Name

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Working Title

"The Voice Behind the Costume"

Target User Group/Client

In this capstone, I would be designing for American cosplayers. A cosplayer is someone who dresses up in a costume of his/her favorite character(s) from Japanese animation (anime), video games, or from popular culture. They could be either male or female, and could be any age (for this project, I'll be looking at cosplayers aged from 13 upwards). These people have a strong passion for the culture they are dressing up in, are very good at crafting costumes, and attend conventions (cons) to show others their costumes and love for this niche culture. This user group would be my "client", in so much as they will be giving me the insights and motivation to keep moving forward with this project.

Description of Problem Space

The con is a yearly gathering of people who get together and express their love and passion for Japanese culture and gaming. Cosplayers use this venue as a means to make costumes to dress up and express their passion as well, albeit a more externalized form than others who attend (others attend to buy tokens of Japanese culture, watch anime, or compete in competitions). Cosplayers attend as many events while at the con as they can, and try to be social while in costume. Unfortunately, while in costume, the cosplayer is intimidated and reluctant to talk to other people. Some of the only interactions they have with other attendees are through photo opportunities and the cosplay masquerade, a "parade" of all the costumes made for the con. The attendees then move on and continue their events, but only end up remembering the cosplayer through an image.

In terms of design, I would like to be able to create opportunities for cosplayers to have a voice to speak out and interact more with the attendees at the con. This way, they can be seen as more than just the character they are portraying: they will be seen as another person who has the same interests and desires as the attendees. Through these opportunities to create interactions between these two groups, cosplayers will be able to get more out of the experience of going to the con (as well as the attendee), but also have the opportunity to build relationships with people who have common interests. I would also like to see these relationships build long-term friendships, but at the minimum, I am aiming to design to help the cosplayer to be able to reach out and get in contact with the world around them at the con.

Importance

This area of consideration has not only importance to HCI, but it is also important in creating a larger family of people who enjoy this niche culture. From this project, I am aiming to help HCI learn more

about the notions of the self and how people construct their own identity through the use of costume and their interactions with others in a public space. The creation of allowing these people to be able to speak out to others who have the same interest can help HCI to generate insights about how we can design to allow other populations discover how to utilize the inner voice of people and bring it out for others to see and interact with.

In terms of a moral and personal standpoint, this project would also help others to see how they make judgments on people based upon what they wear. Cosplayers are notorious for wearing the most beautiful, stunning, and (sometimes) outlandish and homemade clothing (but done in a very respectful and professional manner), and other attendees of cons don't end up associating with these people for different reasons, even though they have the same interests. I would like this project to also help us reflect on this power of judgment and to see if we need to suspend it to allow wonderful people into our lives. Ultimately, this project will help attendees to see past the physical nature of the costume and help the cosplayer to have a voice in the quick interactions they have with others while attending cons.

Predispositions and Assumptions

Going into this project, I have a number of assumptions going into which I'll need to be aware of, not only in terms for design, but to also keep in mind that I don't help to add to the situation that I am trying to change. The cosplayer is a social and passionate person who is comfortable with themselves. If the person wasn't comfortable in public in costume, then that person wouldn't be a cosplayer. Also, the cosplayer utilizes the costume as a social element in the sphere of the con-space as a means to add to the conversation about the culture presented in the con. Cosplayers also love anime, pop culture, and video games. These are all areas where they draw their ideas from when they are selecting a costume to build and wear. This point also demonstrates that the cosplayer is what society would call "crafty", and has some skill in utilizing tools in creating clothing and costumes to create a look accurate to the original character.

The con is the event cosplayers look forward to the most throughout the year. Not only is it a means to be able to engage in the culture they take part in, but it is also a place to buy DVDs, video games, stuffed animals, and other artifacts from the anime and games they are absorbed in. This space is a hotbed for attendees and cosplayers to come together to share their passion for anime and gaming. There are events that range from video game tournaments, anime music videos, masquerades, screenings, and many other events related to this culture. While at the con, though, the many different sides of the people are brought out due to these all of these events (e.g. the people who participate in the video game tournaments become quite abrasive and competitive). This and many other factors of the con-space are making it hard for the cosplayer to bring out their social nature and engage with other people. The cosplayer would love to be able to talk at great length about their passion, but this doesn't usually happen with the average person who attends the con – it usually happens only with other cosplayers.

Another set of assumptions going into the con are that some of the spectators are going into the con wanting to know more about how to actually cosplay and learn more about the characters that are walking around the con-space with them. These people are also afraid or intimidated by the quality of

the costume or the passion these people have for these characters and don't end up speaking to the true experts of cosplay: the cosplayers themselves. These people really only end up seeing the cosplayer through the lens of their camera, and become just another artifact given to others or stored to bring back the con experience. Utilizing this type of interaction that is already natural for some people may be an insight as to start approaching the design space in a concurrent fashion with the rough plan outlined below.

Approach to Design and Research

In order to become knowledgeable about this problem space from both an academic and pragmatic standpoint, I will have to research and communicate to cosplayers concurrently. In terms of a research standpoint, I plan on investigating how HCI has developed a sense of the self and what our field has done in terms of designing for the self. This will allow me to generate ideas for what possible designs are out there to draw inspiration from when I have to design. I will also plan on investigating fashion and cultural theory to see how these fields have utilized clothing as a means to express oneself and how others will interpret the clothes one wears, and also how the clothes affect one's view of themselves. I will also plan on looking into researching exemplars of how industry has created interactions to allow people to express themselves to see what the attitudes people have when it comes to this type of situation.

From a user research perspective, I plan on attending a con to be able to not only see how attendees engage with cosplayers, but to also see what different events at the con might be utilized to create interactions between attendee and cosplayer. Also, I plan on finding some cosplayers to attend the con as well so I can see the rituals and process they undergo to become the characters they are so enamored with. I would then be able to see how other people treat cosplayers and be able to ask them questions about their experience. From this experience and the relationship I would build with these cosplayers, I would also want to engage in participatory design sessions to also learn some of the values and desires these people might have that not only I may have missed, but also those in which they cannot communicate in verbal form.

Preliminary Plan

From a methodological approach, I plan on utilizing the research approach above to get at theory which can help inform the design process for creating a voice for the cosplayer. I also plan on utilizing interviews with cosplayers to be able to understand their thoughts and desires, both in the costume at the con, and also when they are not being the characters they love. I am also planning on creating a cultural probe to allow cosplayers to tell me about their experiences with this culture and also learn more about the people behind the costume. As mentioned earlier, I am also planning on attending a con to learn more about the con-space firsthand and be able to talk to cosplayers directly about this problem space. I would also want to get early feedback about my thoughts from them and to see how receptive they would be able any of the initial design directions I am anticipating on creating. To really show that I care for cosplayers, their situation, their culture, and to also learn firsthand about the process of creating a costume, I plan on creating a costume that I can create and wear as well. This will

allow me to feel firsthand at how the cosplayer feels while at the con. I also want to take these findings to the CHI student competition and be able to allow the field to learn from the research that I will be engaging in and the people whom I will be representing.

Rough Timeline

October: Begin Research; Start talking to cosplayers; Make plans for attending a con and making a costume; Develop the research agenda and the methods I want to use to inform this design; Begin exemplar design (e.g. colorforms and avatars)

November: Deploy cultural probe; Continue research; Engage more with cosplayers; Begin gathering materials for creating a costume

December: Finish deliverables for Capstone class; Keep researching exemplars and papers relevant to the problem space; Ideate on possible design directions; Engage more with cosplayers

January: Prepare ideas to be able to get them presentable to cosplayers; Finish making the costume; Finalize plans about attending the con; Find more exemplars and begin sketching design ideas

February: Attend a con and see how attendees engage with cosplayers; Organize findings from primary research; Retrieve probes and analyze findings; Continue designing

March: Finish up design ideas and continue to expand and contract on them; Begin to create a paper prototype for testing out ideas; Research when necessary and continue to talk to cosplayers

April: Finalize up the design I will choose to present; Continue to ask for feedback; Iterate on paper prototype; Think about unintended uses of the design I am creating; Attend CHI student research competition

May: Conclude findings and project with the capstone presentation; Continue to design and talk to cosplayers about more ideas