



Fashioning the Embodied Liminal/Liminoid Self: An Examination of the Dualities of Cosplay Phenomenon in East Asia

By Anne Peirson-Smith, City University of Hong Kong

Abstract:

This paper will examine reasons for the rapidly developing cosplay phenomenon in East Asia by focusing on the cosplayer's experience of the ritualized, embodied performance aspects of this contemporary play activity and its use or creation of liminal spaces and liminality to facilitate and accommodate it. Also, the paper will suggest that cosplay is a manifestation of the participatory need to fashion and inhabit new personal and social territories through the use of the fashioned body, aided by crafted artifacts, and undertaken in bounded play spaces. These practices enable the cosplayer to inhabit and occupy liminal zones, thereby transcending the pressures of their ordinary, everyday existence. This form of individual sense-making and collective agency is based on lived experience and situated practice, where the human body represents multiple discursive possibilities. This article intends to shed light on the motivations behind this type of spectacular dressing up or fashioned practice by offering an empirically based explanation of why given communities of practice spend their time and money on these sartorial behaviors. This article further hopes to advance knowledge about the reasons for dressing up in general, and for cosplay in particular.

Permalink:

usfca.edu/center-asia-pacific/perspectives/v16n1/peirson-smith

Keywords:

Cosplay, liminality, dressing up, costume play, subcultures, performance

Date of Publication: Vol. 16, no. 1 (2019)

Citation:

Peirson-Smith, Anne. "Fashioning the Embodied Liminal/Liminoid Self: An Examination of the Dualities of Cosplay Phenomenon in East Asia." *Asia Pacific Perspectives*, Vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 65-92.

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Introduction

The practice of cosplay or costume-play (*kosupure* コスプレ) where young adults dress-up and perform in the defined public spaces of conventions as fictional characters from manga, anime, online games, films, or other mediated popular culture narratives (Figure 1) has become increasingly popular over the past decade, expanding from its origins in Asia to become a transglobal phenomenon. The term “cosplay” is a compound word formed by contracting “costume” with “play.” The Japanese origins of cosplay are attributed to the first use of the term in a 1983 article by Japanese reporter and manga publisher Nobuyuki Takahashi. In his article for *My Anime*, Takahashi described his experience of attending the WorldCon in Los Angeles and distinguished the performative aspect of costumed role playing as a Star Trek character as something different from merely being dressed up in costume.¹



Figure 1. A cosplay duo at a Hong Kong University anime event.



Figure 2. Individual cosplayer at commercial cosplay event, Hong Kong.

With its hybrid origins in American and Japanese popular culture, cosplay has gained global accessibility and popularity due to the ubiquity of entertainment content on digital communication sites. Arguably, whether emerging from twentieth century American costuming activity at WorldCons, Star Trek conventions, costume parties in Tokyo, or Japanese glam rock bands, cosplay represents a dressing up practice taking place in real and virtual, cognitive, emotive and behavioral spaces and places in the process of fashioning an individual costumed identity (Figure 2) within a collective setting (Figure 3).

Cosplayers typically choose, plan and create their character outfits from Japanese manga, anime or Hollywood superhero sources, for example, and attend organized events to facilitate this fashioned costumed display. Secondly, they behave according to prescribed expectations and social practices of

1. Laura Orsini, *Cosplay: The Fantasy World of Role Play* (New York: Carlton Books 2015), 8–9.



Figure 3. Cosplayers pose together for a team photograph at a Hong Kong University anime club event.

the cosplay community by enacting their characters² individually or in groups, taking “hallway photos” in carefully practiced poses³ or performing well-rehearsed competitive skits and sketches at events⁴ organized by university anime and manga societies, or at commercial anime, comic book, and online game conventions. Thirdly, cosplay enactments of the fantastical self are openly on display in the public domain, and these costumed performances require a validating audience. Onlookers and photographers who may be friends or strangers attend, watch, and photographically record

and share the event in both online and offline spaces. The proto-cosplay “backstage” community of players inhabits the same performance space by actively supporting the “front stage” presentation of the cosplay self,⁵ assisting with costumes, attaching accessories, applying make-up, working on hairstyling and photography, much like any stage crew (Figure 4).

This paper examines the growing cosplay trend and will do so by depicting the cosplayer’s experience of the embodied aspects of this contemporary play activity and the dualities of its performance.⁶ The work of Victor Witter Turner will serve as a conceptual starting point, which will be addressed and adapted for the purposes of this analysis of cosplay practice. Two concepts, the liminal and the liminoid, will be central to the discussion. Liminality, as defined by Turner, concerns traditional, collective, pre-industrial, ritual based practices such as rites of passage, while the liminoid is defined as post-industrial, individual, optional, leisure-based social acts.⁷ The



Figure 4. A cosplay team assist each other in getting dressed up as Star Wars characters at a Hong Kong University anime club event.

2. Matthew Hale, “Cosplay: Intertextuality, Public Texts, and the Body Fantastic,” *Western Folklore* 73, no. 1 (Winter, 2014): 35-37.

3. Craig Norris and Jason Bainbridge, “Selling Otaku? “Mapping the Relationship Between Industry and Fandom in the Australian Cosplay Scene,” *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* (2009): 20. http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue20/norris_bainbridge.htm.

4. Scott Duchesne, “Little Reckonings in Great Rooms: The Performance of Cosplay,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 121 (Winter, 2005): 23-24.

5. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (University of Michigan: Doubleday 1959), 1-3.

6. Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 24-26.

7. Victor Witter Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine, 1969), 95.

following analysis will suggest that cosplay is a manifestation of ritualized practices involving collective and individual effort in both liminal and liminoid pursuits and which incorporates characteristics of each. Cosplayers' engagement with the liminal/liminoid state is based on the need to fashion and inhabit new personal, social and physical territories using the fashioned self, aided by crafted artifacts, in the location of tangible and intangible bounded play spaces, including the mind and body. In this way, the cosplayer inhabits and occupies the liminal/liminoid zones of the dressed body and the cosplay convention as a means of transcending an ordinary, everyday existence. This enables the cosplayer to realize both individual and collective agency, given that culture is founded on modifying the human body and appearance.⁸ Cosplay dressing up represents options for communicating both individual and collective identities, based on a deep emotional connection with the fictional character being cosplayed. Here the terms "affect" and "affective" are used to describe the emotional display evidenced in the cosplayer's deep connection with their costumed character. These terms convey a more heightened notion of conventional feelings of affection.⁹ Affect arises from interaction with others causing potential changes in the mental and emotional state of those involved when they move from one experiential state to another. This can operate independent of, and enhance or diminish the power of the subject¹⁰ as, for example, when dressing up and experiencing feelings of being someone else.

This analysis is intended to shed light on some of the drivers behind the dressing up practice of cosplay. It offers an empirically based description of how a given community spends time and money on extraordinary sartorial behaviors, as a way of illuminating the reasons for doing cosplay.

First, this paper will examine the notion of subjectively creating ritualized performances of self and identity, as found in cosplay character dressing up, to understand this phenomenon as an embodied practice involving "temporal and spatial beings."¹¹ Next, the discussion will position cosplay as a form of social interaction in site specific performances, proceeding from a reworked version of Victor Turner's notion of liminality and the liminoid, as referenced above.¹² Turner's theories will be adapted to explain how and why cosplay transforms the body using dressing up in costume by examining the contexts in which the cosplay performance takes place. It will do that by focusing on the "where" of cosplay by reworking notions of the liminal within the frame of embodiment at the site of the liminoid body. An analysis of the use of specific sites for cosplaying will assist this explication. It will

8. Thomas J. Csordas, *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6-7.

9. Benedictus de Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, trans. Edwin M. Curley (Princeton and Chichester: Princeton University Press 1994), 154.

10. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 1987), xvi.

11. Joanne Entwistle, "The Dressed Body," in *Body Dressing*, ed. Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 44.

12. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 94.

also explore the significance of the ambiguous, liminal boundaries highlighting the collective and creative tensions between structured and unstructured forms of play found in cosplay. In doing so, this paper will suggest that cosplay occupies a dual liminal/liminoid zone residing at the fashioned, embodied and locational interstices of ritual, performance and creative play. In these spaces, cosplayers fulfill a range of affective based functions for participants, on both individual and collective levels, underpinned by a universal social need for agency, kinship and social recognition.

Methodological Approach

This paper will be supported by the findings of an ethnographic study from fieldwork conducted in Hong Kong and Macau from 2014-2017, as part of a wider ongoing empirical study (2008-2018) using individual interviews, focus groups and participant observations of over 100 cosplayers in Hong Kong, Macau, Tokyo and Beijing. The empirical basis for this paper is founded on a descriptive approach based on specific data from a collection of 5 focus group sessions in Hong Kong and Macau, comprising 25 participants in total. In addition, 30 individual, in-depth interviews at cosplay events in Hong Kong and Macau were conducted with randomly identified informants lasting 10-15 minutes on average. The interviews comprised a convenience sample¹³ of individual cosplayers based on their availability at cosplay events when approached on site by the author. Interviewees included males and females ranging from 15-33 years old, who regularly dress up in public spaces in a range of themed costumes as manga/anime and superheroes. The sample comprised a mixture of students and workers in the beauty, fashion, publishing, creative, communication, media, design, and service industries. In the interests of ethical research practices, the real names of the informants have been replaced with pseudonyms, assuring anonymity and confidentiality. The data analysis is also supplemented by personal observations arising from the author's attendance at conventions and organized gatherings in East Asia from 2008-2018. Also, data is ethnographically used "to represent . . . subjective meanings, feelings and cultures."¹⁴ This methodological approach is intended to reflect the lived and subjective realities of the cosplayers themselves as a means of analyzing spectacular groups or neo-cultural tribes in terms of what they do, why they do it, how they do it¹⁵ and what they do it with, as an embodied means of expression, from the subject's own perspectives.

Embodied Cosplay

One of the unifying features of the human body across time, space and place, as Joanne Entwistle observes, is that it is a dressed body, reflecting prevailing social norms. Here, dressing up is based on the notion of embodiment where the body as the center of identity

13. Ilker Etikan, Sulaiman Abubakar Musa, and Rukayya Sunusi Alkassim, "Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling," *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics* 5, no. 1 (2016): 1-4.

14. Paul Willis, "Notes on Method," in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 91.

15. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), xv.

is inseparable from sensory and cultural experiences.¹⁶ Hence, the mind is situated in the body, making the latter the conduit through which we constantly observe and interact with the world. In turn, this bodily site directs how others observe us, subject to ambivalent and uncertain readings.¹⁷ In this sense, the embodied, dressed body is an active rather than a passive site of self-articulation and identity. It is also an extension of the self that is located within, and responds to, the codes and contexts of space and time in which it is situated at any given point. Unlike Michel Foucault's notion of the body reflexively reacting to and reflecting the dictates and discourses of powerful social regimes and institutions,¹⁸ the social interactionist interpretation of embodiment acknowledges its possibilities in discovering and exhibiting personal power through the subjective controlling and directing of the presentation of the dressed, affective and lived self.



Figure 5. A cosplayer at a Hong Kong University anime club event.

The development of identity and self-concept can be viewed on the basis that growing up is dressing into another identity. Often this transition is signaled by the wish to dress like others who are, in turn, like one's self. Therefore, by dressing the self in an extraordinary way in the public domain, as in cosplay, the player may be rejecting the parentally sanctioned management of appearance in favor of emulating prescribed peer group dress codes by "dressing in," while rejecting others by "dressing out." Childhood representations of self are formulated in play that is often facilitated by superhero costumes, for example. Therefore, in cosplay, one does dress like others, but like others who are "unlike one's self."¹⁹ This act of playful dressing up represents a departure from the wearing of the everyday, public clothing that represents recognized roles, as the cosplayer focuses on fashioning spectacular costumes for acts of themed play, which serves as a transformative

instrument of imaginative and embodied transformation (Figure 5). In the presentation of self via embodied performance using the layering of clothing and masks,²⁰ the cosplayer when dressed as a fantastical persona²¹ is perhaps continuing ritualized roles initially experienced

16. Ruth Finnegan, *Communicating: The Multiple Modes of Human Interconnection* (London: Routledge, 2002), 127-128.

17. Entwistle, "The Dressed Body," 44.

18. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 26-27.

19. Gregory Stone, "Appearance and the Self," in *Human Behavior and the Social Processes: An Interactionist Approach*, ed. Arnold Marshall Rose (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), 88-89.

20. Teri Silvio, "The Body in Taiwanese Digital-Video Puppetry and COSplay," in *Embodied Modernities, Corporeality, Representation and Chinese Cultures*, ed. Fran Martin and Larissa Henrich (Hawai'i: University of Honolulu Press, 2006), 290-291.

21. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: a Study of Play Elements in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 13.

in the socialization phase of childhood development that legitimizes the function and purpose of adult dressing up.²² This process can be further explained using Joanne Eicher's typology of three personas, manifested through dress based on the public, private, and secret selves,²³ whereby the cosplayer appears to be using the chosen costume worn at that moment to project the secret or hidden self into the prescribed public domain. According to this classification, in communicating a clothed identity in everyday life, the public persona is broadly signified through the wearing of everyday professional clothing, such as business suits for work. The private self, most familiar to friends and family, is based on the casual clothing of relaxation and leisure, such as t-shirts and jeans. The secret self represents a restricted zone of clothing reserved purely for the individual and invited viewers, and the clothing includes items such as intimate apparel or adult fantasy dress.

The costumed self exhibited by cosplayers when dressed up as their chosen fictional characters creates a synergy between the individual body and its material covering that "does not simply reflect a natural body, or for that matter, a given identity; it embellishes the whole body, the materials commonly used adding a whole array of meanings to the body that would otherwise not be there."²⁴ The costumed self, however, operates in social settings where a subjective stance is often experienced in the context of groups and spaces, which serve to shape both individual and social actions that support or reject social norms in terms of how to dress in particular situations, for example. Bourdieu's concept of the "habitus" as the ingrained and accepted ways of being and behaving, from dressing to working in a given culture and society, which stand to be challenged and demystified,²⁵ is a useful concept here.²⁶ Applying this notion of habitus specifically to the costumed body²⁷ situates the individual wearer in a broader frame of reference that acknowledges that dressing up is the consequence of a complicated negotiation between singular and collective embodied states and socially prescribed ways of dressing. These presentations of self are constantly in flux and subject to the contextual considerations of a structured social system, with its markers of age, gender, occupation, ethnicity, and race²⁸ added to the consequent social norms and expectations of how we should dress in given situations. Inevitably, costuming yields unpredictable outcomes in the interplay between the normalcy of how to dress in a given

22. Joanne. B. Eicher, and Kimberley A. Miller, "Dress and the Public, Private and Secret Self: Revisiting the Model," *Proceedings of the International Textiles and Apparel Association*, (Minneapolis, The University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, 1994), 116. <http://hdl.handle.net/11299/162462>.

23. Eicher and Miller, "Dress and the Public, Private and Secret Self: Revisiting the Model," 116.

24. Entwistle, "The Dressed Body," 33.

25. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 50-53.

26. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72-75.

27. Rachel Suet Kay Chan, "Expressive Rationality: Habitus and Field in the Malaysian Cosplay Community," *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 14, no. 1 (2018): 133-134.

28. Efrat Tseelon, "From Fashion to Masquerade: Towards an Ungendered Paradigm," in *Body Dressing*, ed. Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 105-106.

context on the one hand, and the expression of individual agency using out of the ordinary dress codes on the other to challenge more accepted ways of dressing, as we see in cosplay. In this way, cosplay deliberately traverses the boundaries of normal, everyday clothing worn in public and private contexts in favor of the secret presentation of the individual self or collective selves in public spaces. This transformative pursuit is undertaken with intent based on various overlapping individual and shared agendas, exhibiting the different discourses offered through the act of cosplaying. As Nicolle Lamerichs suggests, these articulations can include “[. . .] another discourse on cosplay can be found in fandom itself: a discourse that emphasizes fiction, camaraderie, and the art of costume design.”²⁹ Hence, some cosplayers may engage in the practice as a social undertaking. For others, it is a way to publicly demonstrate, showcase, and validate through competition their cultural capital.³⁰ They are able to present themselves as devoted fans possessing the creative competencies required to faithfully recreate and rearticulate in a materialized, embodied form their deep passion for a popular narrative and its protagonists.

Spatial Liminal/Liminoid Cosplay Zones

Cosplay as a cultural performance³¹ takes place in specific places. So, in addition to the fashioned, transformative process using the body as a conduit for expression of identity, the bounded and demarcated physical locations in city spaces where the cosplay performance typically takes place hold significance for understanding its rationale. By extension, anthropologist and folklorist Arnold Van Gennep, observed that tribal rites of passage operated on the margins of society or limen (Latin: threshold), often as “an extended liminal phase in the initiation rites of tribal societies” that could be “[...] frequently marked by the physical separation of the ritual subjects from the rest of society.”³²

The tripartite ritualized passage from pre-liminal to liminal and post-liminal conditions transported an individual tribe member from one life-stage to another, typically involving physical separation and subsequent cognitive and affective change as part of that dynamic process. Building on Van Gennep’s work, Turner extended the idea of liminality to explain limbo-like, ritualized moments in human culture. This included activities occurring on the boundaries of life that were temporarily “betwixt and between” and which individuals pass through, and are incorporated into before they return back into the society that they originated from.³³ Turner further applied the concept of liminality in a modern secular context, where

29. Nicolle Lamerichs, “The Remediation of the Fan Convention: Understanding the Emerging Genre of Cosplay Music Videos,” in “Performance and Performativity in Fandom,” ed. Lucy Bennett and Paul J. Booth, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 18, 2015. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0606>.

30. Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York, Greenwood, 1986), 241-258.

31. Victor Witter Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: the Human Seriousness of Play* (New York City: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 61-63.

32. Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. 196.), 3.

33. Victor Witter Turner, “Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbol-

ritual as “societal drama” assumes specific social and therapeutic functions, enabling humans to cope with prevailing encounters across new life-changing thresholds and allowing them to deal with conflict, disruption or social upheaval, for example.³⁴ Further differentiating between the liminal and liminoid states of being, Turner explained that,

*Liminal phenomena tend to dominate in tribal and early agrarian societies; they are collective, concerned with calendrical, biological, and social structural cycles; they are integrated into the total social process; they reflect the collective experience of a community over time; and they may be said to be “functional” or “eufunctional”. . . Liminoid phenomena, on the other hand, flourish in societies of more complex structure...not cyclical but intermittent, generated often in times and places assigned to the leisure sphere...tend to develop apart from central political and economic processes, along the margins, in the interstices, on the interfaces of central and servicing institutions— they are plural, fragmentary...experimental in character.*³⁵

While cosplay is a contemporary, not a traditional phenomenon, it shares the characteristics of both the liminal and the liminoid in terms of its structure and form, thereby challenging Turner’s fixed differentiation between the two, in favor of a more hybrid version. On the one hand, cosplay operates in a liminal sense as it occurs in the physical separation of an event on the boundaries of everyday life regularly and seasonally held in a convention center or university; it also operates within a community of like-minded people who share the collective experience of their fandom and long term connection to a fictional character. On the other hand, cosplay displays liminoid characteristics as a form of societal drama voluntarily open to participants, operating on the societal margins and engaged in during leisure time at the interface of central and service institutions, offering an outlet for experimental creativity. Therefore, this paper will suggest that cosplay practice in structure and form represents *both* liminal and liminoid aspects.

The liminal, staged middle phase of transformation, when a person’s social status, personal identity and physical being are “betwixt and between,” neither here nor there, as an ambiguous zone, is particularly relevant for understanding how cosplay works. The view that creativity finds space for expression in liminal zones³⁶ can be usefully applied to the process of creative cultural practices such as cosplay, which typically involve a preparation stage, an inhabitation, and a cooling down period.³⁷ The staged, ritualized practice for cosplayers

ogy,” *Rice University Studies*, 60, no 3 (1974), 54-55.

34. Victor Witter Turner, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbolology* (New Delhi: Concept, 1979), 13.

35. Victor Witter Turner, “Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality,” in: *Performance and Postmodern Culture*, eds. Michael Benamou and Charles Caramello (Madison: Coda Press, 1977), 50-51.

36. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 61-65.

37. Victor Witter Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Cornell Univer-

involves weeks and months of planning, creating, or sourcing and customizing costumes in the space of personal time. This is followed by a character performance in a liminal play space and concluded by a post-performance return to the space of everyday reality and the assumption of non-costumed roles.

Equally, Turner's updated notion of "liminoid" or "liminal-like" thresholds traversed by individuals trying to make sense of modern life is useful when we consider the leisure-based and creative orientations of cosplay. Turner adapted the spatial concept of the liminal to explain the more individually directed playful or play-based recreational or non-authentic contemporary performances, such as theatre or sport that he considered as representing

*[...] parts of social critiques or even revolutionary manifestoes-books, plays, paintings, films, etc. exposing the injustices, inefficiencies, and immoralities of the mainstream economic and political structures and organizations.*³⁸

Here, the liminoid state represents a liberating space sanctioning the freedom to play and to be creative, both unfettered by and being external to regulating social structures. As Turner explained, it represents a liberation and the

*freedom to enter, even to generate new symbolic worlds of entertainment, sports, games diversions of all kinds...freedom to transcend social structural limitations, freedom to play with ideas, with fantasies, with words.*³⁹

This observation is also highly relevant in explaining the motivations underpinning the cosplay act. Informants consistently talked about how liberated they felt when cosplaying their character, in contrast to their scheduled and structured lives. These freedoms to think, choose, create, and act invest the cosplayer with a significant amount of individual agency that contrasts with their presentation of self in their normal, structured daily working experiences.

Unlike these artistic pursuits, cosplay appears to go beyond Turner's notion of basic leisure activities as it represents both the liminal and liminoid. This includes aspects of the traditional ritualistic aspects of the liminal in its ritualized, rule based, repetitive nature of costuming and meeting up. At the same time, it fulfills the criteria of being a liminoid, leisure based pursuit in parallel with other hobby-based dress up practices such as Halloween or Civil War re-enactments. However, it is differentiated from these dressing up pursuits in the dualities underlying its specific form and function.

Turner suggested that in modern societies where ritual and community are absent or diminished, play in demarcated leisure time filled this gap. But work and leisure are not always mutually exclusive. As the core activity of cosplay is based on the "craft work" of sourcing, designing and making costumes, there is a blurring of this distinction. The form of play can also be structured and rule bound and more reminiscent of ritualized liminal pursuits. So, the form and function of cosplay differentiates it as a unique cultural

city Press: Ithaca and London, 1974), 115.

38. Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual," 86.

39. Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual," 68.

performance in both of its liminal and liminoid aspects, thereby challenging and extending Turner's work.

Play and Cosplay

Play, once relegated by Plato to the superficial, amorphous, diversionary pursuits of children, in stark contrast to the adult world of focused, structured, rule based games, has become synonymous with a post-industrial quest for the mythic work-life balance, offering a fun and civilizing counterpoint to workplace pressures. Play by children is often accorded more freedom. Adult play is still controlled and often structured by given communities of practice and their "structuring influence of principles."⁴⁰ It is often kept apart from the workplace, signifying a deeper Fordist/Puritanical suspicion of leisure and downtime that is often merely tolerated by the institutions of work.

The liminal/liminoid zone provides a liberating space sanctioning the freedom to play away and apart from everyday life. From an anthropological perspective, play is present in all cultures and most cultures find expression in the logic and fun of play.⁴¹ As such, play is seen as being essential to culture, not an insignificant or meaningless by-product. In many cultures play is driven by make-believe activities. It ranges from play patterns based on adventure narratives through the different stages of child development⁴² as a way of sense making, mastering control⁴³ or escaping everyday life for the player.⁴⁴ In addition to conveying learning experiences, play can also enable alternative and innovative fantasies, creating and inspiring new and creative cultural forms,⁴⁵ such as cosplay (Figure 6).

Significantly, cosplay as a leisure activity that involves significant effort and time in devising and representing characters has elicited various moral panics. It is frequently framed by Asian media as a waste of time and money and as the manifestation of disenfranchised youth headed for failure. Consistent with this attitude, involvement by young people in cosplayer is often made conditional on attaining good school grades, and many simply keep the practice secret from parents and families or co-workers, afraid of being



Figure 6. Cosplayers at AniCom & Games event at Hong Kong Convention Centre.

40. Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual," 82.

41. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: a Study of Play Elements in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 1-2.

42. Jean Piaget, *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* (New York: Norton Press, 1951), 62-63.

43. Donald Woods Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971), 47.

44. Gary A. Fine, *Shared Fantasies: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 237.

45. Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1997), 4-5.

censured or ridiculed. For some, the covertness of cosplay highlights the positive potential of its liminoid opportunities to escape mentally, physically, and emotionally from the rigors of parental authority or restrictive workplace regimes.

Creative Zones and Cosplay

Turner believed that the liminoid transitional stage held possibilities for novel ways of being, new identities and altered social realities facilitating creativity, innovation and flow-like states.⁴⁶ This also echoes Brian Sutton-Smith's work on play theory and the notion of "anti-structure" or "proto-structure" representing "the dissolution of normative social structure, with its role-sets, statuses, jural rights and duties."⁴⁷ Also, Turner considered that "novelty emerges from unprecedented combinations of familiar events" where liminal states constitute "seedbeds of cultural creativity."⁴⁸ Inhabitants of this zone are free to play with "elements of the familiar and unfamiliar."⁴⁹ In cosplay practice, the creative fashioning of self



Figure 7. Cosplayers at a Hong Kong University anime club event.

manifests itself in players dressing up and posing at events in self-fashioned and customized fantastical costumes.

This represents the process of interpreting familiar fictional characters in real-time physical form. While wider accounts of play theory do not tend to focus specifically on costume or dressing up, reference has been made to the importance of material cultural artifacts associated with play and games.⁵⁰ Objects such as toys or masks are the residues of a ritual or liminal culture whose social and cultural function has changed over time, but are often used to signal playful activity. This is also evident in the use of detailed, authentic cosplay accessories such as ball-jointed dolls in anime costumes, wigs, swords, guns, heavy make-up, hi-tech headphones and oversized hand scripted books. Critical to this transformed identity construction is the apparent need to find expression, both visually and materially, through commercially produced media and entertainment images,

texts and products. The manga, anime or heroic character costumes become the material forms or artifacts that rearticulate the original media texts and inhabit a mythical, conceptual space offering an escape from a known reality. In this creative process, cosplayers can be highly inventive when sourcing materials for their props or costumes, from using household

46. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 112.

47. Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual," 60.

48. Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual," 60.

49. Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual," 61.

50. Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters. Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 124; 172.

items or scrap metal to make swords and light sabers, to fashioning headdresses and jewelry out of tin foil, household plastic cartons, ribbons or candy wrappers (Figure 7). The geographic location of the East Asian cosplayers also provides an added advantage of being close to the sites of production for textiles and materials, enabling them to source fabrics and trims with ease from markets or outlets at relatively low cost to be appropriated as extraordinary costumes. Hence, the necessity for creative play and its representation of the anti-structure, beyond its significance as a form of release or rebellion, is also a means of acquiring and demonstrating cultural and knowledge capital. This again represents a blurring of the ritualistic and craft-oriented pursuits of traditional societies with the creative exploration of new individual identities in leisure time within a community of practice⁵¹ defined as a group of people brought together by a passion for something, such as cosplay, and who are regularly engaged in similar pursuits to satisfy that need and develop their knowledge capital.

Equally, the interpretation of characters from original fictional sources to physical costumes exhibits personal creativity. Collectively, this also represents a challenge to the commercialized and commoditized world from which the characters are sourced. Cosplay constitutes a personal reclamation of popular entertainment sites manifested in the mash-up or hybridized versions or re-interpretations of chosen characters. This hybridized cosplay trend is not yet fully evident in East Asia. In this particular geographic location, cosplayers are more intent on recreating authenticity by explicitly expressing character fidelity as an expression of localized appropriations of the practice.⁵² Nevertheless, unlikely pairings of

characters do rub shoulders with each other at the cosplay event site. It is not unusual to see Darth Vader chatting or posing for a photo with Suiseiseki from the *Rozen Maiden* anime, or to see Kirito from the *Sword Art Online* anime with a Stormtrooper (Figure 8). Character authenticity appears to be critical for East Asian cosplayers, despite the fact that each costume is essentially interpretative. Again, the liminal, ritualistic rules are evident in the requirement for costume and character validity in the look and the pose, whilst the latitude

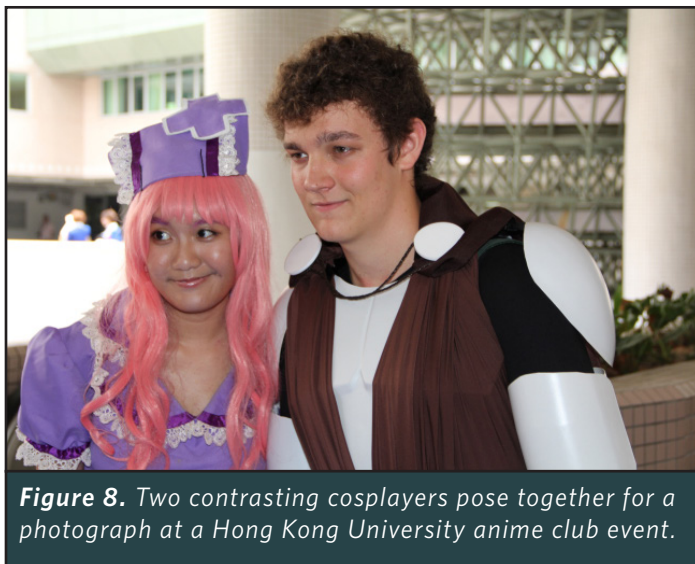


Figure 8. Two contrasting cosplayers pose together for a photograph at a Hong Kong University anime club event.

51. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 41-42.

52. Anne Peirson-Smith, "Cosplay in Action: Raiding the Dressing Up Box in Hong Kong and China," in *Making Fashion in Multiple Chinas: Chinese Styles in the Transglobal Landscape*, ed. Wessie Ling and Simona Serge-Reinach (London: IB Taurus, 2018), 153-154.

to choose and create a character of choice in a unique, open way is evidence of a liminoid pursuit.

Liminal/Liminoid Cosplay Sites: Ethnographic Findings

The locus of the cosplay performance offers insights into the reasoning behind the fantastical fashioning and presentation of a spectacular self, both as a liminal/liminoid practice and as further evidence of a blurring between the two.⁵³ On the one hand, the actual site of the individual costumed body plays a critical and defining role for each player. On the other hand, the individual cosplayer operates and is on display in a collective, collaborative liminal zone as in traditional rituals; and the performance of a selected character gives rise to an embodied liminality based on the prescribed expectations and rules at the core of the cosplay rationale.

The spaces and places that costumed bodies inhabit and locate themselves in are important for understanding cosplay in terms of: the fundamental structures of the practice (i.e. what it entails, how space is used, who performs it and how it is performed); the functions (what the practice accomplishes for individuals and groups); the processes (the underlying motivators driving cosplay); and the experiences (what it feels like to cosplay). Cosplayers' empirical responses will be used to illustrate the following analysis and discussion. As a means of further understanding the cosplay rationale and practice in terms of its liminality, the sites of cosplay will be examined according to the following four spatial areas: counter-sites as spaces of otherness; inclusive sites; bounded and unbounded zones; and disruptive spaces. Ethnographic data from cosplayer interviews will be used to support the findings in this section.

The sites of cosplay activity represent a variation in mimetic interpretation⁵⁴ including ways in which the practice varies and is locally appropriated across globally based, culturally diverse interpretations. Most informants practiced their craft in Hong Kong and China, but they are usually aware of differences in cosplay distributed across various geographical locations and cultures. Some informants observed that, in general, cosplay in North America was more informal and accommodating; in Australia, photography and skits comprised the main focus; across Europe, both real time and digital engagement were equally important; whereas in China, Macau, Singapore, and Hong Kong importance was placed on character fidelity and accurate costuming at the risk of provoking critical negative feedback.⁵⁵ These differences perhaps illustrate how cultural differences can affect the practice. Cosplay in

53. Anne Peirson-Smith, "Fashioning the Fantastical Self: an Examination of the Cosplay Dress-up Phenomenon in South East Asia," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Body, Dress and Culture* 17, no. 1 (2013): 78.

54. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 34-35.

55. Anne Peirson-Smith, "O Brave New World that Hath Such Costumes In It: An Examination of Cosplay and the Fantastical Presentation of Self," in *Transglobal Fashion Narratives: Clothing Communication, Style Statements and Brand Storytelling*, ed. Anne Peirson-Smith and Joseph H. Hancock (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2018), 270-271.

more traditional societies appears to be more controlled and structured akin to liminality, as opposed to the more open, unstructured approaches in other locations, which are more akin to liminoid activity.

In general, cosplay is an evolving, dynamic, creative phenomenon. On the one hand, this is because of the ever-emerging fictional character sources, and on the other, it is due to the increased use of social media and the technological competencies of a digital generation, who are always playing and sharing their lived experiences online⁵⁶ in what we might call a techno-liminal space. Here, cosplayers represent a universe of affinity groups or “communitas”⁵⁷ united by a common interest. Collectively, they are a knowledge system founded on fashioning and sharing knowledge across varied zones of multimodal communication, both verbal and visual, through character choice and the crafting and construction of costumes and accessories. In doing cosplay, liminoid embodiment goes beyond a self-reflective concern with just assuming another persona. Rather, this has to emerge from a deeper affective connect, occurring in the right location and shared with and sanctioned by similarly dressed others, which highlights its liminality.

Countersites - Otherness Spaces

Cosplay resides in the desire and ability to express difference from the majority by dressing up in spectacular costumes alongside others in affective homage to fictional characters from popular culture texts. The liminal/liminoid site of cosplay enables alternative spaces⁵⁸ to exist in “counter sites.”⁵⁹ These latter locations define otherness and extraordinary ways of presenting the costumed self by providing an outlet for unique and combined creative practices, from craft skills to varied performances, structured and unstructured, random and planned, individual and collective. Cosplay was originally founded on a strong DIY “prosumer” culture⁶⁰ based on consumers making objects for themselves that they desire, instead of having them made by commercial producers as the outcome of mass production.⁶¹ Prosumption practices also represent a rite of passage for a cosplayer when they authentically produce their character costume as an extension of their affective connection and display of fan-based knowledge. Recently, cosplayers have been buying outfits online as the product quality has increased at an affordable price point. Yet,

56. Nicolle Lamerichs, “Stranger than Fiction: Fan Identity in Cosplay,” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 7 (2011), <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/246>.

57. Victor Witter Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, 94, (1969): 130.

58. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuite*, trans. Jay Miskowiec, 5 (October 1984):46-49. <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>.

59. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), xix.

60. Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave: The Classic Study of Tomorrow* (New York, NY: Bantam, 1980), 269; 275.

61. Philip Kotler, “The Prosumer Movement. A New Challenge for Marketers,” *Advances in Consumer Research* 13 (1986): 510-511.

most costumes are still customized, which requires certain creative skills. Equally, niche entrepreneurial communities have also emerged, often from within the cosplay community, assuring the supply of quality custom made outfits and props, or higher quality wigs and make-up, in addition to studio-based or hired photographic services for the initiated. Clearly, cosplay involves work in order to play – and as such it blurs Turner’s distinction between the liminal blurring of work and play and the liminoid division between work and play.

Duality is a consistent theme, as a cosplayer through the process of dressing up in spectacular costume is at once integrated into another imagined realm or imaginary world and separated from an everyday reality. In this way, the players co-create fantasy worlds by putting on costumes as the ultimate expression of individual and collective creative imagination, with dressing up in costume providing an opportunity both for self-expression and collective identity formation. This process of transubstantiation in the reshaping and reapplication of material resources across mediated modes, from comic books and videogames to human performance and photographic records, is central to the process of occupying a demarcated zone. By engaging in this transformational activity, cosplayers are essentially active rather than passive culture creators⁶² who communicate through embodied performance practices.⁶³ They are also active audience members or fans and pop culture nomads indulging in active “textual poaching”⁶⁴ by consuming, pro-suming, appropriating, modifying, reworking and re-performing the visual and verbal narratives and pictorial aspects of popular culture commodities, such as cartoons and comic books. In turn, these commoditized forms are re-presented when cosplayers dress up in the public spaces and places of cityscapes at organized events. Cosplayers are actively contributing to and shaping the evolution of the popular culture landscape by sharing a common ideology or fan-based passion for the fictional characters in a textual source.⁶⁵ This passion is located in particular cosplay communities of practice⁶⁶ while dynamically expressing and re-presenting their admiration for a chosen anime, manga or superhero character through a unique form of embodied performance act.

Wearing a cosplay costume represents a dual function that traverses both collective and individual or liminal and liminoid states. On the one hand, it expresses a visibly communicated difference from non-cosplayers. At the same time, it signals a collective identity and belonging for members of a costumed neo-cultural tribe or fandom, who plunder familiar mediated sources of popular culture, such as cartoon characters or superheroes, for their stylistic inspiration. In expressing this duality of meaning embodied in the process and product of dressing up, and in presenting the costumed self in public, the cosplayer

62. Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 15-16.

63. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), 110.

64. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), vii-viii.

65. Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 131-132.

66. Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, 1-4.

inhabits a universe parallel with other recognized youth tribes or neo-tribal narratives.⁶⁷ In this way, they express both their individual and collective identities and ideologies through the material change of appearance and by adopting a range of differentiated identities constituting a multi-layered neo-style tribe.⁶⁸ Yet, while cosplay can be usefully regarded as a neo-style tribe founded on a shared interest, there are marked differences from other aesthetically driven sub-cultures in how, where and why this practice is encountered.

The physical creation of cosplay outfits and appearance, and their subsequent photographic recording and circulation, enables cosplayers to reaffirm their identity and find solace in social connectedness with like-minded players in a like-minded “communitas” within various iterations of the liminal. In this sense they can showcase their creative and cultural capital⁶⁹ within the domain via their ability to craft costumes and props and perform or pose authentically as their character in front of a knowledgeable, validating audience. These material tools also enable the cosplayer to visibly signal their creative competencies in compiling their outfits. Partaking in this craft process visibly underlines their legitimate membership of a particular community of practice or communitas.⁷⁰ Significantly, the cosplayers interviewed claimed that the main benefits of their creative “hobby” embrace not only the thespian skills required to role-play their characters, but also the project management skills and teamwork abilities needed to plan and execute group performances in costume. In addition, this membership afforded them opportunities to acquire the technical know-how to construct their outfits and deliver an authentic public performance of a recognizable and recognized fictional character from *Sailor Moon*, *Pokémon*, *Batman*, or *Game of Thrones*, for example.

Largely, this is an inclusive space, enabling participants to enter it, find their own level of engagement, and discover and develop new creative skills. In this sense, this space also accommodates multiple agendas and a range of creative practices in a number of ways: in giving digital characters a physical form when creating costumes; organizing and rehearsing; the real time cosplay performance itself; and the actual or virtual creative collaboration of the cosplay community with its individual and team-based performances. Finally, players and their associates often record their cosplay persona and share performances via social media channels as a collaborative output in the creative domain. However, communities of practice premised on creative endeavors are often founded on the tension between resources, group demands, and individual aspirations. In the domain of cosplay, this can be seen as the catalyst for creativity itself. So, while cosplayers are required by the collective to follow certain rules and guidelines during the creation process (e.g., authentic hair style,

67. Andy Bennett, “Subcultures or Neo-Tribes?: Rethinking the Relationship Between Youth, Style and Musical Taste,” *Sociology* 33 no. 3 (1999): 599-617.

68. Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, trans. Don Smith (London: Sage, 1996), 139-140.

69. Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York, Greenwood, 1986), 241-258.

70. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: the Human Seriousness of Play*, 47-49.

precise costume color, specific poses, venue policies, and common courtesy), there is also latitude for individual interpretation that can be respected by the group. Typically, cosplayers can and do imitate or cite their original source of character inspiration, while others modify and re-interpret the source according to their individual understanding of the character. In this way, cosplay can be seen as a combination of imitation, reproduction, and (re)creation rather than one of pure creation. The creative energy of the cosplay convention, like that of the carnival, is based on spectacular excess, chaotic revelry, role reversals, heightened fun, and changing identity, which demarcate it from the everyday world. This provides the participants or agents with a means of viewing the world in a new way and ordering it on their terms, offering a creative channel for individual and group empowerment, enabling players to transcend everyday school and work pressures and challenge societal norms. The collective aspect of the cosplay practice also represents a liminoid “communitas” based on a show of embodied solidarity and emotionally based fandoms.

This mimetic, embodied character representation is a particular manifestation of otherness in the form of replication. The notion of mimicry is one where the subject makes believe, or makes others believe that they are someone other than themselves, traversing the line between child and adult.⁷¹ This is found in both rule-based and free-form versions of play, and provides some useful insights into the creative and imaginative nature of cosplay. Young children mimic their parents and their fictional superheroes through play, and cosplayers appear to replicate this process. In this sense, the types of fictitious, comic-based characters emulated in cosplay dress-up routines suggest a reversion to childhood mimicry or imitating others, as cosplayers engage in the process of dressing up and assuming the identity of the comic book, cartoon, or online game sourced characters that they admire and take the time to studiously replicate in authentic, accessorized detail. This is an intentional form of imitation. As one respondent observed,

When I cosplay Hermione Granger from Harry Potter from the Deathly Hallows story I don't become her -- I channel her. Of course, I try to look as much like her as I can which is why I chose her as an older person as that's nearer to my age. But she is also a smart, strong, logical person who is also quite hard working and that is what I try to be too. (Candice, 20, university student, Hong Kong)

In the liminal zone between actuality and invention, the cosplayer does not aim to actually become their chosen character – instead they are paying affective homage to their character and channeling their persona through re-presentation in embodied form.

Bounded and Unbounded Cosplay Spaces

The liminal/liminoid spaces inhabited by cosplay are both bounded and boundary-less, in the sense that play operates within allocated spaces yet outside of everyday existence. Generally, cosplayers appear to meet up, pose and perform -- within demarcated areas of the organized convention or event that have variously been described in game and play theory as

71. Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1958): 163-164.

the membrane or frame⁷² or the “magic circle” of the event, which offer the endless playful possibilities of transforming identity and meaning.

Inside this play frame, the rules of irrelevance or suspension of disbelief apply, allowing the players to escape from the tribulations of everyday life and temporarily inhabit a liminal zone invested with the power of magical transformation. The temporary nature of this magical morphing into “other” is a key part of the experience. Unlike other subcultural tribes, the cosplay tribe tends not to appear in costume or in character outside of the cosplay zone. Indeed, at events such as the Tokyo Comiket this is strictly forbidden by the organizers and can result in a fine or a disbaring from future events -- which serves to intensify the experience of actually being and playing in the zone. Yet, the leakiness of the cosplay event membrane or magic circle is also evident in the sense that the experience is usually visually recorded and shared on social media sites after the event. Cosplayers also inhabit active virtual sites online such as cosplay.com or Halo, sharing photos and knowledge, thereby extending liminality into a virtual dimension. Here the focus is still on representing the dressed-up body. It would appear that physical presence is an important grounded aspect of cosplay behavior, as in many performative, participatory fan-based activities. One respondent explained,

Sharing our cosplay photos and Instagram and Facebook are important. But you need to be at the event to take the photos in the first place and dressing as a character and taking the time to do that is totally the most important part of doing it - ask anyone who does it. (Gina, 22 female student, Hong Kong)

Membership of a fan community such as cosplay is founded on affinity rather than locality, as fandoms are “imagined” and “imagining” communities pre-dating the digital communication domain. As we have seen, the cosplay medium is primarily an embodied message, supplemented with digital encounters on Instagram and Snapchat that might enhance but not replicate the actual physical real time performance and the material DIY culture that enables costume play. Digital cosplay, as Paul Booth points out, is quite different, as it operates at a physical remove from the body and the performance. Although it inhabits a parallel universe of fandom, it is more tangible given its material aspect.⁷³ Cosplay is essentially a playful, pastiche-oriented activity involving (pro)consumption-based⁷⁴ performances where



Figure 9. Cross-playing
As an individual cosplayer
at a Hong Kong Uni-
versity anime club event.

72. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (London: Harper and Row, 1974), 248.

73. Paul Booth, *Playing Fans: Negotiating Fandom and Media in the Digital Age* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2015), 18.

74. George Ritzer and Nathan Jurgenson, “Production, Consumption, Prosumption,” *Journal of Consumer*

the cosplayer as prosumer has often devised and created their costume and accessories. Hence, embodied cosplay may be more pleasurable and transgressive, especially when physical embodiment and the performative queering⁷⁵ of cosplay occur either consciously or otherwise⁷⁶ (Figure 9).

Inclusive Spectacular Spaces

The extraordinary performance, in terms of crafting individual costumes and the ritualized collective effort constituting a cosplay event, is part of its DNA. Observing a cosplay event, it would appear that everyone is invited to the party and into the liminal zone -- as long as rules are adhered to. This is true across age ranges, ethnicities and geographies, as the masquerade of costume is a great intentional leveler. Also, a sense of playfulness and celebration permeates the atmosphere of a cosplay event. Most cosplayers in interviews will often use the word “fun,” as the atmosphere at each event is generally positive. This may also be read as a celebration of freedom, especially given the pressurized urban lives that young people in contemporary East Asian cities experience, in terms of fulfilling familial duties and expectations to succeed academically and professionally in traditional, professional roles. This liminoid “pleasurescape” appears to be driven by a subjunctive mood amongst the players who embrace a world of “maybe” and “what if,” underlining the affective, aspirational and desire-driven motivations of representing another being, which in everyday life might be denied them (Figure 10).

Equally, the liminally collective, kinship aspect of the practice is important to its rationale. The notions of the cosplay family and new kinship bonds are regularly substantiated by observations of cosplayers at events. Cosplayers often refer to the notion of “family” when talking about their collective experiences at events and often introduce their fellow players as “sister” and brother.” In the hyper-pressurized urban zones of modern Asian cities, the traditional extended family is under siege, with social research consistently reporting the demise of the family. The fact that young people in Asia generally feel more affective affinity with their friendship groups is evidence of this. Yet, instead of rejecting the metaphor of family as a restrictive form in the liminal zone, they appear to recreate and reinterpret the cosplay family as a positive support system. As one informant explained,



Figure 10. Cosplay at AniCom & Games event, Hong Kong Convention Centre.

Culture 10, no. 1 (2010): 13-36.

75. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 172-175.

76. Joel Gn, “Queer Simulation: The Practice, Performance and Pleasure of Cosplay,” *Continuum* 25, no. 4 (2011): 586-587.

Coming to cosplay makes me feel like I belong to an accepting family and I feel such a part of it. The people that I cosplay with regularly – and we do not always do it from the same sources or as groups – but they are my family and they have helped me through a lot of things and we support each other as we are all the same age with the same issues in our lives. It’s my rock. (Tania, 22, female student, Hong Kong)

Cosplay can also be an actual family affair taking the familial unit into an alternative social and experiential liminal space by reworking notions of kinship, with members of a family collaborating as a Harry Potter team, for example, with a six-year-old son playing an owl, supported by his father as Harry and mother as Hermione. Family members can also operate as supporting “backstage” players, with mothers and sisters making outfits and props, applying makeup, and trimming wigs, while brothers construct weapons or take photographs of their costumed siblings.

Transgressive Liminoid Play

In occupying this liminal/liminoid zone, cosplayers appear to be playing with dress codes by indirectly transgressing them in a visually playful and communicative way⁷⁷ as textual poachers, which Mikhail Bahktin also observed in children’s language play.⁷⁸ This also evokes the notion of the carnival. By manipulating appearances to grotesque extremes, a pauper could be a prince for a day and celebrate the “temporary liberation from prevailing truth and from the established order.”⁷⁹ A sense of transgressive creativity is also manifested in the tendency for some cosplayers to cross-dress, whereby males play female characters and vice versa, in a metatropic, mimetic way, challenging the accepted and conservative societal norms espoused by older generations, especially in the conservative societies of East Asia. This may reflect the innate modern conservatism of Asian cultures towards the notion of gender play in everyday life. Historically, this contrasts with representations of gender fluidity and sexuality in fictional or dramatic arts such as in Kabuki theatre where men originally role-played female characters; or the all-female cast of Shaoxing Opera or *yueju*, and the male-dominated performers of Peking opera or *jingju*.⁸⁰ These traditional performance arts accepted male-female and female-male role-play appearing on the stage, being removed from everyday life, and constituting a safe space across time for such transgressions. Significantly, some of these cross-gendered performances are not tolerated today in some Asian countries, suggesting the emergence of a conservative reaction to perceived non-

77. Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1997), 93-94.

78. Mikhail Bahktin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bahktin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1984), 10.

79. Mikhail Bahktin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, (Bloomington, Illinois: Indiana University Press, 1968), 10-11.

80. Huai Bao, *Cross-Gender China: Across Yin-Yang, Across Cultures and Beyond Jingju* (Oxford: Routledge, 2018), 2-4.

normative gender behavior. Hence, in Confucian based cultures and communities where politics and challenges to authority are discouraged from an early age, the location of an outlet for some sort of resistance and agency, no matter how abstruse, is increasingly being welcomed amongst the post-millennial generation, or Gen Z. It can also be seen in the use of the visible indicator of the body as a site for societal resistance in the liminoid zone. Cosplayers are intentionally or otherwise traversing and re-fashioning the boundaries of gender as a performative, liminoid statement. However, often when questioned about the reason for cross-play many respondents, especially in East Asia, will insist that the performance of gender in itself is not the point, but rather that character choices are based on cosplayers' profound affective connections to the chosen character, which they usually have an attachment to, going back to childhood. Alternatively, character choice is based on a deep admiration for the values represented by the character, irrespective of gender. As one respondent noted,



Figure 11. Individual cosplayer at Hong Kong University anime club event.

It may be hard to figure but we choose our characters based on who they are and not what they are. And often this is based on a relationship that we have developed with them since childhood – think Ben 10, Doraemon, Pokemon, Sailor Moon and Transformers. Honestly, if they are male or female it is of no concern to us – it's all about being the character! (Jett, 20 female student, Macau)

This viewpoint accords with the notion that cosplayers in their character-fan-based devotion, as opposed to obsessive fan or overt otaku passion for Japanese culture,⁸¹ are parodying the object of a desired fictional form they inhabit and replicate in performance. But, as with most fandoms, fans are aware that the object of their desire is fictional and lacks something, which in this case is a living reality. In cosplaying, desires are projected onto the fictionalized character as a fictional persona is brought to life in the

physical process of the material layering of costume, make-up, mask and accessories. This echoes Turner's notion of traditional, ritualized performances of tribal ergic-ludic liminal pursuits that historically blended work and play and were deeply rooted in a community, as contrasted to more contemporary, individualistic, anergic-ludic liminoid forms of modern leisure that are marginalized to the realms of leisure time⁸² (Figure 11).

81. Norris and Bainbridge, "Selling Otaku? Mapping the Relationship Between Industry and Fandom in the Australian Cosplay Scene," 1-15.

82. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: the Human Seriousness of Play*, 52-53.

Disruptive Cosplay Spaces

There is also a darker side to the cosplay practice that is suggestive of liminal/liminoid challenges to the existing social structures. Cosplay events and online discussions can witness significant conflict and dispute concerning the authentic “look” of the character or the veracity of a prop. The carnival or masquerade aspect of cosplay is evident where everyday appearance is inverted and identity, through the spectacular and re-formed or disguised presentation of self, is part of the play process being socially sanctioned by the cosplay communitas. However, the more negative aspects of play can disrupt this space. Hence, in contrast to the more positive, self-affirming experiences within the fun-based, subjunctive, liminoid pleasurescape, cosplayers are sometimes involved in negative behavior. There is an increasing tendency to be over-critical of authentic costumes and physical character representations. This appears to be more of a quality control issue amongst Asian cosplay communities that manifests itself both in face-to-face commentaries at events and on social media sites. It can consist of negative critiques of wigs and make up or poses being poorly or inaccurately executed. It can also encompass the existence of “fake” cosplayers who are hired to open shopping malls, for example, or who cosplay for the wrong reasons and break ludic rules. It can also exist within the wider proto-cosplay community, when hobby otaku photographers, unknown to the cosplayers, re-use images on pornographic sites. Also, moral panics prevail in wider societal responses to the practice in the form of a conservative backlash about these largely youth-based activities. As one respondent explained,

It can all go wrong sometimes with cosplay. Younger ones don't seem as committed and have badly made outfits or at events to become famous or be discovered by wearing sexy and revealing outfits. They can argue and fight at events too or damage property. When that happens the events can be banned for a few years and that causes a lot of friction and a lot of negative hate commentary and even bullying on social media sites afterwards. (Tom, 23 male university student, Hong Kong)

Within the cosplay world, such attacks are often accommodated in the safety of liminal, collective in-group responses to online flaming, or with on-site support of cosplay colleagues in real time. Equally, negative feedback from outsiders appears to increase the resolve of some cosplayers to continue with the practice and validates the perception of the liminal zone of the cosplay event as a safe collective haven away from, and in opposition to, the misplaced societal judgments of other communities of practice.

Concluding Thoughts

The practice of cosplay can usefully be explained using both the concepts of liminality and the liminoid, thus reflecting the dualities inherent in its display of such qualities or states as: ritual versus reinterpretation; individual versus collective; serious versus playful; commodification versus non-commercialization; bounded and unbounded; inclusive and exclusive; structured and unstructured; or compliance and transgression. Initially, this paper

examined cosplay as an embodied, liminoid practice. This discussion focused on the sartorial journey afforded to an individual when inhabiting a costume that transformed them from an ordinary to an extraordinary being or from the public self to the secret self. Secondly, in reworking Turner's ideas, the hybrid liminal/liminoid conceptual framework applied here represents a useful way of typifying the ritualized versus the complex and sometimes contradictory interpretive aspects of cosplay practice. Turner's observations on the liminal ritual rites of passage that human beings in most societies engage in as a way to regulate and make sense of their lives are born out in cosplay practice: in the expectations for character validity, collective participation, and convention etiquette, for example. This is not just a free flow liminoid zone devoid of strictures, nor is it "unfettered by regulating structures" as it operates according to set rules, in addition to organizer and participant expectations. At the same time, cosplayers find outlets for individual creativity in the liminoid space of a dressed up body expressing a personal devotion for chosen fictional sources that are recognized and celebrated in a given community of practice. Thirdly, this transformative process of crossing the boundaries of self and other beyond the boundaries and margins of life is highly purposeful, and not an end in itself. The findings from cosplayers in this study suggest that motivations for the ritualized and creative, playful cosplay practice are driven both by liminal and liminoid concerns and characteristics. In sum, cosplay enables the fashioning, presentation and performance of a spectacular, embodied, secret self in the process of paying homage to a fictional "Other" within and across tangible and intangible liminal/liminoid spaces. This transformation of appearance, facilitated by costume, props, and make-up is unlike other liminoid leisure pursuits in its dualities of form, purpose and location – old and new; individual and collective; rule based and interpretive; and online and offline, for example.

Using liminal/liminoid spaces in this way affords a relatively safe and welcoming creative precinct for cosplay fans to inhabit and facilitates a subjunctive pleasurescape. In many ways, this is a journey of fashioned self to (re)fashioned alternative residing "betwixt and between" realities, during the course of which participants embark on a rite of passage or "pilgrimage."⁸³ The journey from self to other affords a pleasure-seeking escape from the anxieties of everyday life in the quest for self-affirmation through the acquisition of social and cultural capital and recognition of creative skills, which may be denied to them in everyday life. As one respondent observed,

Cosplay is a real journey for me in many dimensions. I started doing it when I was 14 as part of a female Japanese dance group and graduated to my favorite Japanese anime doing Chi from Chobits and Hatsune Miku from Vocaloid. After attending the Melbourne Comic Con I've added Daenerys from GOT to my list too. But it's also let me meet some good friends — people who I maybe would not have spoken to otherwise — who I can now rely on for a lot of things in my life. And I've learned so much too from these people like how to make costumes and props that look good –

83. Turner, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbolology*, 16-17; 149-150.

such an achievement for me. It's been a distraction from the tough things in my life like work stress, bad bosses and mean people – sometimes doing cosplay too. And I've gained in confidence as I can stand up in front of people now and not feel afraid or shy of saying what I feel and believe in. Most of all its been good fun and it's made me very happy and feel good about myself and that's been a real voyage of discovery for me. (Katy, 24 female trainee manager, Hong Kong)

Part of the allure of cosplay is for participants to create and occupy utopian liminal zones of collective cosplay conventions and gatherings in transformative costume. This practice offers idealized bodily and mental transformations based on a projected desire to be part of fictional, dystopian worlds, such as the *Rose of Versailles*, *Final Fantasy*, *Game of Thrones* or *Harry Potter*,⁸⁴ where good characters battle it out with evil forces. In this sense, the fashioning of the fantastical, embodied self when cosplaying is not a fleeting escape or a mere diversion from real world issues, but rather offers an alternative and subjective way of making sense of lived experiences in alternative liminal/liminoid bodily and physical spaces, which have their own collective rules and expectations. It also serves to remind us that, as with anything that is fashioned, it is often a journey without an end, a perpetual process of encountering and traversing the many liminal boundaries between liminoid self and other, all in the pursuit of happiness.

Anne Peirson-Smith is an Assistant Professor at City University of Hong Kong. She teaches and researches fashion studies, popular culture and the creative industries. She is associate editor of the *Journal of Fashion, Style and Popular Culture* (Intellect Books), co-editor of *Global Fashion Brands: Style, Luxury, History* (Intellect Books, 2014), *Transglobal Fashion Narratives: Clothing Communication, Style Statements and Brand Storytelling* (Intellect Books: 2018), and *The Fashion Business Reader* (Berg/Fairchild, 2019), and co-author of *Public Relations in Asia Pacific: Communicating Effectively Across Cultures* (John Wiley, 2010) and *Planet Cosplay: Costume Play, Identity and Global Fandom* (Intellect Books: 2019).

84. Paul Mountfort, Anne Peirson-Smith and Adam Gecy, *Planet Cosplay: Costume Play, Identity and Global Fandom* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2019), 144-145

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