

“Wearing Research on Your Sleeves”: Participant Observation in a Cosplay Community

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INTRODUCTION

On Saturday morning at Oz Comic Con, the large pedestrian crossing leading to the entrance of the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre is concealed by a parade of people in costumes. Behind armour, gowns and other iconography, individuals from diverse backgrounds – from lawyers to labourers – interact with one another, while performing or re-enacting characters from games, or other pop culture identities. In this ambiguous cultural space, a person dressed as ‘Cloud’ from Final Fantasy VII (Square 1997) can be seen communing with anyone from Marilyn Monroe, to a group of ‘Spartans’ from the Halo franchise (Bungie et al. 2001-2019). Cosplaying, in this respect, also exists as a means of communication between people who may, outside of shared fan-based activities, remain complete strangers.

This interweaving of narratives, and interactions between cosplayers across fan communities, is one of the only instances of uniformity in practice that are immediately observable in the Australian cosplay community. Cosplayers assemble, in large numbers, at gaming and pop culture conventions to arrive at the ‘moment supreme’ – the realisation of an ultimate public performance space to showcase their craft, and fan identities (Lamerichs 2011). At the convention, cosplayers manage a network of complex interpersonal relationships - established across shared offline and online spaces. One way that this emerges in a convention environment, is in the way many cosplayers will interact with fans, photographers, and interested bystanders, for the final result of sharing a public Instagram ID. This simple exchange can efficiently extend an offline interaction back to the primary space of communication for cosplayers, on social media.

Digital ethnography has been applied as a methodology, in research traversing a range of communities that develop across online and offline spaces, as a means of ‘explor[ing] the way that life is lived’ and the ‘relationships enacted through whatever medium is used by the people concerned’ (Hine 2017). Combining traditional and digital ethnographic methods, researchers have explored communities that share

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similar practices to those that appear in the cosplay community – including ‘commercial lifestyle bloggers’, microcelebrities and influencers (Abidin 2017), and ‘networked digital photography’ practices, like ‘selfies’ (Gómez Cruz 2017). Recent research into cosplay practice has also implemented the craft processes of cosplay as part of an ‘art-led and ethnographic’ methodology (Crawford and Hancock 2019). What this paper aims to contribute to existing literature, is analysis into the value of cosplaying in convention spaces, as a participant observation method. This highly collaborative form of research has generated the potential for deeper analysis of fan community practices at gaming and pop culture conventions, by integrating the researcher into various physical, social or performative dimensions of cosplay practice.

The case study I will focus on in this paper, is participant observation of the Australian cosplay community, at the Melbourne Oz Comic Con convention in 2019. This study informed a period of exploratory research, which produced insights into the cosplay community from a range of perspectives – facilitated by the welcoming nature of participants to a researcher “in costume”. The empathetic nature of connection that can be developed between researcher and participant informs the ability to continually refine interview questions and proficiently address research inquiries. This is the result of a level of mutual understanding, that can be inferred from shared practice or experience. After the convention, new research opportunities became viable in digital spaces – for instance, Instagram and Facebook emerged as sites of further communication, discussion and collaboration with cosplayers and industry leaders – which would have not been possible without attending the physical convention in cosplay. It will be noted, however, that with access to some digital community groups, which are closed to the general public, comes a range of ethical limitations and considerations that must be made around useable and unusable research data - to ensure the protection of the privacy of research participants.

A range of fan communities – across gaming and pop-culture – now exist in interconnected physical and digital spaces of practice. Game streamers, reviewers, commentators and bloggers are creating professional careers in similar manners to cosplayers – often practicing in intersecting digital and physical spaces. This paper aims to offer another approach to participant observation, that may have applications in parallel fields, offering practical insights into pop culture and gaming careers that have been established by relationships between human worker and supporting digital interfaces.

BIO

Madeleine Antonellos is a PhD student from the Interaction Design Lab, situated in the School of Computing and Information Systems (Engineering) at The University of Melbourne. Madeleine’s research explores the Digitisation of Cosplay Careers across Australia and Japan. In 2019, her research focused on careers in the cosplay industry in Australia. Guided by the results of her first study, in 2020, Madeleine’s research will focus on cosplay careers as they emerge on the internet.

Bjorn Nansen is a Senior Lecturer in Media and Communications at the University of Melbourne. His research focuses on emerging and marginal forms of digital media use in everyday life, using a mix of ethnographic, participatory and digital methods. His current research projects explore changing home media infrastructures and environments, children’s mobile media and digital play practices, the digitisation of death and memorialising, and the mediation and datafication of sleep.

Martin Gibbs is an Associate Professor in the School of Computing and Information Systems, the University of Melbourne. His research interests lie at the intersection of Science Technology Studies (STS) and Human Computer Interaction (HCI). Current projects include: Media Ecologies of the Home; Digital Commemoration; and the Materialities of Tabletop Gaming. He was program co-chair for the International Digital Games Research Association (DIGRA) 2017 and 2018. His recent books, *Death and Digital Media*, and *Residues of Death* were published by Routledge in 2018 and 2019. His new book, *Digital Domesticities*, will be published by Oxford University Press in 2020.

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