
Cosplay in Australia: (Re)creation and Creativity

Assemblage and Negotiation in a Material and Performative Practice

Claire Langsford

Supervisors: Dr. Andrew Skuse and Dr. Dianne Rodger

December 2014

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy in 2014.

Discipline of Anthropology,
School of Social Sciences,
Faculty of Arts,
University of Adelaide

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines.

Signed by candidate:

Date:

Images

Except where stated all photographs are the author's own. All other photographs are used with permission.

Dedication

In this thesis I have argued that cultural products are never produced in social isolation. Perhaps this argument may also apply to the production of a thesis. Thank you to all the cosplayers, photographers, convention organisers and attendees who I interviewed, photographed and allowed me to hang out with them. Special thanks to members of Team AVCon past and present, and to the Australian Costumers' Guild. Extra special thanks to The Con Artists. You guys taught me the 'real' way to experience conventions and together we learnt so much about c-c-cosplay.

Thank you to the staff and students of the Anthropology Department at the University of Adelaide, particularly all those who regularly attended seminars and coffee. Thanks to Dr. Deane Fergie for introducing me to practice and community of practice approaches. Thanks especially to Dr. Susan Hemer as Postgraduate Co-ordinator who helped me through the most challenging moments.

Thank you to my current supervisors Dr. Andrew Skuse and Dr. Dianne Rodger for their detailed feedback and for coralling my wild theoretical notions into a functioning thesis.

Thanks to my family who will be as glad as I am that this document is finally finished.

And, thanks of course to Patrick Korbelt who kept frustratingly pointing out the agency and individuality of cosplayers and the variety in cosplay practice. Without your annoying insight this might have been a very different thesis.

(In the spirit of Gell (1998), thank you to my sewing machine and my portable hard-drives. Without you none of this would have been possible.)

Abstract

Cosplay, or ‘costume–play’, is a practice centred upon the assembly and performance of costumes based on pre–existing character designs. This craft and performance practice has its origins in cross–cultural exchange between Japan the United States, and is currently enacted by practitioners in many countries, including Australia. Features of localised cosplay practice appear to challenge and contradict models of practice frequently adopted by anthropologists and sociologists. While traditional models tend to emphasise the role of social structures in the reproduction of practices and characterise practices as developing slowly over time, the practice of cosplay in Australia appears to be highly fragmented, individualised and dynamic. Despite this evanescence, fragmentation, individualisation and variation cosplay exists as a recognisable practice and has produced communities of practitioners who identify as ‘cosplayers’.

Drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork within Australian communities of practice, I explore the (re)creation of dynamic, heterogeneous and ephemeral cosplay practice. Utilising an assemblage of perspectives from anthropologies of material culture and performance, two disciplines which have emerged out of post–structuralist interest in practice and process, I characterise the practice of cosplay in Australia as a series of assembly, negotiation and distribution processes. Through an ethnographic exploration of how ‘practices–as–performances’ recreate ‘practices–as–entities’ Reckwitz (2002); Schatzki et al. (2000), I argue that anthropological material culture and performance approaches to practice can expand and challenge traditional generalist models of practice, and provide a more comprehensive understanding of practices that are diverse, ephemeral and more loosely structured.

Contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	Practice and Anthropologies of Performance, Craft and Consumption . . .	5
1.2	Long-term Routinization and Evanescent Practice	6
1.3	Structure and Improvisation	7
1.4	The Problem of Variation	8
1.5	Understanding Dynamic and Heterogenous Practice: Assemblage, Ne- gotiation and Distribution	10
1.6	Assemblage and Distribution	11
1.7	Negotiation	15
1.8	The Structure of the Thesis	17
1.9	Conclusion	18
2	Locating the field: How methodological challenges uncovered a theoretical problem	21
2.1	A Globalised Practice	22
2.2	Placing the Field	27
2.3	Events as Observer	28
2.4	Difficulties Getting ‘Backstage’	32
2.5	Decision to Participate	33
2.6	Online Participation	37
2.7	Participants	38
2.8	Conclusion: From Field to Theory	43
3	How to Cosplay: Performing Cosplay Aesthetic Values at Convention Pan- els	45

3.1	The Panel	46
3.2	The Performance of Cosplay Values and Skilled Vision	47
3.3	Who Teaches? Who Listens?: Establishing Authority	51
3.4	Accuracy	54
3.5	Completism	58
3.6	Spectacle	61
3.7	Amateurism	65
3.8	Creativity	68
3.9	Conclusion: Cosplay Values and Aesthetics	70
4	(re)Creating the Costume; (re)Creating the Cosplayer	73
4.1	Copying, Creation and Creativity	77
4.2	Stages of the Assembly Process	80
4.3	Choosing the Cosplay	82
4.4	Research	86
4.5	Collecting	93
4.6	Mess	95
4.7	Testing	100
4.8	Conclusion: Objectifications, Creativity and Practice	103
5	Looking Right, Feeling Pain: The Costumed Body and the Negotiation of Cosplay Values	105
5.1	Bodies in Practice	110
5.2	Monstrous Bodies and Bodies as Tools	112
5.3	Body as Object in Body Projects	118
5.4	Body as Object in Social Dressing Activities	125
5.5	The Problem of the Painful Body	129
5.6	Body as Object in Competition Narratives	132
5.7	Challenging the Body as Costume Object	135
5.8	Conclusion: Body Debates and the Recreation of Practice	139
6	Playing in Costume, Framing the Performance	143
6.1	Performances in Times and Spaces	147
6.2	Getting Into Character	152
6.3	Playing the Craftsperson	167

6.4	Performing Sexiness	173
6.5	Conclusion: Framing the Chaos	181
7	Performing the Self as Cosplay Master	185
7.1	The Assemblage, Negotiation and Distribution of Mastery	188
7.2	Competition Events and the Performance of Community Values	192
7.3	Interviews	196
7.4	Skits	204
7.5	The Distribution of Mastery	208
7.6	Conclusion: Assembling and Distributing a Master	210
8	‘Pics, or It Didn’t Happen’: Photography and the (re)Creation of Cosplay	213
8.1	Photography and the (Re)Creation of Community	215
8.2	The Photographer	217
8.3	The Profile Picture	224
8.4	Final Fantasies	229
8.5	Doctor Who??!	235
8.6	Tutorial Photography	240
8.7	Conclusion: Happening Things – Assembled Objects and Distributed Selves	244
9	Conclusion: Creativity and the (re)Creation of Practice and Practice Theo- ries	247

List of Figures

1.1	Recreation with Variation (Photograph by Patrick Korbel)	2
2.1	Jane working at home	35
3.1	“Delphox” (Photograph by Patrick Korbel)	62
3.2	Spectacular breastplate	64
4.1	“Kusuri-uri” (Photograph by Corey Newcombe)	74
4.2	“Juri” cosplays (Photographs by Patrick Korbel)	90
4.3	“Fluttershy” (Photograph by Patrick Korbel)	92
4.4	Wig	96
4.5	Construction	98
5.1	“White Queen”	106
5.2	“Master Chief”	108
5.3	Cat Head	116
5.4	“Jack Skellington”	117
5.5	“Kusuri-uri” (Photograph by Corey Newcombe)	119
5.6	Steampunk “Jack”	120
5.7	Dressing transformation sequence – #1	126
5.8	Dressing transformation sequence – #2	127
5.9	Daniel in pain (Photograph by Patrick Korbel)	131
6.1	<i>Dynasty Warriors</i>	144
6.2	Map of AVCon from 2011	148
6.3	“Sand Person” and photographers	150
6.4	<i>Sengoku Basara</i> cosplayer	153

6.5	Fan sequence - photo #1	154
6.6	Fan sequence - photo #2	155
6.7	Fan sequence - photo #3	156
6.8	Cat and Rabbit	158
6.9	Daniel and “Dalek”	161
6.10	“Ezio” and “Bane”	162
6.11	Renee as “Jessica Rabbit” (Photograph by Emmanuel Photakis)	174
8.1	“Elf King” (Photograph by Patrick Korbel)	214
8.2	Photographers	218
8.3	Photographers at Oz Comic–Con (Photograph by Patrick Korbel)	221
8.4	Ethnographer as “Kusuri–uri” (Photograph by Corey Newcombe)	225
8.5	Final fantasies (Photograph by Nathan from IGotSuperpowers)	230
8.6	Julia’s belt	232
8.7	Ashton as “Doctor Who” (Original photograph by Maetography)	236
8.8	Panel with PowerPoint slide	241