

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF COSPLAY

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## Introduction

What is cosplay, when and where did it originate, and why does it matter?

The word originated in Japan in the early 1980s but the activity of dressing up, assuming another identity and playing out characteristics from another life has been part of human culture from our earliest times. As part of our shared cultural heritage, cosplay has global reach. Its sudden rise in popularity around the world in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has led to admiration, imitation, and even attempts at cultural appropriation or colonisation. Yet the actual, physical history and prehistory of cosplay remains almost unexplored, its earliest evidence still largely undigitised and therefore effectively undiscovered.

Scholarship is full of rabbit holes. This one opened up for me several years ago, when I read an assertion in a source I respected that was contradicted by evidence freely available in a number of other English language sources. America invented cosplay, said the source, and exported

it back to Japan after the Los Angeles Worldcon in 1984.

Certain I knew better, I started down the path of scholarly righteousness, but as usual the ground gave way below me and I fell down the rabbit hole into Wonderland. The journey has been more nuanced, more complex and more interesting than I ever envisaged. I'm still falling.

America didn't invent cosplay. Nor did Japan, although Japan definitely gave us the word and definitely did not import the practice from America in 1984. Cosplay, masquerade, fancy dress, whatever term you choose, emerges from one of the oldest and deepest impulses of the human spirit: the belief that imitation can be conjuration.

This presentation is a road marker on my journey into the history of cosplay. It is also a call to arms. I hope other scholars, performers and crafters will join me in uncovering and documenting the true history of cosplay in Japan, and setting it in its place in world cultural history.

Its original form was audiovisual – a Keynote presentation – and I have preserved that outline in print, with the narrative punctuated by the slides I used at FANS 5.

I would like to thank Dr. Darren-Jon Ashmore, Miki Dennis, Barbara Ann Edwards, Maggie Percival, Paul Blackwell, Dr. Judith Mortimore, Prof. Mari Kotani, Rob Fenelon, Walter Amos Dr. Frenchy Lunning, Karen Schnaulbelt Turner Dick, Rob Lantz, Dale Engelhardt, and David Merrill, who have all inspired, informed or contributed to my study of costume.

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<sup>1</sup> N. B.: For the referenced slides, please see the PDF immediately after this one on the journal page. This presentation was originally given at FANS Japan Stitching Time Symposium, Yamanashi Gakuin University, Kofu, Japan, on 18 March 2017.

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I began this journey five years ago with a shocking discovery on a website I respect: [costuming.org/history](http://costuming.org/history).<sup>2</sup>

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I found this statement inexplicable because I was aware at the time of a number of readily available online English language sources presenting direct Japanese evidence that contradicts this view. I therefore dug a little further into US sources and found that [costuming.org](http://costuming.org) was not the only site the claim primacy for the USA in the creation of cosplay, and to frame Japanese cosplay as purely imitative of the US. I rechecked the sources last year to see if opinion had shifted, but this was not the case.<sup>3</sup>

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It is my belief that any cultural colonisation of the term cosplay needs to establish detailed and credible proof of ownership. With this in mind, I pose three questions:

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In order to answer these questions, I need to clarify my own standpoint, and first I will define my terms. I use the word costume to distinguish between whatever clothing individuals wear in their ordinary everyday life and the clothing they assume for a

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<sup>2</sup> [www.costuming.org/history](http://www.costuming.org/history) accessed 30 May 2016.

<sup>3</sup> [www.strangelandcostumes.com](http://www.strangelandcostumes.com) accessed 30 May 2016.

specific purpose, which can be public or personal.

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I define the term cosplay as part of a historical progression of terminology used to distinguish costume from everyday dress.

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And I would like to consider these terms and present some examples of each stage of the progression of terminology before we go any further. Please note that some of the terms and types of costuming are still active today, even though they have outlived the general use of their terminology.

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Many societies have used costumes and masks for public and private rituals from ancient times. Some modern societies, including Japan and Italy, still use a form of historic dress to signify the religious roles of individuals. Some also continue with old costuming and roleplaying traditions even though the beliefs behind those roleplays are no longer universal. And some dress as characters from the past as part of private or public celebrations.

As an informal visual guide to the changes in terminology I made a rough count of usages in books in my collection and borrowed from libraries across the disciplines of costume history, social history, anthropology, local memoir and theatre. This chart summarises roughly 150 sources and

their use of these terms. The sample is only a rough guide, but may be helpful.

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I think it may also be helpful to define our field of study. Please note, however, that the ground is shifting under our feet as we work. In Japan and beyond, some cosplayers who feel uncomfortable in public, or whose parents feel they are too young to go to cosplay events, are making their own cosplay at home and sharing it through photos or online with friends. A type of cosplay at once public and private is opening up. And it is precisely because the game is changing so fast that I believe we need a solid foundation of history, backed up by documentation and checkable eyewitness accounts, before we decide that we know what cosplay is and where it comes from.

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As more and more sources are scanned into the internet, as scholars we must constantly remind ourselves that this process is highly selective. It can be very useful, however, as in the case of Mr. Skygack from Mars. This charming newspaper cartoon character can claim to be the first SF media character portrayed in the USA. Unfortunately the documentary evidence does not yet support the identification of Mrs. William A. Fell (or her dressmaker) as the first US SF costumer, but it does locate the creation of the costume prior to 19 December 1908.

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The claim to have created and worn the first costumes at an SF convention has long been staked by Myrtle R. Jones Douglas and Forrest J. Ackermann. Ackermann, who was not involved in the creation of the outfits and was always vocal in his admiration of Douglas' creativity as a costumer, was widely credited alone for many years. This was fairly typical of the airbrushing of women out of leading roles in SF fandom, until the spread of the Internet made documentary evidence easier to find. Douglas was also a fan writer and publisher and a speaker of Esperanto.

Her influence was immediately noted as a threat by mainstream male fandom. SF author Frederik Pohl, writing about the impact that Douglas and Ackermann made in his book "The Way The Future Was" almost 40 years later, described them as "stylishly dressed in the fashions of the 25th century" but also wrote that he feared they had set an ominous precedent. He was right: the next US national convention had 12 costumed attendees.<sup>4</sup>

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But despite these two well documented instances of SF costuming innovation, I did not feel there was any justification for claiming that American had given cosplay to Japan. Costuming is not simply about science fiction, but about the expression of personal aims and ideas.

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<sup>4</sup> Frederik Pohl, *The Way The Future Was* (Ballantine: New York, 1978).

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US influence in Japan is very strong; the occupation of Japan ended in 1954 but the process of cultural colonisation has continued. Although before the Occupation Japan's Western influences were as much European as American, the balance has shifted. However this does not mean that Japanese costuming was mere imitation of American SF fandom, any more than American costuming is merely derivative of the tradition that had existed in European, African and Asian society for centuries before America was founded.

The American magazine *Amazing Stories* had its first Japanese edition during the Allied Occupation in 1950. Japan's first SF magazine *Seiun* (*Nebula*) followed in 1954.<sup>5</sup> However, academic Takayuki Tatsumi places the origin of Japanese SF fandom after both these events, in 1957 when the Japanese SF magazine *Uchujin* – meaning *Cosmic Dust* – was launched with sponsorship from Takumi Shibano, although his own involvement with fandom dates from the 1970s.<sup>6</sup>

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In 1980, Leiji Matsumoto gave an interview to *OUT* magazine discussing his latest movie and the fan activity that *Space Battleship Yamato* had engendered. He remarked that

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<sup>5</sup> Science Fiction Writers of Japan

<sup>6</sup> <http://d.hatena.ne.jp/cpamonthly/20050601> interview on *Café Panic Americana* (1 June 2005), accessed 2 Feb. 2017.

“wearing a homemade costume is actually not new since my generation used to play with ... cloth with the Kanji for ‘Makoto’ written on it after seeing the movie *Shin Sen Gumi*.”<sup>7</sup>

The first local accounts of organised costuming activity in Japan occur in the 1970s. Consider this extract from a brief online history of cosplay by Nov Takahashi, founder of Studio Hard and active in fandom as a student.<sup>8</sup>

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This indicates an active fandom visible enough to be mentioned in fanzines and organised enough to attend and put on public events. Takahashi went on to professional success in anime, music and media. If his name sounds familiar, he is the same Nov Takahashi credited with coining the term “cosplay” after the 1984 LA Worldcon. He coined the term, but the timescale and the background are not as reported in some sources.

### **The First Japanese Convention Cosplay**

The first record of costuming at a Japanese convention is in the convention book for *Miyacon*, held in Kyoto in 1974. There's a copy in the Ninomiya Public Library in Japan, which holds a number of early

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<sup>7</sup> <http://ourstarblazers.com/vault/622/> accessed 26 Apr. 2017. It is not clear whether the movie he refers to is the 1963 theatrical release or the 1961 TV series.

<sup>8</sup> [www.hard.co.jp/cosplay\\_02.html](http://www.hard.co.jp/cosplay_02.html) (online in English and Japanese) accessed 26 Feb. 2017.

Japanese SF convention books.<sup>9</sup> Billed as a “Yoshio Aramaki Costume Show,” it appears to have featured a number of brief costumed skits starring Bruce Lee, Captains America and Future, Planet of the Apes and other icons of pop culture – not exclusively American, but also Asian and European. I haven’t yet found any photographs or written accounts online, although the convention got a write-up in *SF Magazine* in November 1974.

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### The Triton Puzzle

In considering the early days of Japanese SF costuming, the role of one particular character – Triton, from Osamu Tezuka’s *Umi no Triton* - is influential. Tezuka’s manga ran from 1969 to 1971 and the anime TV series first aired in 1972. Triton is still cosplayed.<sup>10</sup> The character has a devoted fandom. On her official webpage, critic, writer and feminist Mari Kotani says that she was a member of a Triton fangroup in Hiratsuka Konan High School, before helping to found the Loreleias fantasy

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.ninomiya-public-library.jp/bookdetail?11&retresult=page%3DDetail%26comp1%3D1%26comp2%3D1%26cond%3D1%26facet0%3D00050000\\*%26item1%3DS%26item2%3DU%26key1%3DT%26key2%3D%EF%BD%BC%EF%BE%8A%EF%BE%9E%26mv%3D10%26sort%3D0%26target1%3D1%26target2%3D2%26&num=1063803&ctg=1&reqsch](http://www.ninomiya-public-library.jp/bookdetail?11&retresult=page%3DDetail%26comp1%3D1%26comp2%3D1%26cond%3D1%26facet0%3D00050000*%26item1%3DS%26item2%3DU%26key1%3DT%26key2%3D%EF%BD%BC%EF%BE%8A%EF%BE%9E%26mv%3D10%26sort%3D0%26target1%3D1%26target2%3D2%26&num=1063803&ctg=1&reqsch) viewed 15 12 2016

<sup>10</sup> 10 photos on Cosplayers Archive, accessed 10 Feb. 2017.  
[http://www.cosp.jp/photo\\_search.aspx?n2=11079](http://www.cosp.jp/photo_search.aspx?n2=11079)

fanclub in 1976.<sup>11</sup> In 1977 the group appeared in costume at Uchujin magazine’s twentieth anniversary event, Cosmicon.<sup>12</sup>

A number of sources state that at Comike (Comic Market) in 1977 a girl attracted much interest cosplaying as Triton from Osamu Tezuka’s *Umi no Triton*.<sup>13</sup> This is not mentioned in the Comic Market online chronology, where the first reference to costume play is at Comike 8 on 2 April 1978, but Comike’s co-founder, the late Yoshihiro Yonezawa, told the Triton story in an interview.<sup>14</sup> Triton definitely made an impression at 1978’s Japanese SF Convention, Ashinocon.

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Mari Kotani was at Ashinocon in a group wearing costumes inspired by Edgar Rice Burrough’s *Fighting Men of Mars*.<sup>15</sup> It was based on Motochiro

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<sup>11</sup> Kotani Mari official website  
<http://inherzone.org/> Accessed 5 Jan. 2017;  
<https://www.revolvvy.com/main/index.php?s=Mari%20Kotani> accessed 5 Jan. 2017.

<sup>12</sup> [www.panache.jp/Cosplay](http://www.panache.jp/Cosplay) Panache! official website, accessed 15 Dec. 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Including TAKEDA Yashuhiro Men who Made Neon Communication Evangelion” Wanibooks, 2002, p. 34;  
[http://asianbeat.com/ja/feature/issue\\_other/now/cosplay/01-4.html](http://asianbeat.com/ja/feature/issue_other/now/cosplay/01-4.html) accessed 15 Dec. 2015.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.comiket.co.jp/archives/Chronology.html> Comic Market Nenpyo (Comic Market Chronology) accessed 15 Dec. 2016. By 1980 the entry for Comiket 15 notes that costume players have increased “dramatically.” In 1983 the police asked the organisers to stop costume players going outside the venue as it was causing a disturbance; “What is Comiket, Manga / Anime Liberation District, Interview with Yoshihiro Yonezawa?” “Separate volume Treasure Island 358 with me Comiket!” Takarajima, 1998, p 20

<sup>15</sup> Panache! *ibid*

Takabee's cover for a Japanese edition of the book, and its white tunic and red cloak were similar to Triton's costume. A number of those present mistook Kotani's costume for Triton. (Triton costumes are still made and sold for cosplay use in Japan and beyond.)

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In 2005 Kotani stated that because of this event many cosplayers consider her the first Japanese cosplayer.<sup>16</sup> However, it seems that this designation interprets the term as being the first person to wear a manga or anime costume at an SF convention, since the wearing of costumes at events including conventions was well established. (At Ashinocon, other SF costumes were also worn<sup>17</sup> - Yasuhiro Takeda, later of GAINAX fame, constructed a last-minute Tusken Raider costume out of toilet paper and cardboard tubes.)

What is clear from the photo of the group behind Kotani and her interviewer is that this was an established group of costumers. In her presentation at the FANS Japan symposium in March 2017, Kotani noted that some Japanese male SF fans and critics did not view the inclusion of costume at SF conventions as a positive development, but four years after Miyacon it was obviously spreading.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Takahashi *ibid*

<sup>17</sup> [www.space-force.org/HISTORY.HTM](http://www.space-force.org/HISTORY.HTM)  
Space Force: History accessed 15 Dec. 2016.

<sup>18</sup> *Stitching Time*, FANS Japan symposium, Yamanashi Gakuin University, Kofu, Japan, 18 March 2017.

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Kotani's clarification of the somewhat incoherent timeline pieced together by Western students of cosplay, including myself, was revelatory. It enabled me to understand the photo available online for some years as "the first Japanese cosplay" – not a picture of the Tritonesque Burrows outfit from Ashinocon of 1978, but an outfit that Kotani was asked to wear for a Japanese magazine feature on the history of cosplay in the 1990s, incorrectly dated 1978 in some sources including mine.

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The website of Japanese cosplay idols Panache contains some interesting information. The site notes that the appearance of STAR TREK on US TV greatly increased interest in costuming at US SF conventions in the latter half of the 1960s. Japanese SF fandom was then in its early years having started running annual conventions in 1961. It was strongly influenced by Star Trek but also by the World SF Convention in The USA. The costume show at the thirteenth Japan SF Con (Miyacon) in Kyoto in 1974 followed in the footsteps of US conventions.

From this evidence it can properly be argued that Japanese SF convention masquerades were inspired by US convention masquerades, but it also demonstrates that convention costuming was active in Japan a decade earlier than claimed in the previously cited US sources.

This is confirmed in an interview with Hideaki Ito conducted by Tim Eldred and Sword Takeda in 2010.<sup>19</sup> Ito was active in *Space Battleship Yamato* fandom and recalls that he made a costume from the show around 1976, while he was in high school, and that other fans were starting to show up in full or partial costume at screenings and events at the time. By 1978, Yamato fans were thoroughly engaged in cosplay, as a *Space Battleship Yamato* fan club newsletter shows. This was available on line at the former Starblazers website and can now be found on mystarblazers.com

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It took five more years after Ashinocon for cosplay to find its own term. It was coined by Nov Takahashi and two friends for an article they wrote in the June 1983 issue of *My Anime* magazine, a year before the 1984 Worldcon once said to have inspired Japanese costuming. The photos that accompany it are compelling. They show a lively, technically skilled fandom inspired by a diverse range of sources. It does not appear at all imitative or derivative.

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Nevertheless, there are contradictory sources, widely quoted by Western scholars. The 1990s photo of Mari Kotani referred to above is a case in point and can be explained by lack of opportunity or language skills

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<sup>19</sup> <http://ourstarblazers.com/vault/552/> accessed 15 Dec. 2016.

to research pre-Internet paper sources in Japan. There is also confusion around the fact that Nov Takahashi himself gave an interview at a US convention in 2004 in which he appeared to corroborate the [cosplay.org](http://cosplay.org) story of an inspiration from the 1984 Worldcon.<sup>20</sup>

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The earliest US Japanese-inspired costume I have been able to document is a child's Hallowe'en outfit for the popular live SF show Ultraman, a hit on US TV as well as in Japan, dating from 1971. This was sold commercially. There is well documented evidence for the wearing of anime costumes from around 1979, at early anime events and mainstream SF conventions. This trend was reported with enthusiasm in Japan, and as other anime fandoms including those of Australia and Europe came on board, they were also celebrated in Japanese anime publications.

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However, even as late as 1993, despite a decade of exchange and interplay between costume fans, the word cosplay was not in general use. In a personal communication on Facebook, quoted with permission, Dale Engelhart told me "the term

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<http://millenniumcg.tripod.com/glitzglitter/1002articles/html> accessed 12 Dec. 2016 Michael Bruno, *Cosplay: The Illegitimate Child of SF Masquerades, and Costuming a world apart: cosplay in America and Japan*, in *Glitz and Glitter Newsletter*, Millennium Costume Guild Oct 2002

“cosplay” started getting thrown around in the local con scene in the mid to late ‘90s , from my recollection about the time the URAN cosplay group from Japan started showing up with 4 costumes for each day of AX, and influenced or maybe I should say upped the ante on bringing showmanship and craftsman work to the US conventions.”<sup>21</sup> In 1993, the Anime Expo staff list still refers to Masquerade, not cosplay.

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In 1994, Anime East explains the world cosplay in its convention book, on the grounds that not all anime fans will be familiar with it. Their certificates for winners of the costume contest refer to it as a Cosplay Masquerade, possibly implying that the terms are not yet interchangeable and that in the US cosplay is still viewed as a subset of masquerade. It is not until around 1999 that we see evidence of anime conventions using the term cosplay to replace masquerade. At this stage I have not seen securely dated evidence of its use outside the anime fan community before the turn of the millennium. It was not until the spread of broadband that the term entered, and rapidly gained ascendancy in, wider fannish consciousness and the general culture.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Anime Expo, a major US convention that started in 1992. URAN were filmed performing a skit in the costume contest at AX 1999.

<sup>22</sup> I am indebted to Rob Lantz and David Merrill for their input and for providing scans of documents.

Looking back at the above account of the history of cosplay, emerging from a worldwide cultural commitment to the concept of taking on other identities that started as ritual and moved gradually into recreation, I see so much more to be done. But, for now, I believe that I have clarified some issues, put together the bones of a coherent timeline for both the practice of cosplay in Japan and the use of the term both within and outside Japan, and demonstrated that while Japanese fan costuming was certainly influenced both other fandoms, especially hat in the USA, it was far from merely derivative, being of itself dynamic, creative and inventive. I fee that I can set out my proposed definition with the support of history, and with deep gratitude to the remarkable scholars and costumers who have helped me so generously on this quest.

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But this story is still being written I had like to leave you with an image from the FANS Japan cosplay symposium, where scholars and cosplayers from Japan, the USA, Canada, Europe, the United Kingdom came together to explore and share our passion for this fascinating and still greatly underexplored art form.

(SLIDE 56)

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