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Theory

Stranger than fiction: Fan identity in cosplay

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[0.1]   *Abstract*—Academic accounts of fan cultures usually focus on creative practices such as fan fiction, fan videos, and fan art. Through these practices, fans, as an active audience, closely interpret existing texts and rework them with texts of their own. A practice scarcely examined is *cosplay* ("costume play"), in which fans produce their own costumes inspired by fictional characters. Cosplay is a form of appropriation that transforms and actualizes an existing story in close connection to the fan community and the fan's own identity. I provide analytical insights into this fan practice, focusing on how it influences the subject. Cosplay is understood as a performative activity and analyzed through Judith Butler's concept of performativity. I specifically focus on boundaries between the body and dress, and on those between reality and fiction. I aim to show that cosplay emphasizes the personal enactment of a narrative, thereby offering new perspectives on fan identity.

[0.2]   *Keywords*—Crossplay; Fan costumes; Judith Butler; Performativity

1. Introduction

[1.1]   When I was 18 years old, I attended my first fan convention, Animecon 2005, in the Netherlands. I was aware that fans often "cosplayed" at such conventions, meaning they dressed as fictional characters they loved. A friend of mine had made me an Aerith costume; Aerith is a character from *Final Fantasy VII.* She hoped we could enter the costume competition. She had become an avid cosplayer since her first convention and really wanted to participate with a *Final Fantasy* act. Aerith was the most practical choice for me. I could relate to her, and I had long brown hair just like hers. My friend portrayed Ceres (*Final Fantasy VI*), my sister opted for Quistis (*Final Fantasy VIII*), and we had also recruited a Tifa (*Final Fantasy VII*) and a Shadow (*Final Fantasy VI*). Most of us knew each other already,

but our Tifa was a fan whom we had met online on a Dutch anime fan community. In the costume competition, all of us participated in a five-minute on-stage beauty contest that we had written months before and had practiced in advance. For Tifa and me, this was our first convention, and we were amazed by the many costumes we saw. When we were out of costume at the end of the convention, we were at a bit of a loss. Those costumes were tied to our con experience, and even more to our selves.

[1.2]   When cosplaying, fans of popular culture (e.g., television series, games, movies) produce their own costumes inspired by fictional characters. Fan costumes involve four elements: a narrative, a set of clothing, a play or performance before spectators, and a subject or player. Each of these can be used as a starting point for an analysis of cosplay. In this article, I focus mostly on the fourth element, the fan him- or herself. I shall argue that costuming is a form of fan appropriation that transforms, performs, and actualizes an existing story in close connection to the fan's own identity. This article is based largely on the fields of fan and performance studies and my own experience as a cosplayer and researcher who has attended a variety of European conventions in recent years. Fan costumes are just one example of how fans express their affection for existing stories and rework them through various media. Like fan fiction, fan movies, and fan art, cosplay motivates fans to closely interpret existing texts, perform them, and extend them with their own narratives and ideas. I start by describing cosplay as a performance, after which I depict the various contexts and uses of a costume. I analyze cosplay as a specific type of performativity, then discuss how cosplayers identify with the narrative and how this affects their identity.

[1.3]   The fan tradition of dressing up has a long history, dating back to American science fiction conventions in the 1960s and 1970s at which fans wore outfits from series such as *Star Trek* or *Star Wars.* Another subtype of fan costumes in Western culture is inspired by the tradition of Renaissance fairs and historical reenactment, as well as later practices such as live-action role-playing, in which enthusiasts base costumes on certain historical periods or genres and combine them with performances. The term *cosplaying* was coined in the 1980s by the game designer Takahashi Nobuyuki when he encountered the costuming practices of American fans on a visit to the United States (Bruno 2002; Winge 2006, 66–67). In Japan, cosplay has become very prominent. Many Western fans nowadays learn about costuming

not through science fiction or fantasy genres, but through Japanese fiction. As a fan practice, cosplay is associated with Japanese fans of anime (cartoons), manga (comics), and games, who are called *otaku* (Hills 2002; Kinsella 1998). Fans usually wear their costumes in specific settings, such as during particular events at conventions (e.g., competitions, fashion shows), or as props for fan videos. In contrast to definitions that argue that cosplay involves outfits inspired by Japanese fiction, I do not exclude the more Western variants that flourish in science fiction and fantasy fan communities.

[1.4]   Though the practice of dressing up at fan conventions is almost as old as the conventions themselves, it has scarcely been examined academically. It is often addressed in fan studies that devote a short chapter to conventions (e.g., Bacon-Smith 1992, 3–43; Taylor 2006, 1–11; Pearce 2009). The scholars who mention costuming in their books often use it as an introduction to fandom and its "strange" and sometimes ritual-like practices (see also Jenkins 2010). The study of other fan practices is more common. Fan fiction in particular has been closely examined (Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992; Pugh 2005; Busse and Hellekson 2006). Game studies scholars often analyze such fan products as machinima, user-generated content in games, and fan modifications, although Andrew Burn (2006) has offered a study of *Final Fantasy* fan fiction and fan art, and James Newman (2005) has published an article on the fan practices of gamers, including fan games, fan fiction, and walkthroughs. As I will show, research on cosplay can contribute to the field of fan studies, not only because cosplay is an aesthetic practice, but also because it reveals the personal relationship fans develop with a narrative.

[1.5]   I analyze cosplay here as a form of performance. Examining fan cultures as a performance is not entirely new, though developed theories on this are scarce (for two, see Coppa 2006 and Lancaster 2001). "Performance" is a rather broad concept. A helpful definition is offered by Henry Bial (2004) in *The Performance Studies Reader:* "The term 'performance' most commonly refers to a tangible, bounded event that involves the presentation of rehearsed artistic actions…We can extend this idea of a performance to other events that involve a performer (someone doing something) and a spectator (someone observing something)" (57). In cosplay, the performance may be actualized in stage acts and fashion shows, or it may be a more casual practice in which a fan simply wears the costume and socializes in it.

[1.6]   To an outsider, fan costumes might suggest that fans want to look like, or momentarily *be,* the fictional characters they identify with. Fans' reasons for cosplaying vary, however, and our group at Animecon 2005 was an example of this (figure 1). For instance, I did not love Aerith wholeheartedly. There were things about her I disliked, such as her sweet (maybe even shy) attitude, and I didn't care for the pink in her outfit. Later, as a cosplayer, I chose to play more eccentric or evil characters whom I was more attached to emotionally and whose outfits I liked better (e.g., the Baroness from *G.I. Joe;* Lady Une from *Gundam Wing;* Franziska von Karma from *Ace Attorney*). I chose Aerith at Animecon partly because she fit into the group and partly because her outfit was doable. These practical considerations influence other cosplayers as well. My sister loved wearing her Quistis outfit because she really identified with Quistis; my friend portrayed Ceres partly because of the complex design of the ball gown that Ceres wears in the game. She saw this as a sewing challenge and loved working on it. Similarly, the fan who cosplayed Tifa had invested months in finding the proper gloves for her outfit. Still, she was mostly neutral about the character; she enjoyed talking about her experiences of the game and her passion for the entire cast of *Final Fantasy VII.*

Figure 1. *Our Final Fantasy group at Animecon 2005. Photograph courtesy of Animecon (http://www.animecon.nl/). [View larger image.]*

[1.7]   Perhaps most importantly, cosplay is not confined to the fan activity of costuming but is also embedded in fan practices as a whole. Most cosplayers do more with these characters than just cosplay them. If they have a strong preference for certain characters (see Pugh 2005), they may role-play them online on bulletin

boards, on LiveJournal, in chat sessions, or elsewhere; write fan fiction about them; draw fan art depicting them; or use them as an avatar during chat sessions. My sister role-played Quistis on LiveJournal, and the fan who cosplayed Tifa with us often used a Tifa avatar when posting on bulletin boards. Discussing cosplay as a fan practice means taking all of these spaces into account.

2. Contextualizing cosplay

[2.1]   Dressing up is a regular activity in most societies. Cosplaying, however, is a fannish subculture and has its own limits and possibilities. It always takes place in a specific social context, usually in discrete spaces such as fan conventions or get-togethers. In Japan, cosplaying is more entwined with the public domain than in the West. For instance, cosplayers gather in the parks of the district of Harajuku in Tokyo. Here, costuming practices are part of consumption culture. Shops sell cosplay articles, such as wigs, and even full costumes. Cosplay restaurants draw fans in by having waiters and waitresses dress up as fictional characters or types (e.g., maids, butlers). Particularly interesting are the Miss Dandy bars, in which women dress up as men to cater to other women (Robertson 1996, 143–46). Even though this is a professional practice rather than one initiated by fans, it is clear that costuming has a more prominent role in Japanese society than in Western society.

[2.2]   The costumes fans wear are usually self-made, though in some cases they are purchased from Japanese stores or commissioned from other fans or professional tailors. Most cosplaying sites (such as Cosplay.com) design their user profile pages on the assumption that players make their outfits themselves and include options for players to discuss the creation of the costume. Online forums and communities are devoted to mutual help with difficulties such as styling wigs; tutorials made by fellow fans and these discussion boards lead to a culture in which fans help each other out as peers. The community is crucial here to the development of costuming skills. The process of sewing the costume and guaranteeing its authenticity is therefore very important. The costume is a cultural product that can be admired at a convention, and therefore spectators also play a role in guaranteeing authenticity (see also Winge 2006, 69). Fans may evaluate the costume, appreciate the character being portrayed, or take photographs.

[2.3]   Cosplaying at a fan convention is partly institutionalized through, and motivated by, specific events. The most common of these are fashion shows, photography sessions, and cosplay acts. Fashion shows are organized much as they are in mainstream fashion culture and are usually held on a catwalk or stage where cosplayers can show their costumes from various angles. At fashion shows, the costume is central. Because fans make the outfits themselves, they can earn praise for their sewing skills here. Fashion shows are also entwined with the narrative the costume is based on. Through their choice of the music that plays as they present their work and their body language, cosplayers can express their chosen characters.

[2.4]   In photography sessions, which are sometimes held during or after a fashion show, the costume also plays a central role. The fans function as models for the photographers, but they can also use the photographs themselves to promote their costume activities. Fans who specialize in photography usually initiate the shoots, sometimes at specific times that the convention has arranged. Though many of the photographers are fans who want a snapshot of a cosplayer—or rather, a character —they love, some may want to develop their photography skills further. Most cosplayers see getting their picture taken not just as something to be expected, but as a compliment (see Leigh 2007).

[2.5]   Most conventions also organize an event in which cosplayers perform skits onstage. Cosplay acts vary in length and quality. Usually they are less than 5 minutes long, but at the German Animagic convention, for instance, certain groups are allowed to perform for an hour or more. In these performances a new narrative is created, much as in fan fiction. They vary from plays and dance acts to quizzes and martial arts, and they may use music and video, which may be footage taken from the source text or created by the performers themselves (figure 2).

Figure 2. *Diana de Mol as Sakura from Tsubasa Reservoir Chronicle. Photograph courtesy of Furiaa. [View larger image.]*

3. Performativity and dressing up

[3.1]   Even though cosplaying is a prominent activity at conventions, it has received little critical attention, as I remarked earlier. As a fan practice, it creates an intimate and complex relation between the fan and the character. Cosplay is an excellent example of how fans actualize fiction in daily life and identify with it, and thus it helps us understand the constitution of fan identity. Through the acts of constructing and wearing a costume, the fan constructs his or her identity in relation to fiction and enacts it. To clarify this, I shall frame identity here in relation to Butler's concept of performativity, which in turn can also be exemplified and criticized when compared to cosplay.

[3.2]   Judith Butler described performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and also elaborated on it in her other books, such as *Bodies That Matter* (1993). The term stems from the work of Austen ([1962] 1980), but Butler uses it in a different, less linguistic sense. Though Butler's theory is related to gender, it has been picked up by many scholars interested in performance or identity. She argues against older discourses of identity politics that claim gender is fixed in our selves and shapes who we are. To Butler, gender is an expression of what one does, rather than what one is. In her theory Butler emphasizes the "reiterative power of the discourse," the repetition of the signs that constitutes the act and in turn shapes the subject's identity (1993, 2). Re-citation and repetition, not single acts, bring the subject into being (see also Llyodd 1999, 197).

[3.3]   Thus, in Butler's theory, identity is not invented but is the temporary result of imitation. Her notion of performativity shows an uncertain subject without a core, which is shaped by repetition and citation of existing discourses. Surprisingly, Butler's theory does not rely on the autonomy of the subject. The subject can gain agency only through its acts, which are limited because they rely on imitation of the discourse. Performing one's identity is not a voluntary act here, but rather one that is always confined to discursive practices in a certain society. This is also one of the main points on which her theory is critiqued (Llyodd 1999; Hall 2000). Her theory is deterministic in that it provides little to no space for the intentions of the subject.

Still, Butler is often not read as deterministic, because one of her most remarkable case studies, on drag, seems to suggest that playing with one's identity, or even subverting it, is possible. Cosplay seems similar to drag in this way. If we can express ourselves through a multitude of costumes and characters, are we not consciously constructing our identity?

[3.4]   Butler's account of drag is often seen as a prime example of her theory of performativity. It seems to suggest that identities, especially gender identities, are malleable and can be subverted, but that is not what Butler tries to show. She explains this in her interview with Segal and Osborne (1993): "There are restrictions in drag. In fact, I argued toward the end of the book that drag has its own melancholia." This melancholia inheres in the fact that drag is confined to the same gender discourse as other identities. Ultimately, she analyzes drag not as a form of empowerment but as a parody of feminity (Salih and Butler 2004, 111–13; Llyodd 2007, 42–44). Drag is based on gender, which is itself imitative. Rather than showing how cross-dressing can erase existing boundaries of gender identity, Butler emphasizes how it reconfirms heteronormativity: the categories that define man, woman, and heterosexuality as the norm (Butler 1993, 237). Drag exposes all of these notions as constructed, but it is not subversive because it also reconfirms them.

[3.5]   Two minor criticisms of Butler's theory are relevant when relating the subject to cosplay. First, Butler discusses drag as a form of lived expression. Drag, however, happens in other contexts as well. Drag can be performed at a carnival, within the theater, or at political interventions such as protest marches. Here, the context is more playful and less explicitly related to identity politics. Drag and cosplay explicitly come together in the subgenre of crossplay, in which players dress up as characters of the other gender (figure 3). This practice is occasional and, to some degree, ludic. Second, Butler does not take the intentions of the subject doing drag into account. The motivations of crossplayers, for instance, vary. Crossplay can be only an occasional practice, enacted because the player likes a certain character of the opposite gender; it can be part of a parody (e.g., Man-Faye; Sailor Bubba); it can be motivated by a player's preference for a certain outfit despite the gender of the character. Some crossplayers enjoy the challenge of behaving like a member of a different gender, while others see themselves as publicly declaring the fluidity of gender. Additionally, crossplayers choose their characters according to more than

merely gender. A number of crossplayers I know lean toward certain character tropes, such as lordly characters or cute girls.

[3.6]   Forms of dressing up such as cosplay and drag combine a sense of identity and playfulness with the wearing of an outfit. While Butler limits the acts of the subject to discursive practices, we see that cosplayers in fact play with identity all the time and understand the meaning of what they are doing in various ways. Moreover, cosplay and crossplay give us a different view of drag, which is not confined to gender or political interventions here but involves a range of aesthetic practices. In Stuart Hall's works (e.g., Hall 2000), identity is seen as twofold. It is not only the subject determined by discursive practices, as in Butler's writings, but also the subject him- or herself, and how she or he uses culture. Identity is seen as a meeting point of discourses that affect us as social objects, while it is also a process that subjects themselves produce. The subject invests in his or her position. What Hall calls the "articulation" of one's identity is an important factor in the construction of identity (19). However, in Butler's theory, there is little room for such agency of the subject.

Figure 3. *Crossplayer playing Emil from Tales of Symphonia II at Animagic (http://www.animagic-online.de/), 2010. Photograph courtesy of Nicolle Lamerichs. [View larger image.]*

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4. Dresses and bodies

[4.1]   Butler's interpretation of drag as an embodied, theatrical practice is applicable to cosplay as well. Butler says in her interview with Segal and Osborne (1993), "What's interesting is that this voluntarist interpretation, this desire for a kind of radical theatrical remaking of the body, is obviously out there in the public sphere. There's a desire for a fully phantasmatic transfiguration of the body." Such a remaking is central in both drag and cosplay. The relation the cosplayer has to his or her body is important if we want to analyze cosplay as a form of performativity. In Butler's writings, considerable attention is given to the construction of gender through repetition. *Gender Trouble* (1990) pays little attention to how one's sex plays a role in the construction of identity, an omission that Butler tried to correct in *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Still, the embodiment of one's identity is part of its development. The body plays a role in various ways when we analyze cosplaying and general fan practices.

[4.2]   First of all, we should realize that cosplayers use their bodies explicitly to display their affection for certain narratives. At some conventions, wearing a costume is becoming implicitly expected. Fans in street clothes stand out at conventions where most attendees are in costume. Nonetheless, the difference between those who are dressed up and those who are not is not as clear as it might seem. At most conventions I went to, even the attendees not in costume dressed up for the occasion to some extent. Through T-shirts, buttons, headbands or hats, and jewelry, even fans who do not consider themselves cosplayers use dress as a way to signify their affiliations (see also Hodkinson 2002, 131–51). At anime conventions, it is not uncommon to wear something in a Japanese style, such as a Gothic Lolita outfit or a kimono. Though this is not cosplay in the narrow sense, in that one is not impersonating a fictional character, it shows there is an intimate relation between even uncostumed fans and their clothing.

[4.3]   Nor are fans easily divisible into cosplayers and noncosplayers. Cosplaying can be multilayered. At a convention, cosplayers sometimes change into regular

clothes during the day, especially if their costume are not very practical. The cosplayer chooses when to wear a costume and may bring more than one to a convention. Some players change their outfits frequently. This playing with roles and identities can confuse spectators. A common problem (or compliment) at conventions is that cosplayers' friends or acquaintances may not recognize them at first.

[4.4]   Second, cosplay is not only a practice related to bodies and dress, but also an embodied practice. Both the dress and the body and behavior of the player are important in analyzing it. Cosplay allows spectators to encounter fictional characters in a convention setting. As Gunnels (2009) describes, this immediacy of performance is at the heart of cosplay. First impressions are crucial here. As a fan practice, cosplay is centrally concerned with embodying a character accurately. Because of this, cosplayers often develop an increased awareness of their own bodies or choose a character that matches their own posture, identity, or social role. As I explained earlier, I chose to cosplay Aerith because I felt I could look like her easily. Cosplayers may be criticized for failing to fully reproduce their character's appearance, even when these failures are due to such factors as body size or medical necessity. I wore contact lenses to cosplay Aerith, and at that convention I heard complaints about other cosplayers who kept their glasses on when playing characters who did not wear them. Fans may negatively judge a cosplayer who they feel has not done enough, even though the player has obviously put effort into his or her appearance.

[4.5]   Cosplayers are usually judged according to body features and behavior. However, the characters they portray are strongly embedded in a medium (e.g., animation or game) whose design may make doing justice to their appearance impossible (figure 4). Participants on message boards often discuss what fabric could best reproduce the appearance of an outfit, try to understand within the universe of the original narrative how a character might make and wear his or her costume, or compare several versions players have made of one costume. Similarly, cosplaying characters from movies is problematic because characters are connected to their original actors (e.g., Johnny Depp's portrayal of Jack Sparrow), and their appearance is often more detailed than that of animated characters. Still, the goal of most cosplayers is not to create a look-alike, but to express their own identity through a costume. In analyzing the identity of the cosplaying fan, we must take

into account both appearance and behavior. They determine the practice and thereby affect the self.

Figure 4. *Roderick Leermakers as the Joker from The Dark Knight. Courtesy of Abunai, 2008. [View larger image.]*

5. Exploring fiction, subverting reality

[5.1]   Is cosplay truly similar to other performative acts Butler describes, such as drag? Perhaps something innovative is happening in these fan communities that should be analyzed differently. Segal and Osborne (1993) summarize Butler's ideas with a remarkable statement: "It's only within critical subcultures that transgressive reinscriptions are going to make a difference." We can wonder whether fandom is the kind of subculture they are looking for, one that does not cite existing patterns but practices something altogether new, and thereby manages to create an effective, subversive parody. In early fan studies research, fandom was often depicted as subversive because it goes against the commercial media industry and offers a more feminist space in which to rework narratives (e.g., Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992). My focus is a bit different: I argue that within these communities, a new idea of identity can flourish. Fans show a flexible, multilayered idea of identity—an identity that cannot be pinned down. Still, cosplaying is one example of how fans rework texts, and therefore it is always related to fiction. The

activity itself has no clear political agenda. Perhaps cosplaying counterbalances the tendency of fan cultures to analyze and critique the media they engage with. Still, by using Butler's later ideas, I argue there is transformative potential in the way fans identity with narratives. I shall explain briefly how this identification works before I trace it back to performativity again.

[5.2]   Cosplay leans on identification with narrative content. Most importantly, cosplayers have a dynamic relationship with stories and characters. Most cosplayers do not wish to exactly duplicate the character they portray; rather, they want to bring something of their own, such as elements of their own appearance, into the cosplay. In that sense, they can also be compared to cover bands and other forms of impersonation in which performers enact their own versions of existing material. Moreover, characters are used as signifiers of the fan's own identity. On the one hand, a costume shows off a player's attachment to a certain narrative or character, and a player can gain status through high-quality cosplay. On the other hand, the associations connected with a character are transferred to the player. Expression through a costume of a fictional character is actually self-expression. Cosplayers decide what characters and values fit them. These decisions are the very core of this type of play, but they are ones that the audience might be less concerned with. While the audience can judge a costume and behavior, and their resemblance to the source text, they cannot compare the character with the player.

[5.3]   In cosplaying, there is a mutual exchange between the player and fiction. In this sense, the relation between players and characters is similar to that between gamers and their characters. Game theories often stress that the avatar—the main playable character in a game—is not just a protagonist that can be read, but also an enabling character that the player controls. The character-player relationship has been described by De Mul (2005) as "ludic identity" and by Gee (2007) as "projective identity." Both concepts highlight that a player establishes his or her own identity while interacting with a game and its avatar. This interaction also shapes our interpretation of the fictional material. In cosplay, a similar thing happens. Players identify in multiple ways with the characters they portray. Some relations may be very personal while others more general (perhaps based on the outfit, the trope of character). What we see is that the identity of the fictional character rubs off on the identity of the player. The values or features of a character are projected onto the player by the spectators and player him- or herself. In turn,

the interpretation of the narrative changes for the same group because of the cosplay, which can be seen as a performance that enriches the existing story or story world.

[5.4]   Thus, when we speak of identity and identification in cosplay, we speak of two things. On the one hand, players actualize a narrative and its meaning; on the other hand, they actualize their own identities. To put it bluntly, by stating that a narrative or character is related to me—that I can identify with this particular story or person—I make a statement about myself. There is transformative potential in this ability to express who we are through fiction. As Butler says, "I think we need to pursue the moments of degrounding, when we're standing in two different places at once; or we don't know exactly where we're standing; or when we've produced an aesthetic practice that shakes the ground. That's where resistance to recuperation happens. It's like a breaking through to a new set of paradigms" (Segal and Osborne 1993). These moments of degrounding or indeterminacy are exactly what cosplay facilitates for its subjects.

[5.5]   In fandom, a sense of identity is grounded on aesthetic practices, like cosplay. I have already explained that in Butler's theory identity is seen as performative and involuntary. Subversion becomes a slippery process because the subject is always subjected to social forces. However, if we read *Bodies That Matter* (1993) closely, we see that Butler provides a small space for the individual subject. She does this by exploring identification from a psychoanalytical angle, an exploration that relies on imagination and desire. "Identifications belong to the imaginary; they are phantasmatic efforts of alignment, loyalty, ambiguous and cross-corporal cohabitation…Identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability" (1993, 105). Although identification is subjected to "iterability" or citation of existing discourses, it offers more possibilities for envisioning the self and offering resistance to the dominant discourse. This emphasis on the imaginary might also account for Butler's notion that subversion can best be located in aesthetic practices.

[5.6]   Even though Butler's theory is deterministic, she still manages to create a certain space for the subject to act in. Creative practices that can widen the range of our performativity allow us to articulate our identity. Fans explicitly use fiction to

do so. Their aesthetic practices support the insight that Segal and Osborne as well as Butler already had: that within the space of imagination, we can constitute a complex identity play. Here, cultural norms are not recited or imitated but rather appropriated in innovative ways through narratives. Cosplay can be seen as an imitation or recitation that is based on fiction that subjects explicitly enact. It is within these spaces between reality and fiction, and among these pluralities of meanings attached to a text, that subjects experiment with who they can be.

6. Conclusion

[6.1]   In the previous sections, we have seen that fan costuming is a highly diverse activity. The essence of the activity lies in showing appreciation for a character and a text, as well as expressing one's self. Cosplay can take place in different contexts, but in all cases, it constitutes a relation between the character and the player. These two aspects are at the heart of cosplay, and they sometimes conflict. After all, cosplayers identify with the material differently. Their motivations to create and wear a certain costume therefore vary as well. For instance, numerous fans choose a character to play on the basis of the character's design rather than personality. Similarly, fans sometimes move toward very creative, individual versions of characters that may no longer be seen as derivative costumes.

[6.2]   Cosplay makes the ambiguous relation between the fictional and actual explicit. It is especially interesting as a fan practice within spaces between the player and the character, the actual and the fictional. Cosplay does not just fictionalize everyday life and give it an aesthetic dimension; it also shows how the fictional shapes the actual. Ultimately, cosplay is a vital example of how identity is constructed. Fans construct their own identity by associating themselves with fictional characters and embodying them. Cosplay emphasizes that the self not only narrates fiction but is partly fictional as well. It is through interaction with stories that we can imagine and perform ourselves.

7. Acknowledgments

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