

# Capturing Cosplay: Analysing *Steamkittens* and the Digitisation of Cosplay Photography at Gaming Conventions

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## Keywords

cosplay, gaming conventions, digitisation, digital photography, digital labour

## INTRODUCTION

Individuals are developing careers in gaming-related fields, enabled by performing digital labour (Dorschell 2022) in various environments, including competing in esports tournaments (Johnson & Woodcock 2021), or streaming gameplay on platforms like *Twitch.tv* (Johnson & Woodcock 2017). However, research into career pathways in gaming-adjacent practices like cosplay, and cosplay photography, which leverage similar techniques and approaches to digital labour, have had less representation, to date. This paper will investigate the role and impact of photographers, as cultural intermediaries (Woo 2012), in the Australian cosplay industry; focusing on the case study of Leigh Hyland, professionally known as *Steamkittens*. It will analyse the approach behind his *Steamkittens* project, the design of a digitised system for facilitating his labour practices and how his work has specifically impacted the Australian cosplay community.

The research was conducted using a digital ethnographic approach to methods, which considers the ‘embedded’ and ‘embodied’ nature of digital technology use in the ‘everyday’ life of individuals (Hine 2015). Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, participant observation at gaming and pop culture convention sites in Australia in 2021-2022, and online observation in digital cosplay communities and social media spaces. The Australian cosplay industry is a digitally-mediated community where professional cosplayers, who monetise their practices, intersect with non-professional – “hobbyist” – cosplayers. This paper has found that cosplay photographers like *Steamkittens* act as important ‘cultural intermediaries’ (Woo 2012) in the industry. *Steamkittens* and his team help cosplayers to professionalise or express themselves online, by capturing high-quality photographs of their work, free of charge, at pop culture conventions around Australia, which can be instantly shared with their audiences on social media.

*Steamkittens* provide each cosplayer with a set of these digital photographs, which act as assets that can be leveraged in their digital labour practices. The professional quality of the photography offered by *Steamkittens* helps cosplayers express specific personality attributes or stylistic traits of the character they are dressed as. For some cosplayers, this heightens the role-playing experience and can physically represent the labour put into the costume by displaying it in its best light. For others, these photographs are leveraged to contribute towards the production of professional personas in these spaces. Each photograph is captured in consultation with the cosplayer, with Hyland opting to craft each shot around a cosplayer’s desired mode of self-presentation. In order to facilitate the process, *Steamkittens* and his team have created and implemented a system that digitises the organisation, creation and dissemination of their cosplay photography services.

By analysing the complex, interconnected physical and digital labour processes of *Steamkittens* and his team, this paper will contribute further insights into the emerging research space of digital labour and career pathways in gaming-related disciplines.

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