Cosplay: Definition, History, and Culture

Cosplay (from "costume play") is the practice of fans dressing up as characters from fiction. In essence, as one historian notes, it "involves a fan expressing enthusiasm...by dressing and behaving as one of [their favorite] characters" daily.jstor.org . Britannica likewise defines cosplay as fans wearing costumes of characters from anime, comics, video games, film or TV britannica.com . The English word *cosplay* itself was coined in Japan in 1983 en.wikipedia.org , and

the hobby soon flourished there. Early Japanese fan events like Comiket (first held in 1975) drew hundreds of people sharing fan-made comics and costumes cosplayerjourney.com . By the 1990s, Japanese anime and manga fandom (e.g. *Sailor Moon*, *Dragon Ball*, *Evangelion*) had energized cosplay, which then spread internationally. Today cosplay is a fixture at conventions worldwide – in fact, a JSTOR Daily feature observes that at events like San Diego Comic-Con attendees' "enthusiasm for attending in costume" is one of the most visible aspects of the convention daily.jstor.org .

Key Elements of Cosplay

Cosplay combines *costume making* with *performance*. Key elements include the crafting of detailed outfits and the embodiment of the character's persona daily.jstor.org britannica.com . In other words, the point is not merely to wear a nice costume, but to "embody and identify with an adored character" daily.jstor.org . Costume creation itself is an act of fandom – as researcher Frenchy Lunning writes, making the costume is "as much a part of

the loving...aspect of fandom as the actual performance" daily.jstor.org . Unlike a Halloween costume, whose goal is a party or trick-or-treating, cosplay's primary purpose is to *portray or inhabit* a character britannica.com .

Key elements include:

- **Costume construction:** Sewing, tailoring or assembling the character's outfit (often custom-patterned) britannica.com .

- **Armor and props:** Building armor pieces or props (swords, staffs, gadgets) from foam, thermoplastics, or metal and painting them to look realistic britannica.com .

- **Wigs and hair styling:** Cutting, dyeing and styling wigs (or hair) to match the character's hairstyle britannica.com .

- **Makeup and special effects:** Applying makeup (including body paint or prosthetics) to mimic a character's facial features, scars, or non-human aspects.

- **Performance:** Posing or acting like the character for photos or on stage. This can include mimicking signature poses, lines, or mannerisms to bring the character to life daily.jstor.org .

Each cosplayer may excel at different elements, but all involve creativity and attention to detail. The result is a blend of visual art (the costume) and performance art (the portrayal).

Popular Fandoms and Characters

Cosplayers draw inspiration from virtually all popular media. The most common sources are **anime/manga, video games, and comic books/movies** britannica.com . For example, many fans cosplay characters from popular anime series such as *Naruto*, *Sailor Moon*, *My Hero Academia*, or *Demon Slayer*. Video game characters are also widespread: everyone from classic heroes like *Link* (Zelda) to modern favorites like *Overwatch* heroes or *Final Fantasy* protagonists. Major Western franchises appear constantly as well.

Common cosplay categories include:

- *Anime and Manga:* E.g. characters from *Naruto*, *Dragon Ball*, *Attack on Titan*, *One Piece* britannica.com .

- *Video Games:* E.g. protagonists from *Legend of Zelda*, *Overwatch*, *Pokémon*, *Final Fantasy* britannica.com .

- *Comics and Movies:* Superheroes (Spider-Man, Wonder Woman, Batman, etc.), *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, Disney or Pixar characters.

- *Television and Film:* Fantasy or sci-fi characters (*Doctor Who*, *Marvel Cinematic Universe*, anime-based films, etc.).

The wide range of media means cosplay communities are highly diverse in interests. In practice, nearly any beloved character can be (and has been) cosplayed.

In Western fandoms, superheroes and popular film franchises are especially visible. Marvel and DC heroes are staple costumes; for instance, Spider-Man and Harley Quinn remain perennial cosplay favorites britannica.com . Likewise characters from major video game and movie franchises (like *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter*) are often seen. In short, cosplay spans every genre with a fan base – anime, gaming, comics, movies or TV.

Craftsmanship in Cosplay

Creating cosplay costumes involves a variety of craft skills. Many cosplayers make their outfits from scratch or heavily modify purchased pieces. As Britannica notes, costumes can be made of "fabric, clay, papier-mâché, cardboard, latex, silicon, or any other suitable material," and some cosplayers even mold parts in plaster or forge metal for armor britannica.com . In practice this means cosplay often involves:

- **Sewing and Fabrication:** Cutting patterns, sewing garments or fabric parts

    britannica.com .

- **Armor & Props:** Sculpting or molding armor pieces, weapons, and accessories from EVA foam, thermoplastics (like Worbla), 3D-printed or carved materials britannica.com .

- **Painting and Detailing:** Airbrushing and weathering paint on fabrics and props to match the character's look. Adding decals, embroidery or printed graphics for authenticity.

- **Wigs and Makeup:** Styling wigs (cutting, curling, heat-styling) and using cosmetics to match hairstyles and facial features. Special techniques like sculpting eyebrow shapes or using colored contact lenses fall here britannica.com.

Experienced cosplayers often learn a little of everything – sewing, sculpting, painting, electronics (for lights or moving parts) – making cosplay a multidisciplinary craft. Tutorials and materials (foam sheets, epoxy, paints, wig tools) are widely shared on social media and at hobby stores. The result can be astonishingly detailed costumes that rival movie props.

Social Media and Conventions

Modern cosplay culture is driven by both **fan conventions** and **online communities**. Conventions provide a public stage for cosplayers, while social media allows them to showcase and connect.

Conventions: As noted earlier, at major conventions people in costume are one of the most visible attractions daily.jstor.org. Events like San Diego Comic-Con, New York Comic Con, Tokyo Game Show, Anime Expo (USA), MCM London (UK) and many local anime/gaming conventions all feature thousands of cosplayers. Conventions often hold official cosplay contests and photo-ops, and they set up common areas (photo studios, themed backdrops) for photographers. They bring together fans who discuss craftsmanship, trade tips, and form cosplay groups. In this way cons foster community and give cosplayers a chance to be seen by thousands of fans and media.

Online/Social Media: The internet has vastly amplified cosplay. Cosplayers routinely post photos, tutorials, and time-lapse videos of their costume-making on Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and Twitter. Hashtags like #cosplay trend frequently. According to Smithsonian Folklife Magazine, many cosplayers "post photos or videos online of themselves in costume posing or acting in character," and some even build full-time careers from it folklife.si.edu. Social platforms allow fans to discover new cosplayers, follow their progress, and give feedback (likes/comments). They also enable remote communities (Facebook groups, Discord servers, cosplay forums) where people share patterns, advice and

encouragement. In effect, social media gives cosplay a global audience: an elaborate costume can go viral worldwide, boosting a cosplayer's profile.

Cosplay Competitions and Awards

Competitions are a hallmark of cosplay culture. Many conventions organize "masquerade" or cosplay contests where participants perform skits or simply parade on stage in costume. Cosplayers are judged on accuracy, craftsmanship and presentation. Smaller contests might award prizes like prop vouchers or trophies; larger ones can offer cash, equipment or paid trips.

At the international level, events like the **World Cosplay Summit (WCS)** in Japan draw huge attention. At WCS, teams who win their national cosplay contests come to compete in Nagoya, Japan for a world championship. Such contests highlight the highest level of craftsmanship and showmanship in the community. (Other countries also have their own regional championships.)

These competitions matter greatly to many cosplayers. Winning or placing high brings prestige and often media exposure. Professional cosplayers and hobbyists alike attend to show their skills. The Smithsonian notes that some professional cosplayers even earn income by "participating in contests" folklife.si.edu – indicating how contest success can translate into sponsorships or career boosts. In short, cosplay awards provide motivation to innovate and are a major venue for recognition in the community.

Inclusivity and Diversity in Cosplay

Cosplay is widely considered inclusive, attracting participants of all backgrounds. It is popular among **all genders**, and cross-play (cosplaying as a character of a different gender) is common and accepted en.wikipedia.org folklife.si.edu . For instance, women often cosplay male characters and vice versa, and conventions readily accept those costumes. Cosplayers span all body types and ages; many in the community emphasize body positivity and the idea that *any* fan can cosplay any character they love. People from any race or ethnicity cosplay freely; in fact, global events see participants from dozens of countries.

Furthermore, many LGBTQ+ fans find cosplay a friendly space to explore identity. Some use it to experiment with gender expression in a supportive environment. As one cosplayer put it, being in costume at a convention put her in an "accepting… atmosphere of people that I didn't know existed" folklife.si.edu . Another noted that cosplayers of "varying…gender expression" all communed together at her first convention folklife.si.edu .

However, the community's diversity has also highlighted areas for improvement (see next section). In recent years, cosplayers of color and plus-size cosplayers have actively pushed for greater representation and respect. Efforts like plus-size cosplay meetups and social media campaigns show that cosplay is becoming more inclusive of different body types and identities.

Challenges and Criticisms

Despite its ideals, cosplay faces internal challenges. **Gatekeeping** can occur when experienced fans harshly judge newcomers for skill level or costume accuracy. Some cosplayers report being discouraged online or at events for not being "good enough." **Harassment and discrimination** have also been problems. For example, a Business Insider report documented that some Black cosplayers receive racist online attacks when portraying characters who are not Black businessinsider.com . As noted there, "racism has a longstanding presence…in the cosplay community," and women and people of color sometimes face sexist or racialized comments. Cosplayers also speak up about *cultural appropriation* issues, such as wearing traditional cultural garments in a way that stereotypes or disrespects the original culture (e.g. using tribal face paint, blackface, or sacred symbols improperly).

Event organizers often struggle with these issues. Many conventions now publish **harassment policies** and provide volunteer staff to enforce respectful behavior. Online, cosplayers have created support networks (e.g. cosplay survivor groups) to help victims of abuse. These efforts aim to keep cosplay's creative spirit alive while making the hobby safe and welcoming for everyone.

Ethical and Legal Considerations

Legally, cosplay exists in a gray area. Costumes copy copyrighted characters, so in theory they are "derivative works." One legal analysis notes that *"very few lawsuits have been filed against cosplayers in the United States"* _{firstamendment.com} . Rightsholders generally tolerate cosplay as unpaid fan expression. However, cosplayers must avoid commercial exploitation of copyrighted designs without permission. Selling custom costumes or prints of copyrighted characters can risk copyright or trademark infringement. (Fair use defenses are weak for straightforward copying.)

Practically, most casual cosplay is non-commercial, so companies look the other way or even embrace it. Some publishers and studios post official costume guides or invite cosplayers to events. But beware: if a cosplayer advertises or sells a character image (for example, as merchandise), they may need a license. Also, cosplayers should respect others' privacy and rights of publicity when posting photos.

Public performance can also raise issues. For instance, acting out a scene in full costume might require permission from the content owner if it goes beyond casual fan interpretation. In practice, short fan skits or posing are usually tolerated at conventions under "fan activity" allowances.

Conventions enforce safety rules. Realistic weapons are usually banned or checked; overly sexual costumes may be restricted (especially near minors); and eye-catching but dangerous elements (like live fire or illegal paint) are forbidden. Cosplayers are expected to follow event codes of conduct. For example, Disney Parks famously disallow certain costumes at their venues.

In summary, ethical cosplay means respecting creators and others: do not monetize copyrighted characters without consent, follow event rules, and use costumes responsibly (e.g. don't use real weapons). When done properly, cosplay is a legal form of fan creativity that benefits brands by spreading goodwill among fans.

Cosplay: Career vs. Hobby

For most, cosplay remains a hobby or form of self-expression. As Britannica notes, *"most cosplay is done by hobbyists for fun,"* even though professional cosplay modeling and contests do exist britannica.com . Many attend a few conventions a year or share costumes on social media as a creative outlet.

However, some individuals have turned cosplay into a career or sideline. Top cosplayers like Jessica Nigri or Yaya Han have tens or hundreds of thousands of followers, book paid appearances, license their own merchandise, and even work as official spokesmodels for game and anime companies. The Smithsonian Folklife Magazine reports that many successful cosplayers "make money by creating social media content, receiving commissions for costumes and wigs, modeling for vendors at events, participating in contests, [and] selling products" folklife.si.edu . Platforms like Patreon or OnlyFans also allow some to earn from fan donations or exclusive behind-the-scenes content.

Thus cosplay spans a spectrum: at one end, a weekend hobbyist sewing a costume for fun; at the other, a full-time professional cosplayer with sponsors. Either way, the community spirit remains: whether hobby or career, cosplayers share a passion for creative expression in fandom.

Sources: Reputable cosplay histories and encyclopedias britannica.com britannica.com , fan community journalism and interviews daily.jstor.org daily.jstor.org folklife.si.edu folklife.si.edu , and scholarly/legal commentary firstamendment.com businessinsider.com provide the information above. These cover official accounts, community voices, and academic perspectives on cosplay's evolution, culture, and issues.

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