
The Eye of the Beholder – Creating an Interactive Experience at Conventions

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Abstract

Costume Roleplaying (cosplay) is an activity many people engage in to show their love for animation (e.g. Japanese anime), science fiction, and video games. This is typically done in conventions (cons), where thousands of people gather from across the world to express and share their love for these elements of Japanese culture. During the convention, though, attendees interact with cosplayers only through a simple photo opportunity or attending the masquerade. This paper chronicles the work-in-progress conducted and future work necessary of a transdisciplinary approach to create an interactive experience at cons to bring cosplayers and attendees together in novel and meaningful ways.

Keywords

Cosplay, convention, con, culture, identity, anime, video games

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.1 Multimedia Information Systems, H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

General Terms

Strangers, conventions, identity, public spaces

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Figure 1: A Cosplayer [16].

Introduction

Japanese animation (anime) and video games are currently a very popular cultural phenomenon. Conventions (cons) are yearly events where people who love anime and video games gather to view the newest anime and to be absorbed in what they love. One group of people in attendance is cosplayers (costume roleplayers). They create their own costumes in the style of the characters they want to roleplay at the con (e.g. figure 1). Cosplay has become a visual staple of the con experience and the embodiment of the love of anime and video games.

There are many events held at a con: one can buy authentic Japanese merchandise, view new and classic anime, play in tournaments of trivia and video games, attend panels, and other special events. Cosplayers attend the con, as do the attendees, but are wearing costumes and acting like their costumed persona. Con attendees take in the spectacle of the cosplay or stay away from cosplayers. For those who approach cosplayers, they ask for the cosplayer's picture. At this point, the cosplayer poses, and a picture is taken.

This situation happens often (figure 2). It is a very interesting situation, as this gathering of people with the same interests don't interact with or only interact in superficial ways. The CHI community has created means for people to communicate and interact with new people, and this setting is an opportunity for the CHI community to open opportunities for interactions between the "everyman" and the cultural icons that people only know few details of their lives from cultural media. This paper reviews the work-in-progress done so far to create an interactive experience between cosplayers and con attendees.



Figure 2: The con experience. Attendees take pictures of cosplayers, but don't interact too much with them [23].

Literature and Exemplar Review

In beginning a transdisciplinary approach to creating a means for con attendees and cosplayers to interact in more genuine and better ways, I have conducted a literature review of cultural theory and from the CHI community. These approaches were selected as they directly address how people interpret clothing and the individuals who wear them and also how CHI has tried to create genuine communities in public areas where there wasn't a "strong" community to start with.

Cultural theory has helped me to understand how the clothes people wear show the wearer's values and sense of community. [15] studied the punk movement in Britain, where he examined the artifacts and clothing this group used to subvert those in power. [9] studied how men's clothing has changed the identity of the wearer, from simple worker to the empowered businessman. [10] also examined the evolution of power dressing as a means for women to fully enter the workplace. The work of Goffman [28] demonstrates how people present themselves in everyday life and the need to attend to how their roles change through everyday interactions with people. These roles are left to the narratives created through the use of play [30], and help to create a successful cosplay. It is important to realize the power and meaning of the clothes and the performance of the cosplayer, as these aspects help con attendees to identify the character in front of them (see figure 3).

There are numerous exemplars of approaches to creating new and meaningful interactions among different groups of people. One approach is using the natural human need to be social in the different contexts of life: [3] is currently trying to allow people



Figure 3: Without accurate dress, props, and roleplay, a cosplay cannot be recognized (photo from [16]).

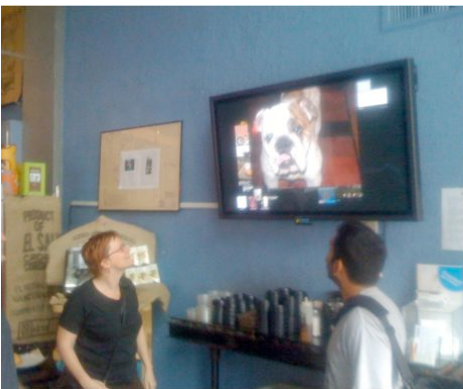


Figure 4: The CoCollage – helping to create a community at the local coffee shop [20].

on the subways of New York to allow people to not feel alone on the subway, the Whereabouts Clock [25] (used to help members of an office have a rough idea where other people in the office are), and the Hummingbird [32] (used to help ski instructors in Sweden know where each other are. Outside of the CHI community, the social approach to bringing people together can be seen in gaming (e.g. [11]), fashion (e.g. [18]), and innovative art projects (e.g. [13]).

The CHI community has created context-aware devices that know about the environment they are situated in. [4] created a PDA as a guide that will help tourists walk around Lancaster, England. Those who used the PDA found the guide interesting to help them walk through a new environment and liked the knowledge it gave them. [1] created the Cyberguide, a PDA that will allow one to see the history of an unknown location. [31] has also contributed a locator in the form of a badge used in offices, the ActiveBadge, which sends off beeps from a badge depending on who is around in the audience. The business world has also utilized devices incorporating GPS and augmented reality technologies to give people more information about the places and people around them (e.g. [14, 19]).

The CHI community has also turned to the realms of ambient technologies and information visualization to help create communities of people brought together through technology. The CoCollage [20] is a community-generated collage; through its use, individuals created friends and returned to the collage to see new content. [5] used Plasma Posters that allowed people to share and watch new content in the workplace. [6] studied how people used a centerpiece in a café to allow others to anonymously contact each

other; people left comments and notes for others and returned to for future interactions.

Preliminary User Research

Interviews

In order to learn about the experience of cosplay and the cosplay lifestyle, I have started to conduct semi-structured interviews with cosplayers. These interviews lasted for one hour, and were open-ended to allow the cosplayers to elaborate on their experiences of cosplay. I have learned that patience is needed to learn how to sew and properly become a character; it is very important to stay in character at all times; there are no rules about what gender a cosplayer can choose to be (e.g. a male can cosplay a female); cosplay is such a fun and engaging activity that some want to cosplay every day; having people to rely upon when starting to cosplay is important to learn the proper steps and have someone to rely upon during the making of the costume.

Secondary Cosplay Research

To learn more about cosplay from cosplayers and also from those who have attended cons, I have sought secondary sources on cosplay. Cosplayers will also find reasons to dress up, just because it is simply fun to do [29]. Cosplayers respect the tiniest of details in becoming their character. Their makeup, materials, props, attitudes, and even physique play important roles in becoming the essence of the character he/she loves [7]. This is taken so seriously that some import their photos into Photoshop and manipulate them [17]. Cosplayers will dedicate a tremendous amount of time to becoming their character [27] and will even learn other crafting skills to make their characters even more realistic [12]. For the best of the best in cosplay, they



Figure 5: Cosplayers from the anime *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*, which are some of the more popular characters to cosplay [24].



Figure 6: The Legolas Experiment, used to see how people would react to simulated cosplay.

can compete in worldwide tournaments to be called the best cosplayer through regional tournaments [2]. Cosplay is taken seriously enough that it is also used in weddings (e.g. [22]) and marketing (e.g. [26]).

Cosplayers are attracted to cons. When cosplayers attend cons, they attend as individuals or in groups of related characters that interact with each other in skits (short acting sessions) from the anime/game they are originally from. Cosplayers are used to having their pictures taken when someone asks them for a picture, which then they pose for the camera. Cosplayers are also very conscious of the different cons that happen, and do their best to try to go to them (e.g. New York Anime Fest [21], Tokyo Game Show [8]). As part of successfully cosplaying a specific character, cosplayers carry props and items (either bought or handmade) that the character would be very likely to have on their person.

Pilot Studies

After conducting interviews, I wanted to learn how con attendees respond to cosplay firsthand. One pilot study utilized a life-size cardboard cutout of the fantasy character Legolas (from *The Lord of the Rings*). I set Legolas up in the basement of a building where people would gather every day to work and play (figure 6). I left an area for people to write their thoughts and reactions to how they would want to start a conversation with him. I found out that some people were afraid to talk to him due to how realistic he looked (many didn't like his piercing gaze). Those who were able to strike a conversation with Legolas treated him as the actor Orlando Bloom, and wrote statements geared towards Orlando Bloom (e.g. "How do you maintain that girlish figure?").

Concurrently conducted with the Legolas experiment, I set up a series of pictures of cosplayers for people to leave their reactions as if they were at a con with these people. I left Post-It notes for people to leave their responses and reactions (figure 7). At the end of the study, the responses to the cosplayers were clustered into two categories: visceral responses to the fashion, pose, or person (e.g. "I love your hair") and attempts to figure out the significance of the character and the cosplayer (e.g. "Why are you trying to look old?", "No clue what this is"). As some people were posting their responses, some first shouted or said their thoughts first, and then would struggle to write down their responses. Some would stand in front of the cosplayers, confused, and would simply not know how they would respond or talk to the cosplayer (figure 8). This situation happened more often than not, and I believe contributed to a reduction of how many comments received. It is from a combination of seeing this behavior and these responses, coupled with the literature review and user research conducted so far that has given me a direction for future work: helping people know and identify the cosplayer and character in front of them at the con.

Future Work

To continue exploring this problem space and to start creating an experience that will allow cosplayers and attendees to interact with each other in new ways, I will continue my user research. I will be conducting semi-structured interviews with cosplayers to learn more about the experience of cosplaying at a con. I will also be conducting a focus group of people who have attended cons before and have seen cosplay to learn how they interpret cosplayers and gather ideas on how to create an interactive experience. I will also be



Figure 7: The cosplay picture experiment: some students were eager to place comments about cosplayers, and others were not.



Figure 8: During the cosplay picture experiment, many were reluctant to share their thoughts, as they didn't know how to react or interact with them.

attending a con to observe how people and cosplayers interact with each other in the con; I will also be cosplaying myself to firsthand learn how to roleplay and what it feels like to be observed while cosplaying. From all of this research, including additional secondary and exemplar research, I will be able to design an experience for cosplayers and attendees. This experience will then be evaluated to learn what interactions are created and redesigned if necessary.

Conclusion

I have presented the preliminary foundations of a transdisciplinary approach to creating an interactive experience that will allow cosplayers and con attendees to interact in new and interesting ways. The con is a rich setting for the CHI community to learn from, as it is a setting full of passion and many different characters. This passion is true for conventions around the world; the potential results of this research will help convention attendees to learn more about the stars and characters around them, helping to give them the inspiration to interact with "new" people.

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