayers and for this reason it is important to understand why cosplay appeals to adolescents, and how comparable this can be to the appeal of other subcultures to adolescents.

3.1 Cosplay as a subculture

Early subcultural research during the mid-20th century regularly followed the framework of identifying a subculture through trends of a group’s labour, class, territory, deviance and dress.27 The seminal 1979 study of subcultures by Hebdige still provides a relevant insight into motivations of collective activity today, and influences much contemporary research into “Post-subcultural theory” that explores the increasing fragmentation of youth culture, and their characterising social activities.28 As post-war youths sought to construct an identity not bound by tradition, contemporary youths now construct an identity not bound by social reality.29

The rise of subcultures outside of mainstream cultures was linked to relative increase in the spending power of youths and the corresponding creation of a market directed to them, which is mirrored in the recent markets created for cosplayers through specialised clothing, merchandise and conventions.30 Correlating with Hebdige’s observation that a subculture operates exclusively in the leisure sphere, cosplay requires investment; from the time and money spent upon creating a cosplay and learning the appropriate skills to do so, to the ability to spend time and money upon showing them off at conventions and events.31 Cosplay communicates through

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27 Gelder Subcultures: Cultural histories and social practice, 3  
29 Eds. Bennet; Kahn-Harris, After Subculture, 7  
31 Hebdige Subculture, 94
commodity, and there is an ever present balance between creativity/originality and commercial exploitation.\textsuperscript{32} This could account for some of the popularity among younger participants still living at their parental home, as they have more time and funds to allocate towards leisure.\textsuperscript{33} Commodity within cosplay is explored further in chapter 4.

A recent biographical study by Henderson et al. suggests that due to current social conditions, adolescents have more agency with creating their adult selves than previous generations.\textsuperscript{34} Adolescence has long been considered the period in which individuals are most likely to feel alienated, and teenagers still negotiate an uncertain half-child/half-adult space, and are encouraged to defer adult responsibility until after education while simultaneously faced with new technologies, unprecedented awareness of the world and access to an intricate information systems online.\textsuperscript{35} Now identified as a target market, and without the pressures of strict employment or lifestyle expectations from their elders unlike previous generation, teenagers today independently piece together their identity while transitioning to adulthood.\textsuperscript{36} One such opportunity for identity creation is through appearance; a composite image established through clothing, accessories, hair and make-up. As early as 1904, Simmel wrote of how young people’s “erratic” behaviour governed their susceptibility to spectacular dress fads, which though a gross generalisation, links to Kaiser's

\textsuperscript{32} Hebdige \textit{Subculture}, 95
\textsuperscript{34} Henderson, Holland, McGrellis, Sharpe, Thomson, \textit{Inventing Adulthoods}, 32
\textsuperscript{36} Marcel Danesi, \textit{Forever Young: The ‘Teen-Aging’ of Modern Culture} (Toronto: Toronto UP, 2003) 10

\textsuperscript{32} Henderson, Holland, McGrellis, Sharpe, Thomson, \textit{Inventing Adulthoods}, 32
\textsuperscript{36} Danesi, \textit{Forever Young}, 10
more contemporary analysis of adolescent dress habits.\footnote{Georg Simmel “The Philosophy of Fashion”, Eds. David B. Clarke; Marcus A. Doel; Kate M. L. Housiaux, The Consumption Reader (London; New York: Routledge, 2003) 243} Kaiser notes how clothing and physical appearance hold a magnified importance to adolescents as they retain “egocentrism of childhood” while becoming increasingly aware of the self in relation to others.\footnote{Susan B. Kaiser The Social Psychology of Clothing: Symbolic Appearances in Context (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1985) 1997 129} An appeal of cosplay could be the exaggeration of conventional dress; that an individual can satisfy a desire to present themselves as a spectacle far beyond what is considered appropriate for every day, and through this masquerade create an identity that does not affect their conventional identity.

\section*{3.2 Belonging and acceptance}
Cosplay is rarely a solitary activity, and participation either online or physical seeks to align personal interests with likeminded people. Whether this is a small group of friends at somebody’s house or thousands of strangers attending a Con, a legitimate collective identity is clearly sought out and consequently communicated. Some informants interviewed spoke of growing up shy, introverted and withdrawn themselves, or knew of other cosplayers who had.\footnote{‘Fox’ & ‘Magpie’, personal interview.} Many had interests which were considered “nerdy” or “weird” by their peers, one in particular mentioned an inability to find their place throughout school.\footnote{‘Toxi’, personal interview.} All commented of the ease of meeting people through cosplay, and having a bubble in which they felt accepted, particularly Fox and Magpie [Fig.1] who both were too anxious to speak to strangers normally though while cosplaying were able to approach each other.\footnote{‘Fox’ & ‘Magpie’, personal interview.} Until recently, aspects of geek culture have been considered as uncool, and fans of particular media such as
comics or sci-fi are regularly pathologised as “‘deranged’, as stalkers, as having lost touch with reality…”, so it makes sense that fans of geek culture would come together as a community to unashamedly express their fandom. Peirson-Smith recognises “social interaction” and “collusion with a knowing audience” as key to the validation of the identity presented through costume. 42

For younger participants who are inexorably aware of and sensitive to the perception that others have of them, their social world consists of home and school or perhaps a part-time job, but generally their social identity is only actively experienced in the former two areas. 43 While schoolyard hierarchies can be brutal for judging and out-casting those who are different, cosplay offers an outlet for this difference and in fact celebrates it. As one informant comments;

“…so you go from being at the bottom…everyone picks on you and no one really likes you, you dress weird, and then you go to somewhere where you dress weird and everyone’s like ‘Oh my God! You dress so weird, that’s amazing!’…”44

Interestingly, some informants commented on their avoidance of cosplay groups due to the amount of younger members. Groups such as Sussex Cosplayers, who organise small local cosplay meet-ups through their Facebook page, were mentioned as sweet people but the members were young adolescents who were just beginning to cosplay and appeared more motivated by the social opportunities than for the enjoyment of cosplaying itself. 45 Another had witnessed the community change over 10 years, and felt that the newer, younger participants were overly

42 Gelder Subcultures, 143

Peirson-Smith, “Fashioning the Fantastical Self,” 80

43 Henderson, Holland, McGrellis, Sharpe, Thomson, Inventing Adulthoods, 98

Danesi, Forever Young, 9

44 ‘Toxi’, personal interview.

45 ‘Toxi’, personal interview.
concerned with getting “likes” on their Facebook, seeking attention and a type of fame rather than just enjoying likeminded company, though this aspect is further explored in the next chapter.\(^{46}\)

For individuals of any age whose interests or social behaviours have resulted in them being socially outcast, within a society of likeminded people they are offered an opportunity to reinvent themselves and a context in which to be considered “cool”. While the costumed self is susceptible to challenge from other social players, such as family, friends, the media or online strangers, it is also through social players that the costumed identity can be legitimised.\(^{47}\) Informants spoke of wearing costumes that made them feel confident, then subsequently they became confident people in everyday life, the selection of costume can in some cases be equated with selecting desired personality qualities.\(^{48}\) To apply Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects and transitional phenomena, cosplay belongs “to the realm of illusion which is at the basis of initiation of experience.”\(^{49}\) The transitional object is something that an individual adopts at a young age and carries for a length of time until the need for the object is outgrown, such as an infant’s safety blanket. Somebody may require the comfort and safety of their transitional object, in this case cosplay, for many years, and for that time is allowed their illusion until it is gradually decathedeted, leaving behind residual transitional phenomena of actions and habits directly related to cosplay. Fine’s 1983 study of the social worlds of role-playing games, a precursor activity to cosplay, observed the opportunity of players to take on fantasy identities, which enables players to “endow themselves with attributes that in reality they don’t

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\(^{46}\) ‘Altria’, personal interview.

\(^{47}\) Peirson-Smith, “Fashioning the Fantastical Self,” 96

\(^{48}\) ‘Fox’ & ‘Magpie’, personal interview.

These attributes varied from strength and physical attractiveness to confidence and extroversion. In these instances, it could be considered that the non-physical attributes end up as residual transitional phenomena, as traces of the attributes remain in the individual after they move on from requiring the fantasy games. Fox mentioned not only gaining confidence to speak to anyone outside of cosplay, but also to stand and talk in front of crowds at conventions, such as in Fig.1 where they are participating in a cosplay ‘masquerade’.

3.3 Choosing a Character

When speaking to informants on their decision process behind character selections, the responses were varied. While some chose based solely upon costume details and the opportunity of a creative challenge, many expressed interest in the personality and back-story of a character, both aspects which cannot be worn but rather performed thereby establishing cosplay as more complex than mere dress-up. One informant, Sketch, commented that he tends to choose characters with tragedy in their backstory, and relates to the characters from through applying own experiences from growing up. In this way, cosplay provides an opportunity to contextualise a participant’s personal history within their current identity, sort of learning to be a fully rounded person within this intermittent area between reality and fantasy.

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50 Gelder, *Subcultures*, 141
51 ‘Fox’ & ‘Magpie’, personal interview.
52 ‘Drewett’, personal interview.
53 ‘Sketch, personal interview.  
54 ‘Fox’ & ‘Magpie’, personal interview.
55 ‘Sketch, personal interview.
Other informants explicitly explained their character choices, Toxi preferred retro game characters, such as Super Mario, because they are big characters which could never be shy or introverted. Another, Drewett, preferred to cosplay strong female characters out of respect for the strong women in her own family and in an attempt to promote characters that they felt weren’t a common occurrence in much media.54 Both illustrate to some extent the use of characters to convey traits they themselves wish to have. Particularly in the former example, the characters are applied traits by the informant; the game characters are not inherently confident or outgoing, they are simply game characters without a particular personality, however the informant’s cosplay creates these aspects of the character and this personal narrative influences the wearer’s identity when the costume is worn.

As Peirson-Smith notes “…the donning of costume takes on a dual function… expressing a visibly communicated difference from other non-Cosplayers, whilst at the same time, signalling group identity as the member of a variously costumed neo-style tribe.”55 While there must be an individual difference, a common language must be shared by the members of a subculture; in this case being a shared interest in popular culture.56 Vitally, no two cosplayers’ are the same, participants may dress as the same character or even have bought the same costume, though the final outcome of a cosplay is individual and unique. An individual communicates their significant difference within the parallel communication of a group identity through collective costume play, which also a key aspect to the spectacular styles expressed in other subcultures.57

54 ‘Drewett’, personal interview.
55 Peirson-Smith, “Fashioning the Fantastical Self,” 77
56 Hebdige Subculture, 122
57 Hebdige Subculture, 102
3.4 Experimentation with identity

Lave and Wenger claim the development of identity is fundamental to newcomers in communities of practice, exclusively focusing upon the community identity, though it needs to be acknowledged that an identity developed within the community of practice also profoundly affects an individual outside of said community, as proposed here with participants within the cosplay community. The opportunity to choose a character provides the opportunity to select an identity to perform. From discussion with informants, I propose that cosplay is also an opportunity to practice a spectacular identity, aspects of which can be adopted outside of cosplaying areas. Further, it creates an identity that can remain spectacular separately from the personal identity that develops from adolescent to adult. Hills suggests that through impersonation, a cosplayer is not a clearly fixed and bounded ‘self’, but neither are they lost in the ‘other’. This impersonation which lays between the self and the character can be classified as the “cosplayer identity”, much like an alter-ego.

Rauch and Bolton state that both cosplay and subcultures are about an imagined ideal, “…but the latter holds out a stronger promise that we can refashion our everyday selves in that new image”, though through speaking to subjects it is apparent that the former costumed practice too offers this promise. Dress has been identified as a catalyst that allows the wearer escape from the boundaries of self and offer acquisition of multiple identities, and Peirson-Smith’s ethnographic study of cosplayers in Hong Kong, Beijing and Tokyo suggests that “the boundaries of

58 Lave; Wenger, Situated Learning, 115
59 Matt Hills, Fan Cultures (London: Routledge, 2002) 168
superficial identification with the character are often transgressed in the act of Cosplay from public through private to publicly exhibited secret self…”60

Of the publications regarding cosplay in South-East Asia, many observe practices such as “Cross-play”, dressing as a character of the opposite gender, or “rule 63”, that for every fictional character there exists a counterpart of the opposite gender.61 Drewett dresses as various male characters, such as Rik from *The Young Ones* [Fig.2] and enjoys the reaction from “messing” with people who are not certain of her gender.62 The accepting nature of the cosplay community makes it a safe area to play with gender-norms through dress, whether it be for fun or as a deeper personal expression, as the temporal nature of a costume means that an assumed identity need not impact on someone’s every day presented self. In this way, a private self can be tested amongst others within the community before a participant chooses to (or not to) present this private self to the outside world.

A notable feature of the cosplay community is the spread of ages attending conventions and variety of backgrounds it attracts, noted by scholars as well as observed first-hand through attendance.63 Lave and Wenger touch on the benefits of communities which bring together “old-timers” and “new-comers” as encouraging diverse learning experiences.64 The initial diversity, paired with the understanding of being outside mainstream norms, results in a community support system which encourages acceptance. Animosity between cosplayers is abolished through a

60 Peirson-Smith, “Fashioning the Fantastical Self,” 77
61 Leng, “Gender, Sexuality, and Crossplay,” 89
62 ‘Drewett’, personal interview.
63 Peirson-Smith, “Fashioning the Fantastical Self,” 95
64 Lave; Wenger, *Situated Learning*, 57
common interest and willingness to dress up for something they love, as it seems foolish to judge somebody else for being weird or different when everybody involved is a bit weird and different.\textsuperscript{66} This leads to an “anything-goes” attitude where participants are free and encouraged to play with dress in ways that would typically lead to harsh judgement in the outside world, such as dressing as the opposite gender [Fig.1][Fig.2][Fig.5], or in a provocative style regardless of body type. From the informants, these are issues that are not questioned within cosplay areas, however outside of those areas would lead to questioning of somebody’s sexual preference or negative comments regarding body-weight.\textsuperscript{66} As such, adolescent participants not only learn from an earlier age to accept and support people from all backgrounds, they also learn how to accept and celebrate their own differences through dress. It is for this reason that cosplay can be appealing for adolescents, as a safe space separate from the home and school spaces where they can piece together an identity through fantastical costume that constitutes their adult identity.

\textsuperscript{65} ‘Altría’, personal interview.
\textsuperscript{66} ‘Toxi’, personal interview.
Figure 3. Sketch McDraw cosplaying Kuma, a character from manga series "Afro Samurai". Sanesh Joshi Photography. Personal Photograph provided by subject. 2013
Figure 4. Toxi and partner cosplaying zombie versions of Nintendo game characters Mario and Princess Peach, Brighton Film and Comic Con. Personal Photograph provided by subject. 17 Nov 2015.
4. Negotiating Identities: Creativity, Play and Adulthood

As established, there are many theories as to why the cosplay community holds appeal to adolescents, though it is far more complex to understand why so many different adults would spend time, money and effort to dress up as a fictional character. Cosplay feeds from a contemporary phenomenon that Lash and Lury call the “thingification of media”, where movies, cartoons and games become more than valueless signs and images, they become physically consumable “things”.\(^{67}\) The global culture industry has resulted in media that is not bound to the screen or page, but can instead be encountered as media objects.\(^{68}\) A notable feature of “thingification” is the transposition of media, such as taking characters or signifiers from a film and licencing them to appear on objects or in physical spaces. The current prevalence of geek-culture in everyday life means that there is less of a stigma surrounding adults who enjoy childish media such as comic books or animated films, and are now more inclined to indulge in said childish media in a public way such as through cosplay. It could be considered due to the piecemeal way in which adolescent identity is created presently that not all adults are secure in their identity, or perhaps secure enough to indulge in identity play.\(^{69}\)

Something that sets cosplay apart from other fan cultures is the active role of the participant as a producer, it is a community of practice formed around the collective action of producing and wearing costumes.\(^{70}\) While most fan cultures passively

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\(^{67}\) Lash; Lury, *Global Culture Industry*, 8
\(^{68}\) Lash; Lury, *Global Culture Industry*, 8
\(^{69}\) Danesi, *Forever Young*, 10
\(^{70}\) Rahman et al., ““Cosplay”,” 320
consume a particular media, such as following a tv series, cosplayers extend the media beyond conventional consumption by displacing the fictional characters into a physical setting. By doing this, the narrative of a character becomes embellished with new surroundings and experiences, without undermining the singularity of the character from the source material. For example, after most large conventions there will be an after party held at a local bar. The majority of characters, whether Elsa from Frozen or Spiderman, will not have storylines that situate them drinking alcohol in bar, however through cosplay it is possible to play with the knowledge of a character’s personality in order to expand their world and perform an accurate version of them within a bar/party context. This opportunity to merge knowledge of fictional worlds with real-life situations will be further explored through theories of play.

One theme that occurred through the interviews was cosplay as an opportunity to display creative skills. Napier notes cosplay as a representation of a fan’s open-minded creativity. The skillset of the informants greatly varied, some would spend months producing armour and weapons in a workshop while others would trawl charity shops to find appropriate pieces. Some discussed the vast difference between their first cosplay and what they can produce now, one interviewee stapled together pieces of fabric to make their first costume but now creates props and

Lave; Wenger, Situated Learning, 98
Lash; Lury, Global Culture Industry, 96
Susan J. Napier, From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy And Fan Cult in The Western Imagination (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 160
‘Sketch, personal interview.
‘Fox’ & ‘Magpie’, personal interview.
costumes at a professional level.\textsuperscript{74} It is clear that the skillset of a cosplayer extends beyond dressmaking or prop building to sourcing, styling and performance.

4.1 Displaying skills and resources

Some interviewees discussed the opportunity for creative projects through cosplay. Sketch describes himself as a hands-on, creative person and felt that cosplay allowed him to express himself through creating and replicating costumes and props.\textsuperscript{75} Part of the reason for choosing the characters he does is because they all require learning a new skill or technique to create, and as somebody who will spend months on a project such as his elaborate Kuma cosplay [Fig.3]. The process of creation is as important if not more so than the final wearing, and like many other serious cosplayers will take the time to arrange professional photoshoots to properly showcase the character, as shown in this image.\textsuperscript{76} Similarly, Altria in earlier years competed in international cosplay competitions. She achieved success within the community leading to contest judging and speaking at convention panels, however has regularly distanced herself from social aspects and “drama” within the community, seeking enjoyment from the creative process and final product rather than any reaction.\textsuperscript{77} Other interviewees communicated a desire to expand their creative skills, Fox mentioning that he otherwise would never have learnt to use a sewing machine. Cosplay allows an explicit display of somebody’s skillset and the community encourages and supports craft, unlike personal hobbies which may never have the same opportunities for display. Along with practical creative skills,

\textsuperscript{74} ‘Altria’, personal interview.
‘Toxi’, personal interview.
\textsuperscript{75} ‘Sketch, personal interview.
‘Sketch, personal interview.
\textsuperscript{76} ‘Altria’, personal interview.
interviewees mentioned personal skills developed through cosplay, such as confidence, interpersonal skills, and an understanding of performance and acting.\textsuperscript{78}

Hills discussed that fans claim agency through later “performances” of a fan identity, this agency essentially proving them more devoted to the fandom than others and thereby establishing a hierarchy within the fan community.\textsuperscript{79} This performance is observable in the cosplay community. The body itself represents capital to cosplayers and knowing how to dress it results in accolades, attention and, subsequently, fulfilment.\textsuperscript{80} Thornton establishes a concept of “subcultural capital” to apply to the “hipness” acquired through varying participation within subcultures.\textsuperscript{81} In the instance of the cosplay community, subcultural capital applies not to “hipness” of the participant but more as a claim to their cosplayer identity.

Cosplay, much like any other fan community, has perceivable hierarchies with some participants achieving fame as cosplayers. There are tensions between cosplaying for love of creating or for a particular media, and for a version of fame.\textsuperscript{82} A cosplayer identity is separate to a cosplay, as it refers not to a particular character chosen to dress as, but to the individual themself, their skillset, their collection of characters and the persona or style that is associated with their cosplay moniker, much like a brand. There are famous cosplayers internationally who have lucrative careers making appearances at conventions and speaking at panels or judging contests, such as Jessica Nigri, and Yaya Han who has recently launched a line of specialised

\textsuperscript{78} ‘Fox’ & ‘Magpie’, personal interview.
\textsuperscript{79} Hills, \textit{Fan Cultures}, 159
\textsuperscript{80} Hills, \textit{Fan Cultures}, 168
\textsuperscript{82} ‘Altria’, personal interview.
cosplay fabric.\textsuperscript{83} This celebrity status can in some cases be attributed to large social media followings on platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, and the vitality of the internet to cosplay today will be explored further in chapter 5.

However, it must be noted that these examples of celebrity resulting from cosplay are not the norm, and the individuals in question are accessible to contact though not involved in the UK cosplay community on a personal level, therefore it is imperative to understand the hierarchies that exist on a smaller level within the community. Chen observes that cosplayers who are considered successful generally have a particularly strong creative skill, and notes the attention and momentary spotlight that result from success in masquerades or contests.\textsuperscript{84} This attention can manifest itself through a strong social media following or being recognised at cons not for the cosplay but the cosplayer, and this “fame” can be motivation enough for participants to create larger, more elaborate or spectacular cosplays. However, many cosplayers are criticised as “doing it for the likes”, referencing individuals who will spend time and money on costumes and photoshoots that are posted on Facebook but in fact are not considered to be cosplaying for the love of cosplay.\textsuperscript{85} These instances could be inspired by a desire for a similar level of online fame as cosplay celebrities, or alternatively as a way to prove agency as a fan. Even when not searching for accolades or fame, there does seem to be an overwhelming desire for acceptance, and approval. In some cases, this desire can influence participants to spend more on their cosplay in attempt to buy agency as a fan. All informants discussed the positive

\textsuperscript{83} Rob Cramer, “10 Of The Most Popular Cosplayers In The World”, The Richest, 15\textsuperscript{th} Sep. 2014.
Yaya Han, “Yaya Han Line of Cosplay Fabrics Coming to Jo-Ann Spring 2016!”, Yayahan Official Website, 10th Oct. 2015.
\textsuperscript{84} Chen “A Study of Fan Culture, 16
\textsuperscript{85} ‘Altria’, personal interview.
praise they received while in costume, and it could be posed that it is through the community, a cosplay participant is validated.\textsuperscript{86}

Much mainstream news media will focus upon the high monetary costs that can be associated with cosplay, and many researchers comment that consumption is integral to participation.\textsuperscript{87} While in many cases this will be exaggerated or bias to present the costs as excessive spending, there does exist an unavoidable investment into cosplay. Not only must somebody actively consume media, such as a film or tv series, but then factor in the costs of costume pieces, materials and finally the cost of tickets to conventions to display a complete cosplay. Several interviewees mentioned that it did not, or should not, matter if a participant was to buy a costume or buy props pre-made, and insistence on this point could be indicative of tensions within the community regarding how to produce a cosplay.\textsuperscript{88}

Some participants are paid to create custom-orders for friends, and there are independent businesses set up around cosplay, such as wig-makers or bespoke corset-makers, which are all generally considered acceptable sources of costume pieces. Commissioned work will cost considerably more than costumes found on Ebay or put together independently, however these options may not look as effective depending upon the skill of the participant. Altria mentioned that younger participants

\textsuperscript{86} Peirson-Smith, “Fashioning the Fantastical Self,” 80

‘Toxi’, personal interview.

‘Drewett’, personal interview.

\textsuperscript{87} Barr, Hannah, “The Secret World of the Weekend Superheroes”, The Sun, [n.d]. Online http://www.thesun.co.uk/


\textsuperscript{88} ‘Drewett’, personal interview.

‘Altria’, personal interview.

‘Toxi’, personal interview.
today are motivated to churn out different cosplays rapidly, and this desire for variety with limited time could be related to the increasing businesses catering to cosplayers.\(^89\)

4.2 Bricolage & attention to appearance

The opportunity to show others how well somebody can put together a costume relates to Levi-Strauss’ idea of bricolage.\(^90\) A bricoleur combines existing concepts together to communicate new meanings, thereby creating messages which are only understandable to a knowing audience.\(^91\) Hebdige used the framework of bricolage to describe the symbolic subversion of clothing by subcultures.\(^92\) In the instance of cosplay, the bricoleur is using the entire visible body to collage an identity. From hair-style, hats or wigs, to body paint and makeup, to cloth or armour to footwear, every aspect of the appearance is put together in a particular way, and this requires resourcefulness, creativity and an understanding of how to bring fictional concepts into physical reality. Some informants noted the problem-solving aspect of creating a cosplay, that there are objects or materials, such as oversized weapons or glowing elements, that just do not exist and therefore serve as a challenge to overcome.\(^93\)

Part of this also could be for the bricoleur to prove their subcultural capital, whether to establish themselves as a more committed cosplayer, to show devotion or appreciation to the source material, or even to prove themself as a well-informed “nerd”. Again, the desire to prove their fan agency. Feineman wrote 10 years ago of

\(^89\) ‘Altria’, personal interview.
\(^91\) Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind, 20
\(^92\) Hebdige, Subculture: The Meaning of Style (London; Routledge, [1979] 2006) 74
\(^93\) ‘Altria’, personal interview.
the “cataclysmic shift in what society considers cool”, as the social “losers” were not only becoming valuable in technologically driven economy but also cropping up as role models in popular media, such as Bill Gates and Lisa Simpson then, or the cast of The Big Bang Theory today.94 “Geek Chic” has appeared in fashion since the 1980s, and as the stigma surrounding formerly “nerdy” or obscure pursuits diminished, people became more inclined to declare themselves as nerds or geeks.95 Consequently, the term now connotes a myriad of qualities such as intelligence, quirkiness and individuality, somebody who won’t necessarily follow the crowd, and as such, to present the identity of an authentic “nerd” may be desirable for some participants.96 Even within likeminded communities, there is still a defensiveness over claiming or even performing particular identities, and many feel the need to justify their attachments to nerd culture.97

Cosplay is a performative action, to cosplay a character is to produce a set of signs to signify said character or source material.98 Like the “thingification of media”, signifiers from the source material are transposed to a physical context.99 These signs, shown through the material and composition of the participant’s appearance, can be read by the community. The cosplay bricoleur will create cross-text references through combining iconic media with community-created fan theories and short-lived internet memes for cosplays which can only be decoded by few knowing participants. Fox and Magpie discussed the reality of cons, that not everybody’s

95 Feineman, GeekChic, 15
96 Feineman, GeekChic, 15
97 Hills, Fan Cultures, xii
98 Hale, “Cosplay,” 5
99 Lash; Lury, Global Culture Industry, 8
cosplay will be identifiable to other cosplayers, for example they created cosplays based on specific fan-devised anthropomorphized *Pokemon*, which unless participants were familiar with the online fan-fictions and discourse, would not be recognisable whatsoever. Other cosplayers will combine fandoms or themes, such as steampunk portrayals of superheroes, or zombie characters such as Toxi and her partner’s portrayal of classic game characters Mario and Princess Peach [Fig.4].

This bricolage serves as a personal twist upon a cosplay, rather than a straightforward replication, and shows a stamp of individuality by the wearer behind the costume. Hale discusses that the core of cosplay is the pleasure of playing with code, and the idea of “play” itself is crucial to the appeal of cosplay.

To explore the appeal of cosplay beyond exterior significations and community cohesion it is necessary to understand theory of play, and the dynamics of adulthood and childlike play. Adults indulging in childlike-play is encouraged by the thingification of media, in a small way through licencing adult objects with juvenile media, such as Disney car accessories and clothing. News outlets regularly frame cosplayers as out-of-touch with reality or delusional for spending so much time and money on something that can appear frivolous, and escapism is commonly considered a reason for participation. In a larger way, this is encouraged through hyper-realistic events to experience media such as conventions, though con spaces will be explored in more depth in the next chapter.

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100 ‘Fox’ & ‘Magpie’, personal interview.
101 ‘Toxi’, personal interview.
102 Hale, “Cosplay,” 5
103 Hills, *Fan Cultures*, xii
104 Lash; Lury, *Global Culture Industry*, 106
4.3 Play, Masquerade and Escape

The term “play” sets the costumed activity apart from reality, as in Western cultural traditions play is synonymous with childhood triviality and escapism; a freedom from obligation. From this reason stems the misunderstanding that cosplayers go further than play pretend and actually conflate real-life with a fantasy life, as media outlets connect active fandom with childish behaviour which should be outgrown by adulthood. A point of criticism forms around the paradoxical contradictions of cosplay, that it can be both real and make-believe, and that someone can be both themself and somebody else. Caillois explicitly connects play with mimicry, a specific aspect of play where an individual “forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds [their] personality to feign another”, and further establishes that acts of mimicry in play remain with individuals from childhood to adulthood, the act of play functioning much like Winnicott’s transitional objects.

Winnicott discusses the intermediary area of experience between inner and outer reality; such a space is considered a direct continuation of childhood play and regards this space as initiation between the self and the word. Rahman et al. consider cosplay to provide pleasures and fantasies that cannot be fulfilled or materialized in their daily lives, while Hjorth sees it as giving the fans agency in a form of twenty-first century transmedia storytelling, both on and offline.

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105 Hodkinson, “The Goth Scene and (sub)Cultural Substance,” 153
106 Hodkinson, “The Goth Scene and (sub)Cultural Substance,” 153
109 Winnicott, Playing and Reality, 18
110 Rahman et al., “Cosplay”, 321
speculates that participation and immersion are an attempt to re-capture an original, cathartic moment, one felt during the first exposure to a certain media. More complex than just an escape; a nostalgia for a lost feeling. Hill’s speculation could relate to points raised by the informants that cosplaying a character recalls past experiences or shared tragedies, in this way, to wear a costume can be to reclaim a moment felt by a former self. Similar to what Sketch discussed, a character is chosen due to empathy for emotions experienced during adolescence, and so in this case to wear a costume is to recall the adolescent self’s first experience of the source material, and the act of producing a costume itself is reminiscent of his creative childhood. It is considered that society’s understanding of self and reality is increasingly incoherent and fractured, in part due to the undermining and splintering of former absolute certainties such as religion, science and politics.

Hodkinson notes “our reliance on play to deal with these complexities has become even clearer and more urgent.” To cosplay can be to recall the emotions of a first experience.

A drawback of analysing masquerade theory is that most text on the subject focuses upon masks themselves and completely disguising the self. Masks are undoubtedly linked to transition and disguise, and those who cosplay masked characters are invariably keener to present the character they play than to be recognised as themselves, as with Sketch’s Kuma [Fig.3]. Informants presented opposing opinions of masked cosplay, Altria asserted that she has no interest in being seen as

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Larissa Hjorth, “Playing the Gender Game: The Performance of Japan, Gender and Gaming via Melbourne Female Cosplayers,” Eds. Larissa Hjorth; Dean Chan, Gaming Cultures and Place in Asia-Pacific (New York; London: Routledge, 2009) 273

111 Hills, Fan Cultures, 42
112 ‘Sketch’, personal interview.
113 Hodkinson, “The Goth Scene and (sub)Cultural Substance,” 154
114 Hodkinson, “The Goth Scene and (sub)Cultural Substance,” 154
115 Napier, Masks, Transformations and Paradox, xviii
just herself in a costume, rather she wanted to be mistaken for the actual character and explicitly discussed creating a cosplayer identity separate to her professional identity, whereas Toxi felt it was weird to completely hide any suggestion of self and as seen in Fig.4., her face is recognisable as herself rather than as the character. Lurie asserts that to wear someone else’s clothes is to symbolically take on their personality.\textsuperscript{116} There must be definition between disguise and masquerade, that disguise conceals and hides while masquerade states a delineation of the wearer’s identity.\textsuperscript{117} Tseelon observes “ambiguity and the status of masquerade as a challenge to categories of identity”, which applies to the varying motivations of cosplayers.\textsuperscript{118} Again, Drewett enjoys playing with this ambiguity through crossplay [Fig.2], a clear example of using cosplay to challenge identity. There is clearly a distinct difference in motivations to present the self as a character in the way that Drewett’s Rik is still recognisably herself, or to present the skills and creativity through the character such as Sketch’s Kuma, which would cause reaction due to the skill rather than because it is Sketch.\textsuperscript{119}

Goffman’s describes performance as “…all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants”, and this is central to participation of cosplay.\textsuperscript{120} Everyday life hinges on the assumption that how somebody presents themselves is in fact who they are, that the internal and external identity correspond. Appearance in particular contexts is key to socially fitting in. Cosplay allows for the performance of an identity other than the

\textsuperscript{116} Alison Lurie, \textit{The Language of Clothes} (London: Heinemann) 24
\textsuperscript{117} Ed. Efrat Tseelon, \textit{Masquerade and Identities: Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Marginality} (London: Routledge, 2001) xv
\textsuperscript{118} Ed. Tseelon, \textit{Masquerade and Identities}, 1
\textsuperscript{119} ‘Drewett’, personal interview.
everyday self through management of “personal front”, and this is understood by other participants and the spectacular external identity accepted within context.\textsuperscript{121} Cosplay is a more explicit performance than what Goffman was discussing, and aligns with theory of performing arts in some respects, rather than everyday presentation.

Figure 5. Altria (Right) and friend cosplaying manga characters, Space Pirate Captain Harlock and Kei Yuki. European Cosplay Gathering, EPIC photography. Personal photograph provided by subject. 2015
Figure 6. Main hall at London Film and Comic Con featuring cosplaying and non-cosplaying attendees and various merchandise stalls. London. Personal photograph by the author. 19 Jul 2015.

Figure 7. Cosplayers performing a skit as Kylo Ren and Rey from Star Wars: The Force Awakens during cosplay masquerade. London Super Comic Con. Personal photograph by the author. 20 Feb 2016.
5. Performing Identities: Online and Offline spaces

The community is centred upon a dress practice, so it is curious to observe that the members of the community are only briefly costumed for the purpose of meets, events and conventions. Lave and Wenger establish that the term community need not imply a physically present group with socially visible boundaries, rather a community can be defined through a shared participation in an activity system, such as cosplay, which remains relevant to participants even when not physically partaking.\textsuperscript{122} The defining aspect of this community of practice is not constantly practiced, rather the cosplay production and wearing is only a segment of participation in the cosplay community. It is this brevity of performance which correlates a cosplay to an online identity, as in both cases an individual has acute control over the identity that others will experience.

To understand the opportunity to play with identity, we must then explore the avenues through which identity is presented. An identity is closely connected to the context in which it is performed and as Goffman discusses people have a private and public self.\textsuperscript{123} To apply this to cosplay, a participant will have a private self, then public self that is presented in everyday life, and a cosplayer identity that is manifested only when in costume. As Leng observes, “…cosplay constitutes a participatory and communal culture that facilitates social interaction”.\textsuperscript{124} A large part of participation appears to be networking, sharing completed cosplays, works in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{122} Lave; Wenger, \textit{Situated Learning}, 98
\item \textsuperscript{123} The \textit{Presentation of Self in Everyday Life}, 26
\item \textsuperscript{124} Leng, “Gender, Sexuality, and Crossplay,” 90
\end{itemize}
progress or future ideas on social media.\textsuperscript{125} An integral aspect to the current cosplay community is the internet, which can be considered an equally valid space as any physical space to manifest an alternate identity.\textsuperscript{126} The performed identity of real life parallels with online avatars, as the identity can be negotiated and manipulated in both sides of the public sphere.

\textbf{5.1 Performativity}

The fundamental theory behind performativity is that the way an individual presents themself is directly influenced by the context and company of where they are. The public self is dressed in a particular way to reflect or disguise a personality. Much of contemporary life requires adherence to codes of dress more often than not in order to fit in and not garner attention.\textsuperscript{127} The wearing of bright or outlandish clothing has been connected to persons with “weak body boundaries”, as Kaiser notes the spectacle that the clothes create could serve to compensate for feelings of “body weakness or penetrability.”\textsuperscript{128} This corresponds with what most informants discussed, that the cosplay acts as a form of armour that mediates the wearer’s internal identity with a spectacular exterior, and so a participant feels protected and safe rather than weak and penetrable.\textsuperscript{129}

Hjorth observes that “Transformation and subversion are all part of the game as cosplayers perform online and offline fantasies and fictions...”, and these

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\textsuperscript{125} Gustavo S. Mesch; Ilan Talmud, \textit{Wired Youth: The Social World of Adolescence in the Information Age} (New York; London: Routledge, 2010) 45
\textsuperscript{126} Mesch; Talmud, \textit{Wired Youth}, 10
\textsuperscript{128} Kaiser, \textit{The Social Psychology of Clothing}, 107
\textsuperscript{129} ‘Fox’ & ‘Magpie’, personal interview.
\end{flushleft}
transformations and subversions entirely reorient Butler’s theories of post-structuralist performativity.\textsuperscript{130} From Butler’s discussion on gender norms acting upon the individual, gender is considered a concept applied onto someone and any further action by the individual is governed by this application of gender rather than their own agency. It could be argued that cosplayer’s performative actions surpass existing notions of gender performativity. As something that is performed everyday as a way of fitting into everyday society and that as a performance it can be imitated by others, Butler considers gender identities as something inescapable.\textsuperscript{131} However, for a participant to cosplay the opposite gender or even a genderless character is seen as a negotiation of the character before it is seen as a negotiation of the wearer’s gender identity. A performance in this sense refers to the activity and appearance of an individual on occasion which serves to influence other participants, however the performance inside of a convention space will denote and influence for different reasons than had previously been considered in everyday society.\textsuperscript{132} Furthermore, the cosplayer identity could be considered as entirely performative. Due to a perception within a community understanding of diversity, the identities presented within spaces of performance such as cons are understood as homage to characters and fandoms while the same identities presented to outside society would denote other meanings and motivations such as gender confusion or depravity.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{130} Hjorth, “Playing the Gender Game;,” 274.


\textsuperscript{132} Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, 26

The masquerades in front of audiences require an understanding of performance that directly references the costume worn. Even the dramatic pose by Altria and friend seen in Fig.5 shows attention to understanding the physicality and personality of the character being cosplayed. It can be observed that cosplay negotiates a space between everyday performativity and outright performance. Fig.7 shows two cosplayers taking part in a masquerade, which at a convention can refer to a catwalk or stage to showcase cosplays, as seen in Fig.1, or to a competition to reward the best cosplay. These masquerades now generally require a prepared skit, these could be a performance of something from the source material or a comical presentation of the character doing something out of context, such as dancing, which relates back to the transposition of fiction into physical settings.

Wilson acknowledges the importance of studying performance, as a form that appeals to so many can reasonably be considered to lock into the fundamental needs and fantasies of human psychology. If we consider the consumption of media as a kind of mental play, *Star Wars* proves popular as it appeals to the child in all of us, and each character represents familiar archetypes that viewers recognise in themselves. As a result, it allows the viewer to experience their most primitive needs and fears, and to project passions that otherwise have been controlled in everyday life. Consuming dramatic media such as *Star Wars* acts as a catharsis, where the media provides within itself a resolution of the passion it evokes. Films are written specifically for the audience to enter another’s mind and see what situations are like from the character’s point of view. It is suggested that from viewing

134 Glenn Wilson, *The Psychology of the Performing Arts*, (London; Sydney: Croom Helm, 1985) 1
135 Wilson, *The Psychology of the Performing*, 17
136 Wilson, *The Psychology of the Performing Arts*, 3
popular culture that contemporary society will understand social norms and expectations. Therefore, for a fan of a particular film or TV series it cannot be too much of an extension of this to then clothe their body as a character following an experience of the character’s psyche. Much like Hodkinson wrote, to cosplay a character is to reclaim the feelings felt upon first experiencing said character.

5.2 Conventions & safe spaces of performance

Hills recognises the importance of the “‘inhabitation’ of extratextual spaces” for fans. For a participant, a convention is where a cosplay can be activated and properly performed. Conventions are large event spaces which in the UK have been growing in size and frequency over the past 5 years. A convention will typically include vendor stalls selling comics and merchandise, a section for signings and photographs with celebrities, gaming stations, discussion panels, photo opportunities and usually some kind of cosplay masquerade or competition. Cons often have professionals from various fields with some link to nerd-culture, and provide an opportunity to hear insider information or experience exclusive film clips. The con is a physical area to validate fandom, and for many is a safe space which operates alternatively to the rules of everyday life. The space provides a context for cosplayers where there are differing social norms, and acceptability is re-defined.

The convention is more often than not a commodified space, where the entire experience will be commercially constructed, which although critiqued by academics as presenting an inauthentic experience does not appear to be too much of an issue

138 Gauntlett, Media, Gender and Identity, 2
139 Hills, Fan Cultures, 144
140 London Super Comic Con event programme 20th & 21st Feb. 2016, 1
This space is an example of the “thingification of media” phenomenon, as conventions will often be used to promote particular franchises or upcoming cinematic releases, such as the heavy promotion of movie *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* at London Film and Comic Con 2015 [Fig.6]. 2015 was also a year closely linked to the *Back To The Future* movie franchise, and many conventions incorporated panel talks or photo opportunities relating to the films, such as the chance of a photo sitting in a *Delorean* replica for a small fee. This is a clear example of how objects, characters or scenes will be transposed from their source material and placed into the context of a physical convention space. For the participant, this commercially created experience is nevertheless still authentic to them, and this awareness of reality and acceptance of a created heightened reality is key to understanding why cosplayers can comfortably suspend their everyday disbelief. Not only is the individual playing outside of reality, but the entire setting is outside of reality.

To return to performativity, Goffman establishes the setting, location and company to dictate the correct social mannerisms to present. In the case of cosplay, these rules are wavered as anybody in costume is no longer a stranger. The community of cosplay means that any other participant can be approached and spoken to familiarly. The costumed cosplay negotiates an identity beyond their own, but not fully that of the character they portray, and so any interaction is devised within this intermediate space. This links to Peirson-Smith’s observation that while a costumed self is susceptible to challenge by other social players, it is also through these social

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141 Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 151
142 Lash; Lury, *Global Culture Industry*, 8
players that it is legitimised.143 This legitimised cosplay identity is in some ways a loss of self but simultaneously an expansion of self, as the participant allows themself to immerse in an identity not acceptable for everyday contexts.

Through this immersion a participant can physically manifest and expand more of their private identity.144 Toxi and Drewett alike discuss being caught in cosplay out of context, such as going to the supermarket on the way to an event, and said that everyone is still really supportive and pleased to see them when in cosplay.145 However it must be noted that this may not be the experience for all cosplayers outside of safe cosplaying spaces. The way a costume can impact somebody’s opinion of another person is clear to see, even outside of the community in everyday life, to present somebody else’s identity is then to be understood as that identity. To see in context evokes a familiarity or camaraderie, but outside of it can come as a shock to ordinary society. Conversely, to attend a con in everyday clothes is to subtly exclude an individual from participation, as to wear the costume considered appropriate for the space is to conform to standards of involvement.146

5.3 Online spaces

As the internet has become an increasingly integral part of everyday life, having an online identity separate to a physical identity is familiar to many. Goffman’s concept of performativity can be continued to contemporary social situations, that a person’s

143 Peirson-Smith, “Fashioning the Fantastical Self,” 80
144 Hills, Fan Cultures, 167
145 ‘Toxi’, personal interview.
146 Lurie, The Language of Clothes, 13
private self can be held back more so with the advent of internet anonymity. \(^{147}\) Agger considers the internet to exacerbate a pornographic, soul-baring culture, which in turn can breed low self-esteem in individuals. \(^{148}\) Electronic networking is perfect to establish connections for those feeling isolated, and provides an opportunity to conceal the self while still sharing. \(^{149}\) Schultz et al. remark on the ability to disguise social difficulties or disorders, for example individuals with high functioning autism can communicate in a way which is not indicative of their condition. \(^{150}\) This point is particularly of relevance as some informants mentioned a large proportion of the cosplay community suffer from social difficulties or mental illness. \(^{151}\) Online social platforms offer an alternate way to communicate for those who struggle with face-to-face interactions and are more inclined to spend free-time on pastimes such as gaming. \(^{152}\) Relations become “mediated by the screens, behind which feelings and vulnerabilities can be hidden.” \(^{153}\) As discussed earlier, social media platforms also provide a link to celebrity cosplayers which cannot be experienced physically in reality.

All informants use social media platforms, such as Facebook to post updates about recent cosplays and upcoming projects, or YouTube to upload fan-fictions performed in cosplay. \(^{154}\) Jacobs acknowledges that digital technologies promote membership in

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\(^{147}\) Ben Agger, *Oversharing: Presentations of Self in the Internet Age* (New York; London: Routledge, 2012) 1

\(^{148}\) Lash; Lury, *Global Culture Industry*, 7

\(^{149}\) Lash; Lury, *Global Culture Industry*, 12


\(^{151}\) ‘Toxi’, personal interview.

‘Fox’ & ‘Maggie’, personal interview.

\(^{152}\) Saito “The Asymmetry of Masculine/Femenine Otaku Sexuality,” 155

Gelder, *Subcultures*, 143

\(^{153}\) Lash; Lury, *Global Culture Industry*, 13

\(^{154}\) ‘Toxi’, personal interview.

‘Fox’ & ‘Maggie’, personal interview.

‘Drewett’, personal interview.
participatory culture, furthered by Gee’s identification of “affinity spaces”, online communities based primarily upon shared activities, interests and goals. One such page, *The Geek Asylum*, is a Facebook page for North-East England based cosplayers with just over 5000 members, and it provides opportunities not only to share tips and projects but physical meet-ups and gatherings outside of the larger cons and sometimes out of cosplay. The page offers real friendships with likeminded individuals who may not have been found without the internet. Lash and Lury discuss how online sharing can lead to a digital intimacy, where individuals will share more behind their online profile than they could possibly in real life.

These affinity spaces served to pique an interest, leading to further pursuit of education and experimentation offline. A key example of this is using the internet to learn new techniques for creating cosplays, or seeing examples of cosplays by other participants and wanting to replicate similar costumes. Through forums and pages, such as *The Geek Asylum* or *Sussex Cosplayers*, it is common to share source images of characters for the next planned cosplay, or work in process images. Through sharing these images a participant can gain feedback from the community, tips for materials or techniques. Sometimes sharing can lead to members of the community becoming inspired and wanting to replicate techniques themselves.

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156 Lash; Lury, *Global Culture Industry*, 26
157 Jacobs, “Rethinking Common Assumptions About Adolescents’ Motivation to Use Technology In and Out of School,” 272
158 Mesch; Talmud, *Wired Youth*, 45
Mesch and Talmud observe individuals with low self-esteem to be more actively involved in internet use to compensate their social anxiety, similar to Kaiser’s discussion of compensating body weakness with outlandish dress.\footnote{Mesch; Talmud, \textit{Wired Youth}, 52} Altria in particular compares the cosplay community to the teen programme \textit{90210} in terms of drama, and mentioned that people will show off images of elaborate cosplays but be intentionally unhelpful when asked for tips on costume or prop construction.\footnote{‘Altria’, personal interview.} In this way, the online forums and groups operate on a similar social hierarchical level to teenage social groups, and as mentioned previously, for this reason Toxi has outgrown the activities of \textit{Sussex Cosplayers}.

5.4 Parallels between online and offline selves

The majority of society today lives both online and offline.\footnote{Kaiser, \textit{The Social Psychology of Clothing}, 107} If Goffman considers the role played by a social actor as inhabited for the duration of a “performance” before returning to the “backstage” of private life, then internet networking only intensifies this.\footnote{Lash; Lury, \textit{Global Culture Industry}, 1} A cosplayer’s profile can be edited to present a heightened version of a real person from the safety of their private life, such as showing an attractive, skilled, valid nerd. Similarly, a cosplay can be specifically worn and performed to suggest a heightened version of an individual’s personality. Both provide a barrier between a real individual and the outside world. To expand to the spaces in which the identities are performed, a cosplay is perceived differently in the context of a convention and in everyday life. A person’s online avatar or online persona also leads to a different perception of the individual. As Hills notes, members of the

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnotetext{Mesch; Talmud, \textit{Wired Youth}, 52}
\footnotetext{Kaiser, \textit{The Social Psychology of Clothing}, 107}
\footnotetext{‘Altria’, personal interview.}
\footnotetext{Lash; Lury, \textit{Global Culture Industry}, 26}
\footnotetext{Lash; Lury, \textit{Global Culture Industry}, 1}
\end{footnotesize}
community will not confuse the source material with reality, however “many cultural critics have refused to view the fantasy/reality opposition as permeable…” Hills himself however does not consider it possible to distinguish between the “internal self and its experiences and the external self and its cultural context” in the instance of fandoms, though this statement does not fully encapsulate the diverse multi-layered fan participation within the cosplay community. 164

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163 Hills, Fan Cultures, 146
164 Hills, Fan Cultures, 794
Lamerichs, “Stranger than fiction,” 4.3
6. Conclusion

Throughout the postmodern age, subcultures are increasingly splintering and fragmented, and now with the advent of the internet communities are less restricted by locality, age and race. Cosplay as a prime example of such a subculture, and provides a community of belonging and acceptance to all ages, though can be particularly appealing to adolescents for providing a safe space at a critical time of growth, until it can be outgrown and decatheted.

For older participants, cosplay provides an outlet unlike any other in adult life. It is a space to display creativity, somewhere to play without judgement, and an opportunity to indulge in fandoms with likeminded individuals. In a wider sense, this is representative of the contemporary relationship between society and popular media. On a deeper level, this can stem from recapturing a moment in youth or a past self.

Finally, to consider the parallels between online and offline spaces is to fully understand how contemporary communities of practice operate in the modern day. The internet must be recognised as new stage for performative actions, and similarly the convention space acts as bubble outside of current avenues of everyday performance. These spaces, though not technically real, serve to create safe affinity spaces for all participants to support and create together.

As what was previously considered weird is now gaining mainstream acceptance, many people are open to indulging in public expressions of creativity and fan appreciation with less fear for potential social repercussions. Although no community
is without conflict, the cosplay community nonetheless provides like-mindedness, camaraderie and acceptance in ways that other communities have not, though as the cosplay community and its spaces grow, this dynamic could very well change. In summation, by exploring the practice and motivations of cosplayers currently active in the UK it was possible to understand the motivations and experiences of those who choose to partake in the dress practice. As Pierson-Smith notes, cosplay can be a multi-layered activity, and for this reason it is integral to remember that the reasons behind cosplay are as diverse as those who participate. From a relatively small selection of six informants, there was a large variety of experiences and clearly to speak to any more informants would reveal ever more diverse experiences.
Acknowledgements

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0:07 Sarah-Mary: This is Sarah-Mary Geissler interviewing *name redacted* and *name redacted* on Sunday the 8th of November on the subject of cosplay.

Right, first question, how long have you been involved with cosplay?

Magpie: Hold on… nearly 5 years.

SM: Five years, both of you?

Fox: Hang on… *laughs* erm, how old am I? *laughs* probably about 4, 4-5 years, yeah.

0:56 SM: Ok, and why did you first become involved?

M: …[distorted sound]…my own YouTube videos and things …[distorted sound]…interested and kind of investigated what it was and stuff, and then me a few friends decided that we kind of wanted to give it a go, so we went along to a ComicCon back in 2011, and yeah, just kind of, carried on from there

F: For me, one of my friends was going to a Con in Gateshead and had no one to go with so just asked if I wanted to go and I was like …okay? What is this thing? And then went along and really enjoyed it

1:46 SM: Do you dress as one particular character or a variety?

M: Variety *laughs*
F: We’ve got a variety but we’ve got a few characters that we… that are, like, favourites.

2:00 SM: Why that particular variety? And then why the few kind of core characters?

F: I think with the variety, ‘cus obviously there’s so much, so many different like games and films and stuff coming out all the time, if you see a character you really like, or even if you see a character that you want to challenge then you’ll want to cosplay them. But then with the core characters it’s more… well for us we’ve got Charles and Eric from X-Men as core characters and we do a YouTube series with them, but…

M: They’re, like, our favourite ones, they’re the ones we kind of… I don’t know…

F: Well we met over Charles as well…

M: Yeah, so… *both laugh* I don’t know, there’s certain ones that are more special to us I guess? Like, we relate more to certain characters and things like that, so… or we just generally enjoy cosplaying those ones more.

3:11 SM: Do you identify at all with the characters? Is there anything that kind of connects them, are they sort of baddies or the good guys?

M: My… a lot of the time I end up cosplaying the characters that are smart, and just basically arseholes *laughs* like that’s generally the characters that I cosplay, just because I enjoy those characters a lot more, their… I don’t know, they’re a lot more fun to be I guess

F: My… I think I… like characters that I can relate to a bit, because I can get into character easier, so if I’m at a Con and I can act as that particular character easier
3:59 SM: Ok, and do you build your own cosplays?

M: Yeah, moreso because buying it is expensive

F: It’s just stuff that comes out of, like with a lot of my cosplays it’s stuff that we’ve got from charity shops and Primark, and then cut up and sewn back together, or, like just, made better basically

M: I find it really therapeutic making some of them, just like sitting there working on something, working towards something, so, it’s nice

4:53 SM: What were your crafting or like sourcing, costuming skills before you began to cosplay?

M: Terrible! *laughs*

F: My mum’s always made costumes, so, I was used to seeing her using the sewing machine but I was never allowed to use it *laughs* So I guess my only crafting skills would be from… from like, year 8 technology at Middle School

M: Yeah mine was like, really bad, I hadn’t done anything before this but then since doing cosplay I’ve branched out into other stuff, like I make jewellery and things like that as well now, just because I can, and I sew a lot of different things just because I can. I just enjoy it, it’s nice

5:45 SM: Are there any particular skills that you’ve developed on any particular cosplays?

[mumble to each other]

M: I’m better at social skills, on certain cosplays now, because, like, I was really introverted when I started cosplay but now I can basically chat to anybody, which is
really nice, considering I went into cosplay with really intense crowd anxiety, now I’m happy to talk to a big crowd, so…

F: Yeah I’ve got, like, the same kind of thing with that, also like just general, like I learnt how to use a sewing machine because of making cosplays and like learnt how to source different materials, and how to make things on more of a budget

6:49 SM: When and where do you wear your cosplays?

Both: All the time! *laughs*

M: It’s mostly at ComicCon and cosplay meets

F: Or just when we see each other

M: Yeah, occasionally its just when we see each other, because, why not? Yeah, main times are at Cons and meets, but like, occasionally if the cosplay’s there then we just… [distorted sound] ,, or just because we can

F: Or on our YouTube channel

7:23 SM: Are involved in any cosplay groups or communities?

M: No…well, sometimes we go…

F: Well you’ve got those cosplay meet-ups in Manchester which Zane sometimes goes to-

M: Yep…

F: But then there’s nothing like that down here in Cheltenham

M: No, occasionally we have like, cosplay groups at Cons and, depending on who you go like-

F: Yeah, ‘cus at a Con you can meet up with people from all over the country, so we’ll be messaging each other, all over the country being like “do you wanna do an
X-Men group?” or “do you wanna do a 5 Nights at Freddies group?” So you turn up at Con as a full, like almost full set of the characters from a film

**M:** Which just looks like, a little cool, like “Squad!” *laughs* Like all the characters from a certain show

**8:25 SM:** Do you notice any sort-of similarities for the cosplay community or is there anything you notice about them?

**M:** They’re all very- A lot of the ones I meet are like, introverted, or in some way like, not considered the norm I guess, especially the ones that are like high school age

**F:** I think quite a lot of people have like mental health difficulties like depression and anxiety and things like that, so like getting into cosplay and becoming a different character can really help relieve you from feeling worried about yourself because people are perceiving you as the character rather than as yourself

**M:** Yeah, it’s kind of like a barrier between you and everybody else in a way

**9:13 SM:** Ok, and so when you cosplay, do you feel cool?

**Both:** Yeah! *laughs*

**9:30 SM:** You’ve kind of already answered this, but has cosplay had any impacts on your day-to-day life?

**M:** Yeah, I’m definitely more confident in myself now since starting cosplay

**F:** Yeah, I’d say I am too, ‘cus like from first going to Cons and being a shy person to then being able to just, work out how to talk to people, I can like pick up conversations with people when I’m not in cosplay now as well so I can talk to more people and just be more extroverted really
10:05 SM: And has it impacted your day-to-day style at all? Like clothing?

M: Occasionally, depending on which character I’m doing at the time then obviously I have a lot of their clothes at my house

F: And our hair, we dye our hair for characters as well

M: So my natural’s brown but its black at the moment ‘cus some of the characters I do at the moment have black hair, so yeah it’s things like that as well, you cut your hair for certain characters

F: Yeah, I cut my hair for characters, I also wear [distorted sound] …waistcoat, like Charles’ shirts, waistcoat and cardigans so I wear that a lot more often

10:58 SM: Is there anything finally you’d like to add about your own experience of cosplay that I haven’t covered?

M: Well we met through cosplay, so that’s pretty cool

F: I think you meet a lot of people through cosplay, like it really broadens your friendship group because as soon as, if you see someone in cosplay and you like what they’re wearing that’s an instant point that you can start chatting to them with.

So like [Magpie] came up to me and asked for a photo of my Days of Future’s Past Charles and then we saw each other again a bit later on on that Con day and ended up chatting and then just didn’t stop chatting since *laughs*

SM: [Magpie], what were you wearing that day?

M: I was wearing Hannibal, so I was covered in blood *laughs* yeah I had Hannibal on from the TV series and it was a very specific scene where he’s completely covered in blood, he’s got a white shirt on and he’s just got blood all over him and
that’s what I was wearing to sort of approach them like “hey can I have a picture?”
*laughs* so yeah…

12:11 SM: Do you ever find it difficult to know what people are dressed as? How broad is your kind of “cannon” of cosplay have to be to be like “oh they’re that, from that scene”?

M: If you’re familiar with a certain franchise then it’s a lot easier and you can even pick up like little things they’ve added that are to do with the fandom or something

F: Like, I’ll go to one and there’ll be lots of anime characters or game characters and I won’t know who they’re being, but I think like, you can still definitely appreciate effort that has gone into their costume and stuff, whereas like with people Charles and Hannibal there’s not- it’s not very elaborate it’s more like home clothes, so I guess it is harder to work out who it is if you’re not entirely familiar with the show

M: I guess there’s certain twists on outfits that you do that only people who are familiar the series would know, like when we did the Pokemon ones, obviously Pokemon aren’t human, but we made humanoid versions of them and if you were familiar with it you could tell exactly who they were and stuff, like I had a hoodie on with little ears and things and you had the little eye things, and if you know what it is then you will definitely look over and kind of go “Oh I know what that is!”, that’s a cool…” [distorted] …familiar with it I guess? But, yeah

13:51 SM: Brilliant, well I’ve ended all my questions so I’m going to stop recording now.
Interviewer – Sarah-Mary Geissler

Interviewees – Sketch McDraw (length 15:23) – 18.11.15

N.B. this Skype interview was subject to a particularly poor internet connection which affected the recording.

0:04 Sarah-Mary: So this is Sarah-Mary Geissler interviewing *name redacted* on Wednesday the 18th of November via Skype on the subject of cosplay. So first question, how long have you been involved with cosplay?

S: [distorted sound] …got into it about 2000(?)...invited me to a convention which was…

SM: Sorry, could you just repeat that? The connection’s a bit poor

S: I’ve been cosplaying for about 5 years now, got into it in October 2010 when a friend invited me to a convention at the ExCel centre which was the MCM Expo

0:58 SM: And why did you first continue/become involved with cosplay after that?

S: It’s, it’s just really addictive *laughs* I went to the convention [distorted sound] I thought it was fun …people dressed as their favourite characters and things, so yeah I spent a couple months trying to make my first costume, went to a few conventions myself and got a lot of positive feedback from other convention-goers and things, and I just really enjoyed the experience. I’ve always been a hands-on creative person so it allowed me to sort of express myself through creating and replicating things so that’s why, part of the reason why I really liked it and carried on getting into it, so yeah I’ve done, I think about, 11 or 12 costumes now? Over 5 years.
2.13 SM: That leads onto my next question, do you dress as one particular character or a variety? And why that variety of characters?

S: I don’t know, I tend to have sort of a mixed variety of characters. Costume-wise, what I like about them all is they’re all quite different. I’ve done some basic, my first couple of costumes were quite sort of simple compared to the others, a bit more straightforward, I’ve cosplayed Zack Fair from Final Fantasy, one of my favourite role-playing games and I’ve done things, that’s called [distorted sound], the anime series Afro-Samurai, which basically means I’m a cyborg-samurai dressed up like a giant teddy-bear, a bit like Darth Vader but with a samurai sword [distorted sound] I’ve cosplayed as Raziel, a character from the Legacy of Kain series, again one of my other favourite – from when I was younger, so that meant I’m a blue, skinless, twice-dead, jawless vampire *laughs* that’s quite interesting. For – I’m doing more comic-book costumes now such as Bucky Barnes, AKA The Winter Soldier from the Marvel films and comics, to Jackie Estacado from The Darkness comics. So I’ve kind of got a bit of a range, it’s all mainly… part of the reason why I choose those characters to do is one it’s just the challenge of replicating of the costumes, all quite different, they all mean I would have to have the different skills and techniques, some of which I’d have to learn to be able to do them. But I suppose if [distorted sound] why I choose those characters because I like them, some of the meanings behind some of them and I suppose to some extent, and I know with a lot of other people, the characters they choose or gravitate towards to generally have some sort of, they see elements of them self within those characters.
4:41 SM: OK, so what would you say you identify with particularly with these characters, if there are any characteristics? Or are there any shared characteristic between them?

S: Well I suppose, quite a few, I think I quite like the tragedy behind each of the characters. They all have some personal elements tragedy in life sort of thing and my teen years and I think with growing up and stuff, I can kind of relate to that with past experiences – Like some of the Japanese characters, it’s usually the, they have the 3 friends or 2 guys and girl rule, or two girls and a guy, and that dynamic, you know we’re all best friends and then something happens in later years in life, you know the two male characters end up being mortal enemies and that sort of stuff, they’ll come up with tragedy behind that and the sort of conflict the characters have and having to partake in this duel but at the same time try to supress their emotions and sort of deny it. So kind of like that. Yeah, it’s just sort of a multitude of reasons, but got a lot of attitude aspects for a lot of the characters.

6:05 SM: So, you’ve kind of already answered this, but do you build your own cosplays?

SM: Yeah, all my costumes are handmade. Basically what I do is sometimes I get parts from friends. Sewing isn’t really my thing, I got lots of leather… [distorted sound] …my wigs

S: Sorry, would you be able to repeat that again? The connections gone again. [N.B. this was not heard by the interviewee]

So when it comes to things like props and armour… and I make all that myself, usually from warblr, craft foam some things… some other props are made from
scratch using PVC pipes and some parts I will sculpt and do a resin…and have some highly detailed…for like a proper certain piece. So I’d do that as well.

**7:24 SM:** What were your crafting/costuming skills before you began to cosplay?

What was your outlet for your creativity?

**S:** [distorted sound] …stuff, ever since I was young, so I think that’s why a part of me really – allowed me to carry on

**SM:** Sorry, could you just repeat that again please?

**S:** That’s fine, as a kid I’d always make stuff and for that reason why I quite liked getting into cosplay because it gave me an excuse to make stuff again, now I actually have a reason to make stuff when as a kid you make stuff for the hell of it, so now I’ve got a bit more of a reason to make stuff

**8:19 SM:** When and where do you wear your cosplays?

**S:** I… [distorted sound] …conventions … each year so I’ll go to about, usually 3 events a year, at least. Some of which have been in Europe, one in France and [distorted sound] was …there so that was cool. The one in France for the ECG, European Cosplay Gathering, in Paris, outside of Japan it’s the biggest convention, that’s basically a European competition where throughout the year people who enter throughout the year are selected to represent each country, and they select a duo or team of 3 and a solo person to take part and basically you have to make a costume, do a performance in your costume onstage, massive stage, all the lights, all the works - , the judges judge you on the costume construction, accuracy, complexity …as well…there’s 3 winners in each category…get second place and that was back in 2013, so that was quite cool
10:17 SM: So are you involved in any cosplay groups or communities?

S: I am an admin for the square annexe collective, where I - and the – came up for legal issues, specialises in - squaring titles, so Tomb Raider, [distorted sound] and various other

11:05 SM: Has cosplay had any impacts upon your day to day life?

S: Yep! Getting into cosplay I was doing a course in Production Arts Management at Norfolk college, it was a BTEC level 3 course and through getting into cosplay I got myself into the workshop they had there, using in my spare time making lots of costumes and ended up enrolling on a 3 year course there in Prop Design and Special Effects, so a 3 year prop course in how to make stuff, which is great, I learnt a lot of my skills there and I was able to use the tools and facilities to help make my costumes in my spare time which was great, I would be able to do stuff I wouldn’t have been able to have done before. So that’s great. And through that I ended up basically going into - design and I do contract work for film and TV and theatre, and my first job was at – studio back in 2012, I had 5 weeks work there on Edge of Tomorrow with Tom Cruise. I was having to make the exo-suits that like he and the other actors wear, so that was a – job. And now I’m currently working for a company called – in the Norwood Junction area, working on various pieces which I can’t tell you about I’m afraid!

13:03 SM: So is there anything else you’d like to add about your own experience of cosplay?
S: I think cosplay’s been a very positive experience, for myself as well as my friends, there are some negative aspects but that’s the same as you’d get in all walks of life, in all hobbies and careers or in social circles, but yeah, I suppose for me I’m quite lucky that cosplay has kind of, [distorted sound] various conventions… do talks on costume making and prop making to sort of have me realising what I wanna do at uni, and use it as a portfolio and basically let me get work in the film, TV and theatre industry, so it’s had quite a profound effect actually over the past five years thinking about it.

SM: That’s really interesting because a couple of the people I’ve been speaking to like cosplay because it’s nothing like what they do in their day-to-day life, and then others it really informs their career, so I find that quite interesting.

S: I bet it’s sort of like keeping it a separate entity to their day-to-day life while for me its kind of, hobby and a job *laughs*

SM: It’s the job where you get to decide your own brief which is great.

S: Yeah, it’s kind of interesting in that respect but no, I’ve just been really lucky actually because a lot of it’s sort of just been right time right place and just happened some aspects of like a friend invites me to a convention, just being at the university doing one course and finding out they do this prop-making course and doing that, and then getting work experience in Leeds and stuff, it’s sort of been, it’s kind of been a bit crazy thinking about it!

15:20 SM: Okay so I’ve come to the end of all my questions, so I’ll take you off record now.
0:02 Sarah-Mary: This is Sarah-Mary Geissler interviewing *name redacted* on Thursday the 19th of November at St. Peter’s House Library on the subject of cosplay. So first question, how long have you been involved with cosplay?

Toxi: God, I started probably when I was just going into secondary school, so sort of like, what is it, like 11 age? 11/12 kind of thing

SM: Wow, so young?

T: Yeah, it was just kind of like, I don’t know, finding something a bit different to do kind of thing at that age was a priority, so

SM: And how many years ago was that?

T: I’m 22 now, so, about 10 years… 10 years of cosplay

SM: And why did you first become involved?

T: I think a lot of my friends were interested in gaming and I’ve always been a gamer, like I’ve always loved playing all the old-school like SNESes and stuff like that, so I guess that like seeing that that was kind of linked with it, and that if I could become a game character, if I could dress as a game character it was actually quite cool, to become like a different kind of person is awesome

1:03 SM: Do you dress as one particular character or a variety?

T: So many different characters! Anything that kind of takes our fancy at the time so I cosplay with my partner and yeah, anything that is a little bit different, I try to make big costumes, really, or macabre stuff, like zombie stuff and things like that, taking classic characters and change them up a little bit
SM: I didn’t realise until afterwards that you were the zombie Peach and Mario [at the recent Brighton Film and Comic Con], I thought that was excellent!

1:35 SM: So why that variety of characters, is there anything that connects them?
T: I think because they’re so, so out there, they’re so… it’s not, you don’t see those kind of characters to being shy, they’re never like- you can take a lot from movies like, the characters are who they are- there’s a proper like bubble around them so like you take a character and they’re shy, they’re withdrawn, you can be that person. Or you can become a gaming character then you, I don’t know, kind of free-reign of who that person is so it fits in with yourself more kind of thing, otherwise you mask everything, it’s just a bit weird

2:24 SM: Do you identify at all with those characters?
T: Yeah some of the characters, like I was always really, really, shy when I was a kid and really, really, like withdrawn- bullied a lot like, moved schools a million trillion times to try and find my place and then when I found that there were people were also in that situation but all went to one convention together and they’re all friends, all talk to each other it was, I don’t know, a really comforting thought that you can not only dress up really cool, because I love dressing up, not only show your talents and makeup and stuff like that but the you can talk to all these other people that are also nervous and scared so it’s sort of like, a blanket

SM: Sort of appreciated as cool?
T: Yeah, so you go from being at the bottom of like everyone’s sort of like, everyone picks on you and no one really likes you, you dress weird, and then you go to
somewhere where you dress weird and everyone’s like “oh my god! You dress so weird, that’s amazing” so it’s a big turnaround kind of thing

3:18 SM: And so do you build your own cosplays?
T: Yes, I build everything from scratch
SM: So what kind of percentage?
T: Mostly, the most I’ll do is buy fabric from a fabric shop, like not a sewer, like I won’t go into knitting stuff and things like that for costumes, but no I’ll, I’ve got a sewing machine at home and I’ll put together full dresses and the bigger costumes are normally made out of expansion foam and things like that and all the weapons and you know, props kind of thing

3:51 SM: And what were your craft/costuming skills before you began to cosplay?
T: I could paint, I could obviously, I was a face-painter, my mum’s always taught me how to face paint so I had like the body painting skills and things like that. I didn’t know much about fabric until I took it as a GCSE, so I kind of was pushed into taking that as a GCSE because I wanted to know how to make these costumes, so I don’t know, I was kind of OK, like I could make bits and bobs but looking back on what my costumes were I was like “oh no…cringe…ouch…like as if I went out in public!” But no, they get better every year kind of thing
SM: It’s a process
T: Yeah, you’ve got to learn all those different things, like working with something like eva foam or something like that is a whole new experience to try and heat something up to mould it around your body. It’s just like there’s no way you can learn that either, that’s something you have to teach yourself
4:49 SM: When and where do you wear your cosplays?

T: That’s why I’m a kid’s entertainer, so I’ll wear my cosplays for jobs, if I’m a princess and parents will book me for a princess party and I’ll go along as Ariel or Frozen, you know, Elsa and that lot. I normally wear one of my costumes at conventions, I don’t think I’d ever go to like an anime convention or a gaming convention without a cosplay, I think it’s a nice, I don’t know, a conversation starter, you know, if you’re dressed up as somebody everybody’s going to be like “Oh, so you like this game?” and instantly know who you like kind of thing. But I don’t know, I’ve been to Sainsbury’s in a couple of costumes like on my way to places, it makes you feel good when there’s little kids running up to you and they think you’re the real princess and they’re like, their whole world has just been made the most happy day because they just met Elsa buying peas in Sainsbury’s. Like, it’s a nice feeling, it’s lovely

5:47 SM: Are you involved in any cosplay groups or communities?

T: Yeah, kind of… I have a weird relationship with the groups because I haven’t really found a group that I fit into very well yet, I know there’s Sussex Cosplayers- they’re a closed group, they’re lovely people, they’re very nice and sweet but a little bit younger than me, I suppose they’re at the stage that they were just getting into cosplay kind of thing, and I’m sort of like, spending 8 months crafting something and I don’t really have time to go and show it off in a park with a bunch of people. But I’m part of like online cosplay groups, I think that’s a lot easier like, I’ve got my own facebook page and stuff like that, like you can check my cosplay out, special effects
makeup and all that, I think it’s easier to, as again being shy, it’s easier to have groups online where you can talk to, on the Expo page and things like that.

**SM:** And so do you do a lot of online networking?

**T:** Yeah, like, everyone at the conventions kind of have their cards that, you know, link to their cosplay page, and then you just swap them, and at the end of the convention you’ve got a pile of 50 cards to go through and be like “ah! Look at their cosplay!” Kind of like, it just passes it round, it’s good networking.

**7:06 SM:** And so, you’ve kind of already answered this with work, but has cosplay had any impact upon your day to day life?

**T:** Yeah, huge! Confidence-wise, massive, because people tell you that you’ve done amazing, I mean who doesn’t like to hear that you’ve done something really well kind of thing? It’s a nice thing to hear. Obviously my job, I put so much effort into my costumes, like if something’s slightly wrong, if I’m Jessie or something from Toy Story and the hat’s slightly wrong then I’ll have a freakout and go out and fix and make a new hat. But yeah, it’s also opened my eyes up to realising that even the people that hang back and don’t talk to you, they could go out and suddenly turn into an 8-foot, you know, giant costumed being at one of these conventions, and you would never expect it of that kind of person, which is nice

**7:58 SM:** Is there anything similarities you’ve noticed between people who do cosplay, or what’s the kind of demographic?

**T:** It’s kind of, it’s an odd one, because when you go to like, let’s say London MCM Expo which is one of the biggest anime conventions that you can go to, anime/gaming ones, and there’s people from every walk of life, like I’ve seen people
talking about their jobs as doctors, nurses, firemen, people that work at the bakery, like, you know, all sorts of people but I think a majority of them all have that weird, like I don’t know, it’s just like a passion, if everyone shares that passion it’s so much easier to talk to people isn’t it? Like if you go into a room and if you find out everyone loves the same film as you it’s, I don’t know, it becomes really easy to communicate with people once you’ve got a common ground.

**SM:** And you’re literally wearing your common ground

**T:** So, instead of being introduced as “Oh hi Toxi” it’s like “Oh Look! Look look look there’s that person from this game!” or “here’s that person from this game”, it’s different, yeah

**9:06 SM:** And so is there anything else you’d like to add about your experience of cosplay?

**T:** I don’t know, just that it’s a very different world and people are very quick to judge it, like there’s a lot of negative stuff online about cosplay, a ton of it

**SM:** Really?

**T:** Absolutely, people say you’re too fat to cosplay, you’re too skinny to cosplay, you’re too ugly to cosplay, you can’t do- you can’t cosplay as this person because that person’s black, or you can’t cosplay as this person because this person’s white, like

**SM:** And does that come from within the network or community or is that like onlookers?

**T:** No, this is as lot of trolls, and a lot of- media stir it up a lot as well like, you’ll find that a media will go along to a convention and they’ll be like “Oh, look at all these geeks and nerds” and it’s like well not everyone here is a geek or a nerd, not
everyone here plays 24 hours of gaming, not everyone here, you know, does that. Some people have literally just got off the plane from Germany from like, you know, a rock concert, and they’re here to do this today kind of thing, so I think media paint us as a cosplay nation really badly, like it’s very often, like seldom I see people doing positive stuff on cosplay, like if you go on to the MCM page and have a look at the comments that people put, somebody’ll put a picture of themselves in cosplay and instantly you’ll see people saying “you’re too fat to do that”, “you’re too ugly to do that”, “you can’t do that” and it’s like, of course you can, you can do anything you bloody want. But no there is a lot of negativity, an awful lot, but you got to be strong and fight through it, and that’s why the group is so, like cosplayers sort of like— I’ll see someone like dressed up in the street and I’ll be like “you look awesome!”, I won’t hesitate to say that your costume is amazing kind of thing, no matter what- no matter if they bought it, no matter if they’ve just picked it out from a charity shop, no matter if they spent 3 months making it, they always look awesome because you’ve made an effort to do something a little bit different, haven’t you

SM: Yeah, you’re just putting yourself out there

T: Yeah it’s, I don’t know, I wouldn’t be nervous to walk down the street in one of my ridiculous cosplays because all of the nasty people are always going to be there, shouting those nasty things, but there is a community out there that love the same things as you, and it’s a good back-up, definitely.

11:19 SM: Well, that’s all my questions so I’ll stop recording.
0:03 Sarah-Mary: This is Sarah-Mary Geissler interviewing *name redacted* via Skype on Monday the 23rd of November on the subject of cosplay. So the first question is how long have you been involved with cosplay?

Drewett: I’ve been cosplaying since September of 2012, so just over 3 years

SM: And why did you first become involved?

D: Ah, basically, how it came was I- I’d had a very weird couple of years beforehand, I ended up moving to High Wycombe and- from having lived in Cardiff- and I was living with 2 different people, one of which is one of my absolute best friends and he was going to have this thing for his birthday, and he was into cosplay, and he still is now, and he was just like “Well, I’m going to have a cosplay birthday thing, we’re gonna go around Warwick castle in Doctor Who cosplay, do you want to come along?” I was like “OK? But I don’t have any costumes” and I had no money at the time so I was like I don’t know what to do, so I talk to his then girlfriend and she let me borrow an outfit which happened to fit me really well, and I went up and that was my first experience was hanging out with these people who I only knew a couple of them but it was really, really, really, fun because we stood out but people were like quite, like they really were nice to us, and they seemed to like when we were messing about and it was just- it was so much fun and we just had a great day, and that sort of got me onto it and then several months later I went to my first convention which was Memorabilia slash MCM Birmingham and that was March of 2013, so that was my first Con, dressed up, and it was so much fun

SM: What did you dress up as for your first cosplay on your own?
D: On my own? Ooh, my first costume was Seras Victoria from Hellsing Ultimate. I’m not much of an anime person but I love Hellsing Ultimate, it’s one of my favourite things, and the particular character, she has a really cool journey in the story, but also her physically is actually not very far from what I look like in terms of my physical body, like she’s tall, she’s a little curvy in places and she’s blonde, and I thought “hmmm, I’m blonde, I’m curvy and I’m quite tall for a girl, this could work!” *laughs*

2:45 SM: Do you dress as one particular character or a variety?

D: Oh a variety, for a simple reason of I think if dressed as just one character I’d be bored, just it- it’s all well and good being very into one particular show or book or anime or whatever it is, but I like the variety because I like messing around with things and I like exploring different costumes and different people, it’s much more fun that way

3.13 SM: So, why do you choose the particular variety that you choose?

D: I have quite a strong affinity towards doing, sort of, strong female characters a lot of the time. A lot of that is down to my own appreciation for strong women, I grew up having a very strong mother, I have a very strong sister, I have some really strong women in my friends and family who I adore, and I love seeing those kind of characters in things as it's quite rare to have a genuine strong character who doesn't need a man to validate her existence, who doesn't need protecting all the time, who is strong in her own right and can kick arse and can look after herself in a genuine way. So it's kind of why I've done like Buffy cosplay before, Leela from Doctor Who because she not only take care of herself but looked after the Doctor as well, Black
Canary from *Justice League Unlimited*, which is one of my favourite ones, because she can take care of herself and she can fight herself. I also like doing crossplay, because I just like messing with people when they think I’m a bloke it’s actually quite funny, I just also like playing around with gender, it’s more of a challenge than anything else.

**4:31 SM:** And do you build your own cosplays?

**D:** No although I am currently learning certain things, so my partner actually constructed an armour with EVA foam so he’s gonna teach me more about that and one of my friends- I’m gonna be making a dress for the first time, I’m doing that whilst being supervised by a friend who is much better at this than I could hope to be the first time round, so she’s going to help me. So I don’t actually build anything right now, it’s all sort of bought because I haven’t been able to sit down and learn anything

**5:07 SM:** Did you have any crafting skills before or any interest in costume before you began?

**D:** I did, I mean I didn’t really have any skills apart from I could write stories, but obviously, that doesn’t always translate. My skill was sort of picking out characters and imagining how they would look, creating things in terms of writing rather than in physical form. But, I had an interest in costume a lot, I would look at certain looks- particularly as I’m a massive fan of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, I’d sit there looking at the different demons that would crop up and the way the vampire’s looks would change in terms of their transformations from week to week, and I was always fascinated with their look and with the way things were and the way appearances
and scenes would change look over time, that was always really fascinating to me, but obviously it didn’t translate until like later in my life.

6:12 SM: When and where do you wear your cosplays?
D: Ooh, um, wherever I get a chance! I mean, mostly at conventions but I also, I like doing it you know- if there’s a party and someone says “oh cosplay” and I’m like “I’m there, like yep! Right, what am I gonna wear this time?” I mean, I debuted one of my cosplays which is my Rik from The Young Ones cosplay at my friend’s Halloween party with my partner who did Vivienne which was hilarious, that was a really fun party because everyone was like “oh it’s you two, and why have you got a foam- Jen, why have you let Alex have a foam cricket bat?” Well… I don’t know! But, I like to do it wherever I get a chance to, I mean I wanna do more- I actually do some charity stuff on the side, when I get the chance to which is hardly ever, but I actually have an interest in raising money for like rape crisis, so I want to integrate cosplay more into that, you know, because I think cosplay can do so much good. So basically whenever I get an opportunity to, not enough I don’t think! *laughs*

7:23 SM: So are a lot of your friends cosplayers also, or do you have friends who aren’t cosplay but kind of get what you do?
D: Yeah, I mean, I’ve got- I mean a lot of my friends are cosplayers, I mean actually, funnily enough cosplay’s how I met my partner, we met at a convention and we started talking to each other because we were cosplaying, you know, I said “oh I like your cosplay stuff” and you know, months later *laughs* and I have, I’ve actually convinced you know, managed to get a few of my friends who didn’t cosplay to start cosplaying and to then introduce to my other friends who’ve then gone “you should
do this” and I’m like “ha ha! I have corrupted you!” But I mean a lot of my— I’ve got quite a few friends who don’t but they get it, they like seeing my costumes and like seeing what I get up to with my makeup and they like seeing me sort of like mess around with things, and like my writing. My mother initially couldn’t quite get it, she’s just like “this is really peculiar, but ok?” But now she does encourage me and I’ve got like a wishlist of stuff I might wanna get from like Amazon and she’ll buy things from it because she’ll know I want it, for like birthdays and Christmas. And it’s just like— she’s like “well, if you want us to buy anything anything for a costume then can you just let me know so we can buy it for you?” It’s just so sweet! So you know, her and my siblings are really supportive of it, and they like seeing what I’m going to do next even though they’re not into it and don’t quite 100% understand it, they like seeing me work with something and like the fact that I’m learning and meeting people and all that, so yeah, generally get a lot of positive-ness.

9:03 SM: Are you involved in any cosplay groups or communities?

D: Not really, I mean… I’m trying to think actually… Not entirely, I have done work with Costume and Play, I volunteered with them when they were at Bournemouth, this was as a couple of months ago, so I worked with them and that was a lot of fun, because I was doing that with a lot of my friends. I crewed once with the Galactic Knights, which was quite a bit of fun, I’m still on their sort of roster to do crew stuff, which I find quite fun actually, that was really nice. Other than that, not really, I tend to keep myself very open to things, especially as I do a lot of cosplay writing- I write about cosplay weekly so like to I try and avoid affiliating with one particular group solidly because it’s not gonna help me actually report on cosplay for what it actually
is if you’re just sticking to one sphere, you gotta be able to go out and talk to everybody.

10:11 SM: So how has cosplay had impacts upon your day-to-day life?

D: I spend a lot of time now, when I’m watching programmes I look at costumes and go “ok, I really want that costume, I want that costume - you do not need this costume, You do not.” And then I just, I have this vision of like if my bank account was a person they’d just be screaming, crying going “Nooo! Stop!” But also it gives me a lot of ideas creatively, I write fiction as well as non-fiction and I can think of a scenario or a costume and then I’ll think “that might fit this thing” and it all works into each other, and also its inspired a lot of different ideas which, however many of them come to fruition I don’t know, but it’s made me a lot busier, which I quite like –I like keeping busy, so cosplay’s been very beneficial to me actually.

11:09 SM: Can you think of any demographic for cosplayers, or is there any kind of link between people?

D: I think, it’s people who- I think essentially, the only real vague link that we all have is that we’re passionate enough about something to wear a costume associated with something or other. So basically we’re all just a bunch of passionate nerds, we just have a lot of different passions as it were. That’s one of the things I like most about cosplay actually, is the fact that people have their different passions but we all link together in a very bizarre way, but it’s the very best.

11:59 SM: Is there anything else you’d like to add about your own experience of cosplay?
D: Cosplay- I mean I thought cosplay was quite a big world before I started writing about it, now I’ve started writing about it I realised it’s far bigger than I realised. It’s been, it’s something that has been overall an incredible journey and I think it’s something that, you know, you really have to want to do properly, you really wanna have to do it, you can’t be forced into it, because I’ve seen people doing it because their partner’s doing it, and it’s like “no, but that’s like *sigh* that’s not really the right reason”, you have to do it for yourself and that’s what I love, it’s, generally speaking, people who want to do it, because they enjoy doing it and that’s the best thing.

12:58 SM: So that’s all my questions.
**Interviewer** – Sarah-Mary Geissler

**Interviewee** – Altria (length 37:21) – 28.11.15

0:04 **Sarah-Mary:** This is Sarah-Mary Geissler interviewing *name redacted* on Saturday the 28th of November via Skype on the subject of cosplay, so my first question is how long have you been involved with cosplay?

**Altria:** Huh… *laughs* is that a good enough answer? Yeah, I don’t know it’s been a while, I kind of been on and off for 10 years actually. Yeah, because I started going to conventions around 2004, something like that, and seeing all the other people you know, and I just crafted myself a costume with glue and like stapled together at the time. Yeah, and then I just cosplayed for a while, then sort of went off, then getting into judging and that lot and got involved in organising a little bit and did that and then came back as a cosplayer. So yeah, it’s been kind of, seeing all around the scene for around a good ten years now.

1:16 **SM:** And why did you first become involved?

**A:** it’s all my friend’s fault! You know, it’s never, I’ve never seen somebody who just starts cosplaying on their own without anything, you know? It’s generally somebody else is involved, it’s somebody else’s fault and blackmail you into it. I wasn’t really, weirdly enough, into video games and stuff like that when I was really young, I was reading quite a lot. I was one of these kids, not super popular, not unpopular either but sort of like in the middle *laughs* you know, the one doing it’s thing in the corner. And so I’d see the images and stuff, I was drawing monsters and creatures and stuff already, but I wasn’t really massively into the geeky community, until I was shown like, Magic The Gathering, that was as geeky as it gets, you know, and then I just
met my very old friend that I called my sister because we kind of grew up together really, and she was dating a guy at the time, well sort of dating, who was playing Final Fantasy, I think it was x-2 at the time, had just been released, there was a release of x-2, and she wanted to go as Yuna, and she just, she called herself Yuna, that was her nickname at the time, you know, and she wanted to cosplay the Yuna from the game, she thought it was a really cool outfit, you know it’s like “what the hell is she talking about?” she’s like “Yeah, yeah, yeah, I’m gonna go do the costume and I’m gonna dress like her, it’s gonna be great! Oh you know you should join because me and all the people are gonna go to this Con, JapanExpo in Paris, it’s huge, it’s gonna be great, gonna have a great time” Oh well, you know, I was doing some art projects and stuff at the time, so technically you know doing a costume is just kind of an art project, you know it’s not anything dramatically different from anything I was doing at the time, you know like how difficult could it be? I’ve got glue, I’ve got staples here, I’ve got paint, I can put something together. She’s like “yeah, yeah, why not if you do Yuna and I do Lulu you know, whatever” So she cut me some fabric and was like “just stitch it here and here and put it around your waist and it’s gonna be great.” So I go home and I had no clue what the hell I’m supposed to do with this! So I look around the other characters and I found one which is called Rikku, and had this outfit, you know, it’s during the summer so thought you know, it should be fine. It’s long enough that I could actually pull it off, now it would be like no! “laughs” But, she’s wearing this sort of swimsuit with you know, a little dress and some sleeves and I’m just looking at it like “how difficult could it be? It’s just like a swimsuit and a dress here!” Well actually, it was way more difficult than I thought, but anyways I went around to charity shops and bought a swimsuit and then I had Posca, so I Posca’d the side because I didn’t know how to like colour it or whatever, I
cut a green T-shirt for my skirt, somehow it just held on me on its own *laughs* I was that thin at the time! I took my Mom’s rainboot and painted it with acrylic so it just didn’t work, it was cracking everywhere and coming off, but yeah, it was great! It was sort of like, first costume and like I did it on my own, I didn’t even know what a wig was nor that you could actually use them so I just went to one of these shops where they do hair extensions in Paris there was a whole neighbourhood that would sell these and I bought these really horrible plastic-y extensions, I mean you know, that’s really bad quality hair! I don’t think now you can find such bad quality unless you would go to like a pound shop and get you know one of these like plastic-y wig like for kids, it was that, and it was so like really expensive at the time like I thought I was buying really good quality hair. It’s quite funny. So anyhow, and I just pinned them one by one in my hair, mixing them with my own hair, trying to do her hairdo and doing like that. And it was just very, pretty horrible *laughs* you know what I mean? I didn’t matter because like at the time- like the quality of costumes now are just incredible, I mean most people do costume quality like you could find in the film industry, you know, or equivalent, it’s just extraordinary quality of the costumes inside and out is beautiful, and people really put effort into it but at the time we just started, they were genuinely stuff that were taped together and stapled together. The only people who knew how to stitch things together, you know it looked good but you know still very costume-y you know, very costume-y. So yeah, just went there and had a great time, and she was very surprised that I managed to put something together on my own, she was just like “Yay! Well done!” *laughs* It was pretty funny, I had a great time, it was easy you know, it was easy. Just went there and walked around and everybody was taking pictures of everybody else and you know, it was
just- it was just fun, you know, you were sharing the geekiness. Even though I’d never played the game really but *laughs*

**SM:** But you were part of it

**A:** Yeah, it was just fun

**7:23 SM:** So the next question, do you dress as one particular character or a variety?

**A:** A variety

**SM:** Ok, and why do you choose that particular variety of characters?

**A:** I’d get bored, I think you know? And, I mean, they’re all costumes… I’m trying to think… I mean when I did my Miqo’te costume, that was for the Square Enix character competition that I won and I went to Japan with it and stuff, and the good thing with this costume is that, obviously it took me a good six months to build because I was kind of doing it really slowly, to my own pace, there wasn’t any end game, I didn’t care all I wanted to do was just build something, you know, do some leatherwork, whatever. So it ended up being a really nicely finished costume, inside and out, it’s very comfortable to wear. You know I was really proud of it, because if I didn’t like a part I would redo it until I liked it, you know it wasn’t just like “oh I have to do this part and then finish it because of this con”, it was just do it, if I don’t like it “eh… I don’t like it, its fine just redo it again and again” and it ended up quite good quality I think for something like that and it was just quite nice and I rewore it quite a lot… I think it’s the only costume I’ve worn more than 2 or 3 times you know. Yeah… I mean I’m probably a bad example when it comes to cosplay because I do cosplay and have been involved in the community for a while, but if I count the years when I really cosplayed non-stop you know like these people who do one cosplay after
another, like pure 100% cosplayer like hardcore, it’s probably 3-4 years max, not even… no, 2-3, just obviously with a career that I have I can’t really take the time to do something like that, you know, it’s very time consuming. And you find a way- I mean there’s no just one way to cosplay, you know there’s as many ways to cosplay as there are cosplayers out there, that’s what it is really. So, somebody can think that cosplaying with a tape costume all the time, and doing a thousand costumes a year is fine, and it’ll be fine, because that’s the way they want to do it. And I’m one of those people that I would rather do one costume a year, if I can do it even! Because some years are just worse- but have really, really nicely done costume, with all the bits I’m really proud of, it’s comfortable to wear because with age comes, you know, the fact that I’m really not- I can’t do the whole uncomfortable for hours you know. I can’t wear a costume for more than 2 or 3 hours generally now, unless it’s something like Star Lord which is really comfortable but otherwise I can’t you know, it’s just too much effort. I’m not… I’m not really a performer either, you know, I don’t really do this for the performing or the attention that goes with it really to be fair with you. If I could just… It’s the same example with the Miqo’te, I mean I did this costume on my own and I didn’t tell anyone that I was doing it, only 2 or 3 friends that knew that I was working on it but I wasn’t putting pictures out there, I was taking pictures for reference but that wasn’t really putting it out there on the internet or on my page or whatever- which I don’t think I had at the time even. I was just doing it for me because I liked it you know? And I wore it and I called my friend Jasmine who’s a photographer and I really like her because she’s really open with what you want and she’ll give you the pictures she choose and modify and stuff as long as you give her credit, she’s really good like that. And I’m insecure like that, that I kind of need trusted… I wouldn’t be comfortable enough to sort of go with any photographers and
then they can pick what they think is right, I did that when I was younger and now it’s a big no-no. But yeah, and obviously you know, once I had my fun, we were in the forest and having this great photoshoot and it was like “Yeah!” you know and thinking of the cinematography and how the costume would look in the lights, of the character itself and how to make it look like it was out of the game, like the picture itself was out of the game, you know, just not “Altria in her costume”, that’s of no interest to me, if people can recognise me in a costume then that’s of very little interest to me. The whole point is to have the character as a live action, like with film, it’s just way more interesting when it’s like “Oh my God, is it that actor who played that character? I didn’t even recognise them” And it’s great, that’s kind of what I’m looking for there and then once you had your fun and you possess this character and you looked at your picture and you’re happy with it, then you can put them online and people are allowed to see them, but that’s only when I had my fun with it. See, I could just cosplay on the rock and have my picture taken and not share them and I’d probably be as happy, if people see them or not really! It doesn’t really matter anymore. So I’m probably a very bad example for you but…

**SM:** No, no this is really interesting!

**13:13 SM:** So, in terms of the characters that you do choose to make cosplays of, do you identify at all with them or is there anything that kind of draws you towards particular characters or even particular games to work from?

**A:** I used to, I used to think a little bit more… It’s always been a bit of a mix, you know like some characters you do a little bit- I’m trying to think back to characters I did and if I did…I mean when I was younger like I did want to do Rikku because I thought she was pretty close to me, you know she was the youngest of the group
and she was always full of energy and fun and Yeah! And I was really like that when I was younger, like a bit too full on you know, now it’s too tiring! But you know it was really like that. There’s a few a little bit like that, and others it was just because the design was nice really, or I found a story that was truly interesting, like …[distorted sound quality]… was another one I did, and it worked on plain pictures but really I wouldn’t be able to rewear it now because she’s supposed to be this really short, young girl in high school or something and I’m gonna hit 30 soon and it’s just not gonna work! But she’s like this half robot girl, it’s really interesting, she had this like wings and stuff and I thought you know it’s a bit of a challenge in a model-making way. And other times it’s just the design of the costume which is really gorgeous, and I’m like “Ooh, I’d like to wear that!”*Section Redacted* But it’s more because the character is hilarious and the costume is beautiful, so you just want to wear it because it’s so pretty but I’m not sure if I would spend the day being in the character *Section Redacted*, you know I just like wearing the costume. I’m gonna to a beautiful dress because it’s nice, you know? Yeah, when I look at my choice of costumes now actually, I realise that most of them are from very obscure series of video games and it’s purely because I think the costume worn is absolutely gorgeous and I just want to have it because it’s pretty, you know I just want to wear it, there’s very little characters now that I can think of, apart from characters that I’ve loved all my life you know like, Sabre from Fate Stay Night, you know I do love King Arthur in general and all the versions of it so and I love [Distorted Sound Quality], so characters like that I will do because I love the character and her design is quite nice, but really I don’t know if I’m going to a con and be Saber all day? No, I’d be Saber for an hour then I’d wear the costume for two, you know maybe to have fun and to show it, and because there’s a competition but that’s it really. I mean I’m kind of drifting
away from cosplay a little bit now you know, I mean I’m always involved in the community because I like seeing other people’s work because I think people are doing absolutely incredible things now- and knowing what they do it with, you know they don’t have access to like moulds and whatever, you know they’re doing it with plastic and cardboard and things, that’s incredible. I’m also as happy to just do stuff for other people to wear, so I’ll do the thing and then they’ll have the whole attention thing, and be happy with that!

17:20 SM: So because you’ve done it for such a long time, have you kind of seen the phenomenon of cosplay sort of change over time?
A: The world of cosplay you mean?
SM: Yes
A: Yeah, it did involve- I mean you know like all things I suppose it just never really stays the same it just always kind of evolved and its, I mean before it was very sort of- and it’s still very geeky, and it’s still very niche but it’s become a lot more mainstream now with all these competition out there. And there’s a lot of money involved and big people involved now, and all the media you have now. You know at the time when I started cosplaying obviously there was internet and stuff but it wasn’t as big and there wasn’t the facebook page thing and, I mean they barely had any stages when you went to a con for a cosplay competition it was generally in a corner and you had like ropes, so they had a corner on the wall and they’d put some ropes up, some tape even sometimes! Some tape on the floor and that was the stage. And there was like 5 people watching who were like “Yay… whatever” and the prize was like a manga that somebody had in their home that they’d bought or whatever. It wasn’t the same thing at all, and progressively it became a lot more and then- world
cosplay was already there when I started, it was the very beginning or something like that and it wasn’t a competition at the time it was just a gathering of people and you go around and pick some pretty cosplayers to show around, only recently has it become a real competition and different countries and stuff like that, you know it wasn’t like that at all before. I witnessed the birth of ECG as well, witnessed the birth of Euro cosplay, it’s really funny the guy that created ECG is one of my best friend actually but I remember at the time he was just on skype and was like “So, you know, kind of thinking of creating like a competition, like a European competition, I’m not sure, do you think it’s like a good idea?” And I was just like “Yeah…Might as well, yeah why not”. So it was quite interesting in that aspect to see it evolve. Obviously there was also bad aspects to it, because now it seems that there’s a lot of attention seeking through it, and I think it’s fine if people want to seek attention through it and if they want to become- achieve fame with it. I mean yeah, if people want to achieve fame with it and stuff I think that’s fine, you know if you wanna sell your stuff I think that’s fine, if you wanna make it a business I think that’s fine, why not? I mean, everyone does a business of everything so why not cosplay? It’s not especially different for me, I think that’s all fine but it’s just now it’s become so focused on how many likes you have on your page and if you’re not famous, and people get so obsessed with titles and so obsessed with that fame you know, and I’m just like, you do realise you’re dressing up as a fantasy character, I mean you know it’s all good and stuff and I think it’s very creative and I’m happy for people to do it. I know it almost saved quite a lot of people, it’s been a bit of a sort of bubble of safety for a lot of very insecure people that would just be lonely and people who didn’t know what to do with their lives and they just find cosplay and that sort of gave them a goal. I think that’s great, that’s absolutely great and I wish more people would see that and see...
cosplay as another creative meaning of expressing themselves or just another creative thing, it’s not a big deal and I don’t understand why people make it like it’s so important! You know, it’s very strange to me, I just don’t really get it, and that’s part of the evolution that I have seen before it was a bit like “Oh you know, just want to do this character, and do this, and whatever”, it was very on the side, almost like the same line of “Hey do you want to go to the comic book store and we’ll get some comics?” or “Oh do you want to go to my house and we’ll watch a film?” You know, whatever and it was like “what do I cosplay today?” whereas now it is all very organised and all these competitions and stuff like that, which are great but you’ve got that bad aspect of bad attention seeking and using cosplay in a way that I think is very creative and it’s a bit of a shame. But hey, you know! There’s always a bad and a good part of everything I suppose.

23:21 SM: The next question is, what were your craft and costuming skills before you began to cosplay?
A: Inexistant.
SM: Really?
A: Well, I mean, not really, you know. I was always into like drawing and painting, which is, I mean I was always kind of good with armour, for some reason, like drawing the armour pattern and putting it together, I just have that mind where I just suck with fabric, I just can’t stitch anything to save my life. And it’s a bit better now, because I try to understand it, a lot of my friends were on that panel actually and they were just like “How can you not understand it?” Anyhow, but that’s fine because they don’t really get armour that well, it’s either one or the other. But no I wasn’t- I don’t know, like I think I was good enough to try and find a solution to the problem.
And I think that’s one of the great things about cosplay as well, is that it makes you better at problem solving in ways you’ve never thought before. Because, you see everybody’s restrained by money and budgets and stuff because you’ve got your real life and then you have to spend money on something which is just for amusement so it makes you think about what’s the less expensive, better way to do this thing or how can I just fabricate this gravity gun which doesn’t make sense at all but looks cool and what can I use for it to make it look good. It makes you, if cosplay did something for me definitely it forced me to expand my world when it came to art and craft and making in general, it forced me to go out there and research paint and research material, you know and brushes and glues and all these tools that are needed to do, in order to do this. And I think, in most people just get stuck into what they want to do, they choose and art project and just stick with what they know, in cosplay you have no other choice but to find a solution so you have to go out there and you have to like ask “What else could I use? What else could I use? Does anybody have an idea?” And that’s the whole beauty of it. Then you go online and you share and people say “oh you could use this or that”, or sometimes they’re just assholes and they’re like “Fuck off”, that happens as well but, otherwise it’s really nice in that aspect and when I started, yeah I solved the issue of the first cosplay, which I guess makes me better than people who want to do cosplay but never got into it, but I didn’t really have that much skills when it came to costume making at all. You know, at all. It’s quite funny actually considering how well I did in my career after!

**26.33 SM:** And so, has cosplay had any impact upon your day to day life?
A: Oh it did, it did. It did in both ways actually, it did in a very bad way and a very
good way. A very bad way because, you know, cosplay can be very time consuming
as you probably know and it can also be very dramatic if you let it, if you’re involved
in a community then you know how it is. In every community you always have drama
happening and cosplay drama has always been around. With age you kind of learn
how to step away from it and you just do your own thing in your own corner, or you
find people which are drama-free, you know. And now I generally cosplay with the
same people as I just know they’re drama free! I know that’s just safe! But at the time
when I just started I got really involved with the community, I was on the forum with
all the cosplayers and it was always like, it was 90210 of cosplay, it was really, and
that got a bit of an impact on my life because at the time it was all I would do for a
few years and it was just quite bad really and I just realised it and took a step back,
like I just can’t deal with all that drama anymore. But you know, that’s what you do
when you’re 16/17 or whatever. Teen drama, but it was cosplay. But I could’ve been
into drugs, so I guess that’s better, right? But also good, quite a good a thing as well
for me because I had this hobby, and at the time I kind of knew what I wanted to do
but it wasn’t super clear, you know, I knew I wanted to be a makeup artist, I knew I
wanted to do special effects. It started because I wanted to be a magician, so in a
way you know creating new things for me was a form of magic, or at least I took it
that way, you know creating a good character, now I could be the character like
“Hey!”, it was really that. So, in a way, starting with this and I wanted to do monsters
and stuff so doing the characters was just another version of me doing the monsters
and then I started doing things with Ube which is a French cosplayer who did like the
Alien costumes and like Batman costumes with latex which at the time it was a new
material which came out was latex, like “oh my God!” Yeah and then you know, he
was the one who got me into sculpting my first sculpt of monster feet or alien heads. It was him, and he really pushed me that way so by the time I hit time for school and uni and that I had a good base portfolio because of cosplay so I had all these costumes and craft-making skills, I had mold-making base I had crafting, spray-paint, latex and everything which was quite big at the time compared to somebody who’s just trying straight out of A-levels and going into foundation or whatever with drawings and stuff whereas you would go there and you already knew what to do in order to research for a project or to go there and ask for material and see that your project would go from the beginning with concept art to the end with a live-action thing. So yeah, my portfolio got me into uni here which as an international student would actually be quite good I was quite happy to be like “yay!” Weirdly enough, because obviously it was cheaper to do costumes than it was to do makeup, because I always had this thing of I didn’t like latex for makeup because I thought it would look really bad and then they were using foam latex for makeup at the time which you couldn’t use unless you had an oven… it was a bit difficult in my situation to do it so I ended up sculpting a lot of monsters but never doing makeup out of them or face-painting, so my skills in prosthetics were a bit like “Ah, really like wanna do it, but I just don’t really know how to tackle it so in the meantime I’m just gonna do costume stuff!” Then when I was at uni, because I had this and I kind of continued to do cosplay on the side a little bit, you know, not really wear them but at least making them or making part of it, stuff like that, a friend of mine knew about it and he was really interested in cosplay as well and long story short we had a placement “Section Redacted* and I couldn’t do it because I dislocated my kneecap at the time. Which was actually really annoying! “Section Redacted* and [a friend] knew I was doing all these armours and work and craftsmanship or whatever so he just gave my name to
one of the supervisors [for a film], they were looking for people at the time and said “There’s this girl, she does a lot of costume work as well, you know, she’s been doing armours since she was 16..” Yeah so, he went online, saw my portfolio, gave me a call and that’s how I started really. You know, and if I didn’t have all that cosplay stuff I probably wouldn’t have had half of the chances that I ended up with really. So as you probably gathered by now I started into the costume and prop department which is the armoury for films, and I did 1, 2, 3?.. 3 films into it and then I finally managed to make my way into prosthetics which is much harder to get to. So really, I can really say that I started my career, and I think I have the career I have now, mostly because I also had this cosplay stuff in my portfolio, and it taught me how to take a project from A to B, how to gather money for it, how to research, how to present it on the photo so it looked professional, so it looked good. And, you know, all of this stuff really helped me to kickstart my career so I am grateful in that aspect. And also I just hate cosplay, from time to time, because it’s so “drama” and it can really get you down. But mostly it got me really good things. So I can’t really complain too much.

33.46 SM: So is there anything else you’d like to add about your own experiences of cosplay?

A: Uh…[laughs] Not really, I don’t really know if this interview’s going to help or not at all, I just… I just wish that people would see cosplay a bit differently. You know, it’s difficult obviously, I’m trying to, not keep it a secret, I’m not hiding as it is but not making it public either, you know. Especially with my job, I have to be a bit careful because obviously if you type my name in Google you get my professional website and I don’t really want my professional name to be associated with my cosplay
name, because then it would just confuse people more than anything else. Which is why I’m under my nickname! You know, it’s a bit of a shame because most journalists just go around and see, you know, the mainstream channel and stuff to do with cosplay and are just like “Oh, look at these people dressing up in fantasy character, how fucking pathetic!” You know, and they just don’t really get the whole craftsmanship behind it, and it’s a bit of a shame because as much as cosplay annoys me and I’ve quit it and came back and quit it and came back and quit it and came back more times than I can imagine, it’s still… it’s what you make of it. Like anything, it’s as important as you make it really. So you can choose to have fun with it, you can choose to think it’s unimportant and you’re just doing it for yourself, which really I think you should, really do at this point! But first you should do it for yourself, and then you should do it for whatever, craftsmanship, attention, likes, you know, whatever. I think it’s really important to start by doing it because you want to do it for you. You know, and I think it’s really important, and most of the young people going into cosplay now I think don’t really have that and I think it’s a shame. And it’s something that you had before, again, people would be happy to just do the costume for themselves at home, and we had moments where we did costumes that NEVER came out, because you just don’t want that on the internet! Because just no! But you know, it was funny to just be around and it would be 3 or 4 in an apartment and we were like “Yeah! We made the costume and now we’re gonna sit down in costume and play games” or whatever. We just would make it for us. Just for us! Nobody else would see it and it would be fun in that way, you know? And I think it’s a shame now because most people have just kind of lost and they kind of burn into the characters, like “Oh I’ll do one and then trash and then do another one and then trash them and then do another one and trash” And yeah, it’s a bit of shame because they’re just… it
feels to me sometimes that they never really stop and take a step back to enjoy what they just created, you know what I mean? They’re just cosplaying for the cosplaying and not for a reason that’s purely personal that could just bring them so much more and I think it’s a bit of a shame. But, you know, personal opinion really. But that’s it!

37:16 SM: Well that’s all my questions, so I’m going to switch off the recorder now.