

Posthuman Drag: Understanding Cosplay as Social Networking in a Material Culture

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1. Growing up in Australia, one of my earliest memories of what I would come to understand to be *anime* was the unmasking of Zoltar on *Battle of the Planets*, the dubbed, recut and greatly sanitised version of the late seventies *anime* series *Science Ninja Team Gatchaman*. Each week *Battle of the Planets* featured a team of five young superheroes in bird-like costumes, defending Earth against the latest monsters and schemes unleashed by the evil forces of Spectra and Spectra's sinister field commander, Zoltar. Throughout the series, Zoltar remained a sexually ambiguous figure, somewhere between feminine and masculine. This ambiguity centred on Zoltar's lipstick, purple uniform, flowing cape and horned cowl, all of which kept his/her true gender virtually unrecognisable. The liminality of the character carried over to Zoltar's race as well, for while what little we could see of Zoltar's face appeared Caucasian, the Asian actor Keye Luke voiced the character. Then, in Episode 60, *The Alien Bigfoot*, Zoltar is briefly unmasked to expose long blond hair and feminine features.
2. In the original *Gatchaman*, Berg Katse (aka Zoltar) is a male/female mutant created through the in-utero fusion of two fraternal twins. In some ways the elision of this explanation in the western version made Zoltar an even more fascinating character, an impossible, unreal figure that was simultaneously male and female, Caucasian and Asian. For this reason, we referenced Zoltar in a previous paper^[1] as both a figure of disruption and for many westerners in the U.S., the U.K. and Australia, their first exposure to the possibility inherent in *cosplay*, the Japanese contraction of the English words 'costume' and 'play' (*kosupure*) that refers to the taking on of a particular character from *manga* (comic), *anime* (animation), movie, game or (less frequently) other media from Japan.^[2] As we define it,

In its purest form cosplay is akin to performance art, taking on the *habitus* of a particular character through costume, accessories, gesture and attitude; it is therefore not simply 'dressing up' but rather inhabiting the role of a character both physically and mentally.^[3]

Previously we considered the relationship between industry and fandom in the Australian cosplay scene and as part of that exploration raised the possibility of cosplay as 'prefiguring the liminal spaces offered by new media's online identities and digital avatars with the cosplayer capable of transcending cultural, racial and gender boundaries and stereotypes.'^[4] In this article we want to explore that possibility—and the relationship between cosplay and *drag* further. Zoltar serves as a useful starting point for conceptualising this relationship for we would argue that it is in the figure of Zoltar—and the possibilities inherent in such a liminal figure—that we find the three reasons why cosplayers *cosplay*: to play with gender, to play with race and to play with reality. Drawing on the negotiation of cosplayer identity presented in a series of newspaper articles and comment threads and a survey of the literature to date, we argue for cosplay as a pre-digital form of social networking, posthuman drag that sutures the unreal to the real.

Cosplay: history and function

3. Cosplay as a fan-based, performance-based movement is claimed to have originated with a parodic performance of a *manga* or *anime* character by Mari Kotani in Japan in 1978.^[5] The first western reference to specifically *anime* (Japanese animation) or *manga* (Japanese comic) cosplayers comes from Fred Patten who notes that the 1979 San Diego Comi-Con International convention is 'also the first (?) convention to include several anime character costumes in its Masquerade, with a group of six San Diego fans led by Karen Schaubelt as *Captain Harlock* and *Star Blazer* characters.'^[6] But it would not be until 1984, when game designer Takahashi Nobuyuki coined the term *kosu-pure* (costume-play) to describe this practice^[7] when 'Takahashi saw Star Trek costumes worn at the 1984

4. The origins of cosplay, at least as far as its connections to *anime* and *manga* are concerned, go back to *shojo* art. Takahashi defines *shojo* as 'a genre that combines poetry with illustrations.'^[9] Importantly, *shojo* art is based around fashion illustration with many creators also being fashion illustrators.^[10] Referring to the work of post-war *shojo* artist Jun'ichi Nakahara, Takahashi describes the style as 'full-body images [that] appear on the page like mannequins modelling the latest ensembles in store windows.'^[11] Furthermore, *shojo manga* was part of a larger lifestyle package. For example, Takahashi notes how, in the early 1900s, Yumeji Takehisa, one of the most popular illustrators of *Shojo kai* (Girls' world) also 'designed and marketed his own lines of fashions, stationary, accessories and home decorations.'^[12] This opened the way for young women to participate in fan culture, given cosplay's emphasis on fashion and clothing, particularly in design and performance.
5. Cosplay's emergence in connection to *anime* and *manga* in the West in the seventies is linked to both the appearance of *shojo manga* in the U.S. and, perhaps more importantly, what Frenchy Lunning identifies as that moment when 'the postmodern discourse entered its most productive stage.'^[13] This link between cosplay and postmodernity is important because it points to the central tenet of *possibility* in both: cosplay is the practice and postmodernity the theory.
6. Ironically, cosplay is more acceptable in the western world than it is in Japan, due to negative stereotyping of *otaku*. Ironically, cosplay is more acceptable in the western world than it is in Japan, due to negative stereotyping of *otaku*—a Japanese term for nerd or geek. As Hiroaki notes:

Japanese subculture; such as Anime and Manga, have been highly prized internationally. In association with such trends, cosplay spread around the world. Especially in the United States, maybe because Americans are familiar with masquerades and Halloween, cosplay seems accepted by society. Unlike in Japan, cosplay does not provide a negative impression, like 'oh that's so otaku' or 'how dare you dress up like a prostitute'. It could be because there is a long tradition of cosplay led by trekkers [Star Trek fans].^[14]

Similarly we could link greater acceptance of cosplay in the West to long-standing costume-play traditions such as Renaissance fairs, historical re-enactments and live-action roleplaying.

7. That said, in the West cosplaying is largely contained (and thereby institutionalised) to conventions and other fan gatherings. In Japan, cosplay's close relationship to the culture of consumption, means that they spill out into other areas of the public domain: sold by stores that sell costumes, performed in the parks of Harajuku and restaurants, such as the Miss Dandy bars, where women dress as men to serve other women,^[15] video game shows, cafés, night clubs and their own specialised conventions, bringing East and West together, as in the World Cosplay Summit (WCS) first held in 2003, an event to which we will return at the end of this article to explore how two Australian participants at the WCS configured their cosplay identity.
8. Cosplay is very much around materiality and embodiment. As such, Nicolle Lamerichs identifies four elements that a part of all cosplay: 'a narrative, a set of clothing, a play or performance before spectators, and a subject or player.'^[16] The first element, 'narrative,' is in reference to both the pre-existing narratives, the characters that are the subjects of cosplay, from video games, comics and animation, already belong to and the narratives cosplayers bring to the characters through their performance of them. Competitions usually involve a performance of a particular skit (often five minutes but capable of ranging to a full hour) related in some way to the narrative of which they are a part, but also allowing for modification through wit or sexual play. In this way the skit is almost a kind of fan fiction, building on the pre-existing narrative but also what Lamerichs argues is 'a form of fan appropriation that transforms, performs, and actualizes an existing story in close connection to the fan's own identity.'^[17]
9. The second element, the 'set of clothing,' functions as a *suture* not just between the unreal character and the real performer, but also between the real performer, the larger cosplay community, the performer and the spectator. Importantly this set of clothing is *created*; the authenticity of the costume very much depends on the craft that goes into its making, bringing to the fore skills in needlework and design. It sutures the cosplayer to a larger community because costumes are often created through the assistance of online forums, cosplaying sites (for example cosplay.com) and other peer communities devoted to assist in the creation and craft of costumes.

10. Authenticity is a key component here. Appreciation of the costume by spectators (evaluation, photography, etc) is a key part of the cosplay; therefore spectators also play a role in guaranteeing authenticity.[18] Photography-posing for photos and having photos taken-is therefore a compliment and comment on the authenticity of the cosplay.[19]
11. The third element, 'a play or performance before spectators,' points to the idea that cosplay is an embodied practice because cosplay is as much about assuming the habitus of the character (the way they act) as it is in wearing the clothes. It is about embodying the character, providing an accurate and authentic experience in terms of body features and behaviours as much as dress.
12. Following Lamerichs, we define this performance aspect of cosplay in terms of Henry Bial's definition where: "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).[20] As Lamerichs notes, such a definition is especially applicable to cosplay given that '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.'[21] Crucially the cosplay is not simply performed during competition but a habitus the player assumes whenever in costume. Part of the cosplayer's role is to be in character at all times the costume is worn, to be ready to perform, or pose when requested. This is why some cosplayers change into 'casual' clothes at conventions; the assumption of the costume is the assumption of the role. They cannot step out of that role unless they are out of costume.
13. The fourth element, 'a subject or player,' is necessarily crucial to the cosplay, though how much of the cosplayer's own identity informs the play remains a subject of debate. Some costumes, such as those worn by the largely Japan-based *Dollars* 'male or female cosplayers who perform as female dolls and wear bodysuits and masks to transform fully into female characters'[22] completely obscure the player beneath the costume. However some theorists, such as Lamerichs, argue that: 'the goal of most cosplayers is not to create a look-alike, but to express their own identity through a costume.'[23]
14. Others argue for more of an elision of identity. Lunning argues for cosplayers as 'an abjected population' where the cosplay becomes 'an articulation of abjected excess and, as such, cosplay accepts and recognizes all body forms, genders, and sexualities of the fan community in the practice. Body form, as the signifier and origin of the abjected position, becomes in cosplay supplanted by imaginary identities, which elides the founding condition of the abject body.'[24] In part this is made achievable by the fact that the characters cosplayed are themselves largely ageless, genderless and unreal. As Sharon Kinsella argues, for *otaku* in the original Japanese context these characters and narratives represent 'the refusal to grow up and take on adult social relations ... without social roles, *otaku* had no fixed identities, no fixed gender roles, and no fixed sexuality.'[25] However, our argument in this article is that the fact that the cosplayer at the very least selects the character to be cosplayed represents a form of identity politics, where the character in some way aligns with the desires or bodily type (or both) of the cosplayer, an idea we return to in more detail below.

Conceptualising cosplay

15. Lunning identifies cosplay, following Felix Guattari, as 'the *transversal* moment'—a 'display of multiple identity eruptions [that] begins precisely as the costume is put on and the subject encounters another otaku.'[26] For Lunning, transversality 'seems to create this potential space of creativity and collectivity,'[27] referring to the 'possibilities and multiplicities of potential'[28]—precisely the same possibilities we referred to as being offered in the liminal character of Zoltar in the introduction. A key element of Lunning's definition here is 'collectivity' as 'cosplay is always about the performer *and* the audience simultaneously.... Cosplaying starts with the desire to find community for the abject individual.'[29] This desire for community makes cosplaying an embodied form of social networking, where likes and desires are inscribed onto the body itself (rather than a virtual space) making the cosplayer themselves a medium and something we return to below.
16. In contrast, Lamerichs likens cosplay to 'ludic identity,' similar to the mutual exchange players have with their avatars[30] where the cosplayer identifies with aspects of the character cosplayed and elements of the character 'rub off' on the identity of the player.[31] For Lamerichs then, when someone cosplays two things happen:

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.^[32]

17. While Lamerichs' conception of cosplay is quite different to Lunning, they share a common underlying similarity in using the language and (in Lamerichs' case) architecture of digital technology to explain how cosplaying functions.
18. As we have argued previously, 'unlike other fannish dressing-up, cosplay is closer to drag. We would argue that it is not merely an act of becoming a particular character, or marking out a particular alignment, but of *disruption*. This is the "play" in "cosplay," a play with identity and, more often, a play with *gender* identity.'^[33] This link between cosplay and drag is also made by a number of theorists, including Lunning and Lamerichs. Lunning for example notes how the 'imaginary identities' constructed through cosplay 'secure for the cosplayer a temporary symbolic control and agency. The cosplayer enacts, embodies, and performs identities through a *role* scripted through the narratives of popular culture and the gender anxieties of fans,' leading Lunning to conclude that 'cosplay is a *drag* performance.'^[34] Similarly Lamerichs notes that '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?'^[35]
19. But importantly, the drag of cosplay is not simply restricted to gender. Fundamentally drag is imitation (mimesis) and assumption (habitus). As Judith Butler notes 'what is "performed" in drag is, of course, the *sign* ... a sign which is not the same as the body it figures, but which cannot be read without it.'^[36] Cosplay demonstrates that these signs, while all relating to aspects of identity, are not just signs of gender but also race (being Japanese) and reality (being unreal). In this way cosplay extends the possibilities for drag beyond gendered roles of kings and queens, to playing at being Japanese and playing at being unreal.
20. This approximation of cosplay and drag is frequently misunderstood. Gn for example misinterprets our use of drag^[37] as referring only to 'subverting established gender roles' which would 'reduce representation to psychoanalytical discourse and negate the affective qualities of the image that are being embodied by the performer.'^[38] This underplays the notion of 'play' implicit in the term 'cosplay' itself and reduces drag to simply being imitations of gender.
21. While there is an argument, well-rehearsed in early work on fan cultures, that fandom itself is subversive in that it reworks narratives in ways not originally intended by commercial media industries,^[39] cosplay is more disruptive than subversive, a *play* more than a challenge. As Sheila 'Dragon Fly' Koenig notes, 'The project of drag as a subversive practice is to fail.' Rather 'drag performance is a practice of ... creating ambiguity in which gender [and we would argue a great deal more than that] ... can be questioned and disrupted.'^[40] Similarly Lamerichs notes, drag is not just a form of lived expression (as Butler defines it) but it '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.'^[41] In this way we want to move away from the narrow definition of subcultures such as cosplaying offered by the Birmingham approach as *resistance* narratives towards thinking of them as more playfully disruptive, of what Tom O'Regan refers to as 'cosy and discriminatory local identities,' expanding 'the definitions of what is possible' and (for Australian cosplayers) providing 'a way out of the available—often conservative—Australian definitions.'^[42]
22. Views such as Gn's mistakenly assume that drag is only about gender subversion when in fact we would agree that the drag act is as much about playful engagement with the simulation (or *simulacra* following Jean Baudrillard^[43]) itself, inhabiting that simulation and, in Gn's own words, 'Through the consumptive act in cosplay, the image becomes a disembodied sign'^[44] that, again following Baudrillard, acquires its own material force.^[45] Play has always been a part of drag for the ironic turn has always been an aspect of drag and cosplay frequently offers parodies/burlesques of *manga* and *anime*. Occasionally, in its coupling of resolutely heterosexual characters, it even becomes a form of embodied slash fiction as Tania Darlington notes, fans 'both undermine and pay homage to popular mainstream *anime* and *manga* by creating their own counter-narratives that involve well-known characters in fantastic, often absurd, situations and unexpected homoerotic pairings.'^[46] Therefore for us, drag is about identity, not just gender. Simulation of gender, race and (un)reality, we would argue, are all integral parts of the mimesis and habitus of the drag act and all frequently displayed in cosplay.

23. Having said that, on one level, drag *is* still about gender. Here, by gender, we refer to the socio-cultural and historical conventions of male and female behaviour as laid out by Judith Butler. Butler argues that gender is therefore 'performative,' that there is no causal relationship between 'biological interactions'[47] and gender as a cultural construct, but rather gender is inscribed through social norms and repetition. Similarly we would not discount the importance of gender to cosplay, as echoed in an interview Lunning conducted with a cosplayer who said, 'Cosplaying is—on some level—about sexuality, whether or not it is purposeful. Some characters are innately sexy or crossgendered—it is about flirting and exploration—sexual exploration without consequences.'[48] This relationship between gender, drag and cosplay is explicated in *crossplay* where players cosplay as members of the opposite sex. This element of cosplay is complicated when cosplaying characters whose gender remains unclear (for example Zoltar) or where the characters themselves dress as the opposite sex. Once again it points to the liminality inherent in the characters that are the object of the cosplay and how gender must necessarily be a part of all cosplay.
24. Secondly, cosplay's close relationship with Japanese culture means that for a number of cosplayers cosplay is also a way of being Japanese. As Jennifer Stockins says,

It can be argued that Australian *cosplayers* are unwittingly *cosplaying* more than just their favourite character as they are also *cosplaying* as Japanese. The pretence of being Japanese occurs because the majority of popular *anime* and *manga* series are set in Japan; consequently Australian *cosplayers* try to recreate mannerisms and clothing that they believe to be Japanese.[49]

Just as teenage hip-hop fans might emulate the attitude and behaviour of their African-American heroes by wearing streetwear or sporting jerseys, so too do *anime* and *manga* fans emulate their *manga* and *anime* icons through the wearing of costumes.

25. Third, drag is about materiality—about making the unreal real through cosplay. Through the use of costumes, cosmetics, and other accessories, cosplayers are able to bring to 'life' a figure that was once considered artificial or 'unreal'[50] *anime*, *manga* or gaming characters, what Lamerichs terms '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.'[51] Therefore, just as drag is typically thought of as enacting a gender role, so here cosplay is about enacting a fictional character, where the costume and the player provide material form for the behaviour and narrative of the immaterial character. This is perhaps the most interesting and least researched aspect of cosplay because it points to a kind of pre-digital notion of both a public desire (similar to the 'likes' on a Facebook page) and social networking that are both embodied.

The posthuman

26. This public desire is articulated through the costume; cosplayers do, in a very real way, wear their hearts on their sleeves, or their thigh-high boots, or their spikey hair. As Dick Hebdige describes it to Kathryn Rosenfeld, 'Costuming and style leads back to questions of mimesis and desire.... Style—which is mimetic in that it is produced through mutual modelling by individuals within a cultural field—becomes a montage of signs of desire, and aesthetic trappings become capable both of identifying potential objects of desire, and of invoking desire itself.'[52] What makes this desire even more interesting is that the object of a desire is a simulacra: an unreal character. Cosplay therefore becomes a simulation of a simulation.
27. As such cosplayers offer materiality to what is essentially an unreal construction, they are the suture between the unreal existence of the character (in game, on screen, in the panel) and the real performance space in which they talk, move and interact with others. As Gn notes, 'the animated body [itself] is not a portrait of anatomical sex, but a synthesized performance of gender.... Along with all cartoons, the synthetic body in Japanese animation is a form of 'playful art.' Its virtue is to animate or to imbue objects with life,'[53] or as T.R. Lindvall and J.M. Melton describe it as imbuing 'living things with a different kind of life' (anthropomorphism for example).[54] In this way we would argue that cosplay becomes a form of posthuman drag, taking posthumanism as an emergent ontology, in the sense that a posthuman is one who can become or embody multiple identities (the very essence of the cosplayer).[55] The difference here is that this is posthumanism enacted through material culture, dependent on craft and artistry rather than digital technologies.
28. Cosplay goes further than this, for as Lamerichs notes, 'Cosplay allows spectators to encounter

fictional characters in a convention setting,'[56] both as part of the competition and simply walking around the convention. A key element of this is the 'immediacy of performance,'[57] the impression that when the cosplayers are first encountered they *are* the character. Therefore, as Lamerichs explains,

Cosplay makes the ambiguous relation between the fictional and actual explicit.... Cosplay does not just fictionalize everyday life and give it an aesthetic dimension; it also shows how the fictional shapes the actual ... 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.[58]

29. Just like a Facebook page, Cosplayers display their affection/desire through cosplay. This is similar to the way non-cosplayer fans use fashion (T-shirts, jewelry and certain styles) to signify their affiliation to a particular group or subculture,[59] and just as a Facebook page is part of desire to connect with a community, so too does the cosplayer demand an audience. For the cosplayer their desires are inscribed on the body, through their clothing, with the body itself becoming the medium for expression and connectivity. Cosplayers are therefore perhaps best thought of as 'textual performers,'[60] fans who 'try to capture—through participation and immersion—the original cathartic moment felt during the first viewing of a story' and building a like-minded community of spectators and performers around them.[61]

'Being' a cosplayer

30. So far we have critiqued how academic literature perceives cosplay practice. In this final section we will update an earlier case study conducted on the Australian cosplay duo known as the Haraju2girls to consider how cosplayers configure their own cosplay identity.[62] We will explore their negotiation of cosplayer identity during their participation in the 2011 World Cosplay Summit held in Japan. This event was significant as it was prominently featured in the *Mercury* newspaper—the daily newspaper published in Hobart, Tasmania where the Haraju2girls are based. Our analysis will focus on three articles which appeared in the lead-up to, and shortly after the event. As well as appearing in print, all the articles were published online. As an indication of their prominence, the article covering their success appeared on the *Mercury's* front page and was dominated by a large photo of them in costume. As we will show, the *Mercury's* coverage of the Haraju2girls preparations for the Summit, and their receipt of the award for Best Costume, involved a contextualisation of their cosplay identity/practice in a very public forum.
31. The World Cosplay Summit is an annual cosplay competition involving seventeen nations. Through a series of regional cosplay competitions the Haraju2girls became Australia's representatives for the 2011 event. They went on to achieve the highest ranking of any team from Australia in the history of the event. The *Mercury's* short, but prominent, coverage of the event was layered with various hopes and fears for the Haraju2girls. These were configured around two concerns: the social dynamics of being cosplayers and how they would respond to external criticism of their identity.
32. In discussing the experience of the World Cosplay Summit for the *Mercury* newspaper, the Haraju2girls emphasised the community support they had received. In each article, being part of a social cosplay community—particularly other cosplayers who participate in conventions and events—was a core part of being a cosplayer. While these events were seen as competitive, being a cosplayer was seen as a social, community-based activity, where the love and enjoyment of cosplaying as a pop culture character is aligned with a support base of family, friends and fellow fans to realise the cosplay identity. This belief in socialising, sharing and networking is emphasised in the publicity for the WCS which promotes the global affinity which has emerged around cosplay. As was explained in the the Summary from the World Cosplay Summit, 'Nowadays youth from around the world find this as a common language and a dynamic new form of global interaction.'[63] The Haraju2girls' own emphasis on fan affiliation and supportive community was a core message in their interviews for the *Mercury* articles. Consider, for example, the following quote where they explain the importance of support and friendship during the judging of the winner at an earlier cosplay competition, 'One of the Japanese judges had a hard time deciding on the winner, because we are all so nice and supportive of each other.... It's different from comps in other countries, where it can get very competitive.'[64] Here we see the emphasis on social bonding and affiliation in what defines a good (Australian) cosplayer. An identity that is based on the social network and supportive community that helps them perform and become cosplayers. In this way, cosplaying becomes a

shared, social activity. The responsibility the Haraju2girls felt in representing Australia at the WCS is presented as a shared experience that reflects their identity as part of the cosplay community as much as individual agents, as the following quote demonstrates, 'You get to meet a lot of wonderful people—we've made so many friends, all who've helped us get to the point we've reached today.... The amount of support we got from other Australian cosplayers was unbelievable—they really got behind us.'[\[65\]](#)

Addressing external criticism

33. Similar calls to positive affiliation and social support can be seen in the face of criticism or negative stereotypes of youth, as seen in the following comment posted under the *Mercury's* news of their Best Costume award:

CONGRATULATIONS!! These young Tasmanians didn't sit around complaining. They just went ahead and followed their dreams (animated or otherwise) and showed us all what a tasmanian can do—ANYTHING THEY CHOOSE![\[66\]](#)

34. In response to negative comments that the articles received online, a number of posters to the *Mercury* website reinforced the positive support and pride in the work the Haraju2girls were doing,

It's called expression.... Let me guess, right now you're wearing faded blue jeans, running shoes, and due to the cold today, your favourite Holden/Ford racing jacket? Some people actually like standing out from the crowd a little, unlike the drone I'm sure you are. Enjoy the rest of your mundane life. Us 'Weirdos' will continue to brighten up our own, and others lives with a bit of flair.[\[67\]](#)

The materiality of cosplaying and its play with reality is here presented as giving the cosplayer freedom to explore and create a life 'with a bit of flair.'[\[68\]](#) In contrast, the non-cosplaying critic is seen to be constrained by a 'mundane life' of dull clothing and culturally appropriate and 'safe' interests—the 'Holden/Ford racing jacket.' By drawing a distinction between 'standing out from the crowd' cosplayers versus 'mundane life' critics, this poster is emphasising the cosplayer's playful disruption of dominant cultural identities. Here we find an example of the sort of 'pop cosmopolitan' identity that Henry Jenkins has suggested emerged as foreign popular culture,[\[69\]](#) used as an escape from dominant or oppressive cultural identities, or O'Regan's 'way out of the available —often conservative —Australian definitions [of identity].'[\[70\]](#)

35. The emphasis on disruption here defines the cosplayer as a playful agent of change. The high regard given to cosplay's transversal moment as it crosses gender, race or reality can be seen to offer an optimistic creative and social moment. In the following comment responding to the cosplay critic for example, we see how the way out of conservative Australia involves the act of making the unreal real through the skill of the cosplayer,

Seems you can't keep up with the world around, must be tough being a stagnant turd in the world around you, never moving forward, never looking about you. Just sitting there, smelling horrible. Personally I think the artistry in the creation of the costumes is mind blowing. The skill required to make the costumes equally mind blowing. Nothing but total support here.[\[71\]](#)

36. As cosplayers present themselves as learning demanding and challenging skills in creating their costumes and performance, these posts on the *Mercury* articles emphasise the cultural capital their participation in the cosplay culture has given them. In responding to the negative criticism, one of the Haraju2girls themselves explains in a comment about the mastery over textual, material and performative dimensions required to be a cosplayer and how this skill should be recognised by the broader community:

Cosplay is, to me, no different than Football or other activity. Instead of drinking with my mates on the weekend, I am usually brainstorming performance ideas or making outstanding works of art and I am always so proud to see the result of where all my money is spent. What makes me more proud is to know that, regardless of what the general population might think of the outfits I spend 50+ hours creating, that we are representing Tasmania in an international competition against such countries as China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, France, Germany, America, etc. And we want to show our beloved state that it doesn't matter where you are from and how much we have to struggle as Tasmanians as opposed to the rest of Australia, you can achieve your dreams. Whether that is representing Australia in the Miss World Pageant, being recruited for the Collingwood Football Club, or competing against the rest of the world in what is the equivalent [*sic*] of cosplay's Olympic [*sic*] Games. I guess if that makes me a freak, I thank you for your compliment.[\[72\]](#)

37. The mastery over doing cosplay and the global popularity is here presented as deserving equal

recognition and respect as more well-known competitions. Indeed, this post displays the idea that being a cosplayer at the WCS involves becoming a 'textual performer'^[73] whose 'participation and immersion'^[74] in the cosplay role is a discursive strategy driven by the public and social desire to build a supportive community of spectators and cosplayers (which the WCS itself symbolises).

Conclusion

38. The analysis presented in this article has provided a survey of the literature on cosplay to date and presented some of the discursive strategies involved in defining the cosplayer identity through a series of newspaper articles. In exploring some of the theoretical moves used to explore cosplay identity and practice we have also sought to address some of the criticisms levelled against the use of drag to analyse the types of disruption and play occurring in cosplay.
39. We have identified a number of shared areas of concern within the literature around both the transversal moment and liminal state of cosplay practice. We have suggested that in addition to these moves, that are both subversive and playful, there is an emerging discourse around cosplay as being about public desire and social networking. At the same time, this suggests a posthuman identity drawn from material rather than digital culture that brings into question what it *is* to be a cosplayer.
40. The ways in which cosplay identity was articulated by the Harju2girls and others in the *Mercury* newspaper stories demonstrate two aspects of this identity: its social nature and its configuration around external criticism. Both aspects reveal the importance of social engagement and community support for the cosplay experience. While contrasting the cosplayer identity with negative outsider opinion suggests some romanticising or idealising of O'Regan's 'way out' or Jenkins' pop cosmopolitanism, nevertheless this emphasis on disruption is a very social and collaborative one where the shared, supportive and affiliated position is privileged. Ultimately then, the possibilities of cosplay suggested by early *anime* figures like Zoltar from *Battle of the Planets*, to disrupt individual identity—playing with gender, race and reality—have expanded. They now include the *building* of a *communal* identity through the embodiment of desire, via costume and performance. Thereby cosplay becomes a material, *posthuman* drag that sutures the unreal to the real and forms the foundation of a community of like-minded performers, spectators and fans.

Notes

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