

DIGITAL COSPLAY AND POSTMODERN CONSTRUCTS OF COMMUNITY

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Costuming is an activity that is inherent in human communities for as long as we have historical records. From Greek plays to the over 1000-year history of the Gion Matsuri in Japan, there are countless records of people donning costumes to celebrate tradition or enjoy themselves. (Shen, 229)

Cosplay is a contemporary iteration of this very human act and it has itself developed over the years. This article will analyze the prevalent changes from the analog era before the advent of the Internet to changes that have come with the digitalization of the hobby. Costuming is essentially a social pastime, expressing meaning from the costume wearer to the viewer. In the case of a stage performance, actors will dress as a character to retell a

story. In a festival a commoner to parody a king and mock social standards for a day may wear a costume. (Borland, 146) Cosplay has developed during the twentieth century during a time where photography has been possible and the hobby has progressed with the photo as an important record of the activity.

Early on, photos were taken with analog cameras but with the introduction of digital cameras and the ability to send images online the hobby experienced great change. This article will look at changes to cosplay that occurred through the introduction of digital photography and the creation of social spaces on the internet. The event gathering has always been a place for cosplayers to come together and share their activities, however, with the introduction of

a digital environment there has been a great impact on the construct of community. By looking at activities such as Work in Progress images, takucos (宅コス) and the social withdrawal of hikikomori we can gain a deeper understanding of the hobby as it exists today. Although these concepts have played a part in the postmodern disengagement of cosplay practitioners in the hobby, they have also played a role in the reinforcement of community and its development into the twenty-first century.

In Japanese and English the word cosplay can mean many things. For the sake of this article I will define cosplay as costuming as characters from predominantly Japanese anime, manga, Western comics and general video gaming. There will be a heavy influence of the concept of cosplay as it exists in Japan and comparisons made with interpretations from other countries.

Where costuming evolved into cosplay is difficult to say definitively. Essai Ushijima defines cosplay as having a “need of being based on a pre-existing character”

(Ushijima, 2016, 1) and further clarify that the focus of will be on anime, manga and game characters origins however western comic characters also fall within the scope of our definition. Ushijima views the World Con masquerade which started in 1939 as an influence on the introduction of formalized character costuming in post-war Japan. The first Japan Science Fiction Convention was held in Meguro, Tokyo in 1962 and the first documented “Costume Show” was in 1968. (Ushijima, 2016, 4) Financial means and free time are necessities to enjoy cosplay as a hobby. In order to enjoy the hobby and have enough time to do so without work, it really is in the post-war period with a certain affluence that costuming came into its own. If we were to use the limited definition of cosplay only pertaining to Japanese contents then it started in Japan in the 1960s.

Cosplay had its beginnings in an analog world before that of digital photography. The hobby had its beginnings with photos taken by fans at events that they developed and exchanged in physical form. Often

these were stored in albums or boxes as opposed to computer hard drives as they are today. This made the event a focal hub of congregation for early cosplay communities where people met, shared new creations, took photos and construction techniques. For the author who moved to Japan in 1998 an exchange of photos in a general sense was common when meeting friends where photos were taken together as a souvenir of a moment spent together. Compared with cosplayers' activities today this manual exchange of photographs is dated.

In a similar way, cosplayers originally made costumes with a more limited access to materials. The today's standard multicolored wigs were not commonly used and cosplayers usually sufficed with their natural hair. For robot costumes in the 1970s or '80s a standard material was cardboard which was the most available. (Interview with Koujin T, 2013) (1) Contemporary materials such as urethane foam or Wonderflex were not available at that time. In Ushijima's 1995 book "Cosplay Handbook" he recommends

creation of a helmet with the use of FRP (Fiber Reinforced Plastic) with a gypsum (石膏) base. (Ushijima, 1995, 140) Twenty years on, cosplayers may also use lighter and more malleable Worbla or Eva foam materials for the same helmet. An integral part of the semiotic progression of cosplay is the constant search for new and easier to use materials. The casual cosplayer will access materials that are easier to find and those who take their hobby more seriously will be at the vanguard of this search. (King, 365) With the move from an analog era of cosplay photography to digital forms was a paradigm shift.

Digital cameras first became available for consumers in the 1990s. By the mid to late '90s they were more prevalent and digital cameras started to out sell analog cameras in 2003. (Chesher, 8) As digital cameras became more common the act of exchanging physical photos in Japan became less frequent and sharing photos by email or social media sites became more the norm. This meant that cosplayers and cosplay photographers (kameko) did not

necessarily need to meet at events or otherwise. What had been a staple norm amongst cosplayers was becoming less essential and the exchange of images and words of thanks could be accomplished digitally. The transfer of the image itself is a fundamental part of cosplay activities but the digitization of the process was only the beginning of the changes that were to come.

This shift to a digital format of an anime contents based community was not only happening with cosplay. As Lawrence Eng discussed with his analysis of fansubbing clubs in *Anime and Manga Fandom as Networked Culture*, there was a similar shift in development amongst anime fansubbers. (Eng, 164) (2)

With the introduction of the VHS tape, fans began trading their favorite titles. In the mid 80s the technology of being able to add subtitles to videos led to the formation of clubs that started working together to include subtitles in their favorite anime. This was a manual effort with tapes being sent by mail and groups physically gathering in one location to arrange the

translation and addition of subtitles to anime. As time progressed into the 1990s, an increasing amount of these activities were conducted by email and via the Internet:

“The most profound change affecting anime otaku networks has been the development and growth of the Internet, which has allowed an unprecedented number of people with shared interests to interact with each other...” (Eng, 167)

With the advent of broadband internet in the early 2000s video could be transferred with much greater ease revolutionizing the fansubbing community. This significant impact from broadband Internet was mirrored in cosplay communities as well.

The digital shift promoted by Internet use for cosplay provided for many opportunities in sharing with other cosplayers and fans of cosplay. In the late ‘90s in Japan there were a number of sites starting up which would host pictures from cosplayers. American Cosplay Paradise

(ACP), the first cosplay social media site in the USA was inspired by these first web pages. Henry Lee, one of the co-founders of ACP stated that in the early days when the site was first started in the year 2000, all cosplayers would have to send their photos manually and the webmasters would upload the images themselves. As ACP was originally a Geocities site, they had to write all the code on their own and although it was a tedious process it was something they enjoyed. (Lee interview, 2016) In a similar manner, fansubbing communities struggled with the services provided in the 1990s such as File Transfer Protocol (FTP) and newsgroups. (Eng, 167) The advent of broadband Internet allowed for more robust programming possibilities and social networking sites that permitted cosplayers to upload digital images on their own.

Faster Internet connections led to many more possibilities for the formation of online cosplay communities. In the United States, Cosplay.com joined ACP as one of the predominant sites to share images and information for cosplayers. Japanese sites

also moved to a more manageable format with the cosplay social media groups Cure and Archive. With the spread of popularity of cosplay sites started appearing in other languages such as Cosplay Forum for French speakers and Animexx in Germany. In fact, the most popular global site at the time of writing this article is Facebook where many cosplayers and events have their own dedicated pages. The days where photos were taken on film and exchanged in person were gradually fading into the past. However with the facility of uploading photos to the internet and not needing to meet face to face with members of ones community creates a variety of repercussions.

Japanese pop culture events continue to grow year on year and this move to the digital seems to have no great impact on the number of attendees. Japan Expo, one of the most popular events in Paris, France has seen year on year growth since its inception in 1999 where attendees numbered in the low thousands to 2016 where over 250,000 people attended. (Wikipedia, Japan Expo)

Vibrant international cosplay stage events like the European Cosplay Gathering, Yamato Cosplay Cup and World Cosplay Summit continue to grow in participating nations. The move to digital cosplay in fact augments the hobby in many ways such as through the speedy sharing of photos. This can be accomplished the same day with friends around the world. Finding out about events or promoting new ones was not possible in the same way 20 years ago. Gathering at events continues unabated however the significance of the popularization of digital cosplay on the individual deserves closer scrutiny.

Although cosplay events are as popular as ever there are varying effects on social interaction caused by the digitalization of the hobby. These are not all negative by any means and this article will focus on three forms, Work in Progress (WIP) cosplay, takucos (宅コス) and hikikomori (social withdrawal). While WIP may augment face-to-face social interaction at a social event, takucos can be both a positive and negative while hikikomori is predominantly

seen as severely anti-social. There is a vast amount of research available on the negative effects of hikikomori and the influence of video games, the internet and other online activities in promoting withdrawal. In the case of cosplay we can see that the postmodern construct of the community is quite varied.

Considering the young age at which many cosplayers become active in their hobby accessing the Internet is a very natural concept. Between the years of 15 – 20 is quite common and quite often their first exposure to cosplay is through a computer. A contemporary form of sharing the development of a costume is through the Work in Progress. By sharing photos through social media platforms the cosplayer can build engagement with friends; through heightened expectations from fans and peers to see the final product the cosplayer can build motivation to complete the costume. These images are often shared publicly and can constitute a half made necklace or armor showing the materials the cosplayer used. Although

purchased costumes are becoming increasingly popular, (particularly in Japan) a WIP image will demonstrate to others that a costume was indeed handmade; this is a factor that is highly valued by cosplayers depending on their country of origin. A WIP photo may elicit feedback or support from other cosplayers such as how closely a make up application looks to the original character or advice on how to complete a project.

For cosplay stage performances a form of the Work in Progress image is used in a file that is submitted to judges for scrutiny before a competition. These files will usually not be posted online publicly beforehand as they may contain sensitive material, which could reveal secrets planned for the stage performance. Competitions usually require that the cosplayers make their own costumes and it is quite easy to purchase a costume or have props or parts made by others. These WIP files demonstrate the step-by-step process taken in creating a costume and are a connection between the performers and

judges in the creation of the costume. Whereas WIP images that are posted online will have a certain level of presentation for the general public, the images shared before a performance are not for public consumption and are focused on the detail put into the at times mundane steps in the costume creation. Both forms of WIP images build a positive connection to an upcoming event or opportunity to show the finished product with friends or with judges before a public stage performance.

Construction of a costume by the cosplayer themselves continues to be highly valued in many cosplay communities. This carries more weight outside of Japan where currently costumes being made by the cosplayers is becoming less common and there is little stigma attached to wearing a purchased costume. The WIP image that is shared publicly also carries a message to fans and peers that the cosplayer not only has a love for the character and maintains the desire to become the character whose costume they wear, it also demonstrates that they have the skill to build the costume on

their own. Elffi is a prolific cosplayer from Finland who regularly shares the construction of costumes with fans.

As can be seen in Images 1 and 2, he has displayed the necklace of Sinbad from *Magi: The Labyrinth of Magic*, which is made from Worbla material. Image 3 is the final product. The separate pieces have not been painted yet, indicating that he was present during the construction process of the piece. According to Janne he does

“WIP cosplay updates on social media platforms to show people my progress on a new costume and to show them my methods and materials. Cosplayers are very interested in seeing other people’s methods... so they can learn something new.” (interview with Janne, May 2017)

Due to the value placed in hand making a costume in many cosplay communities, WIP photos have become a normally digital form of imagery that has combined well

with the physical standard of the hobby.

In Japan cosplayers will take and upload photos of costume that are in the process of being created in the same way as other countries. The term Takucos (宅コス) is more commonly used, the breakdown of the work is the use of the same word *taku* (宅) which is used in the word *otaku* and combined with ‘cos’ from cosplay. Through interviews with cosplayers in Japan, the term can be qualified as any cosplay that is done outside of an event or studio photo session. This would include but not be restricted to cosplay at ones home, and include a photo and uploaded from a hotel the cosplayer is staying at before moving to an event or in a public area. A common factor in takucos images is a background that may have no relation with the character that is being cosplayed. There may be a closet, shelf or perhaps a pile of clothes in the background. Similar to WIP, there can be an unfinished quality with takucos. However with takucos it may be that the cosplayer has arranged for a setting that is near studio quality – to the extent that one

may not be able to recognize that the photos were in fact taken at home.

There is a fine line outdoors of takucos or a cosplay photo in final form. The location may be the same such as with a convenience store but the defining factor may be a pose recognized by peers and fans as that from the character being cosplayed. Ushijima noted the importance of the pose in his '7 Significant Features of Cosplay'. In point number two, "Becoming the Character" Ushijima states "becoming the character is what cosplay is all about. If you don't get the pose right it's just not the same." (Ushijima, 1995, 64)

One of the most internationally active cosplayers from Japan, Reika, stated that she often posts takucos photos before a costume has been completed. In image 4 she is presenting her wig and make up for the character Levi from Attack on Titan. In image 5 she is posing casually with hotel room items in the background and image 6 is the same character at an outdoor location and a brown filter added for finishing effect. In discussions with Reika, it became clear

that she considered takucos to be not only photos that were taken at home but any photo that was taken before the final product was created. (interview with Reika, 2013)

In many ways takucos shares similarities with WIP. It elicits interaction with friends and fans on social media and demonstrates the progression of a costume. This may lead to a certain level of inspiration for the creator and commitment with the image viewer to complete the costume. There are several important differences with WIP however that should be clarified. There are times when takucos does not directly lead to sharing a costume at an event. This includes situations where the cosplayer may not be able to attend an event such as in the case of a minor without permission to attend events by parents or if the cosplayer lives in a remote area where there are no events nearby. In the case of S san, her mother used to cosplay and at the age of 13 she started to become interested in the hobby. Her mother was happy that S san was taking an interest in cosplay however

due to her young age, her mother did not allow her to go to public events. A resulting course of action for S san was to post photos to social media of her in costume at home. Takucos can be an easy first step into cosplay by trying out different looks and gauging the response of friends through social media providing a unique form of community participation unheard of before the digital era of cosplay.

A search for takucos (宅コス) through any internet search engine will bring up a wide variety of images from cosplayers. Some are surprising in the quality put into recreating a studio environment. There are limitations however to the extent of what can be done with takucos. Usually at home it is the individual taking photos of themselves, rarely are photos taken by a photographer. Space is often limited and close ups are the norm. There is an overlap with the internationally common WIP yet there is a unique style that is introduced with takucos images. Unlike WIP there is a captive nature to takucos where for a variety of reasons they will not go to a

physical gathering yet it is a testament to the expanding capabilities that are provided with the digital era in which it is not necessary for the cosplayer to attend an event to enjoy their hobby.

The captive nature of takucos brings us to the third realm of digital cosplay to be presented in this article – Hikikomori. The term was coined by the Japanese psychologist specializing in Puberty and Adolescence, Tamaki Saito in 1998. Derived from the verb hikikomoru, which is a compound of the verbs hiku (引く) meaning “pull”, “draw” and the verb komoru (こもる) meaning “hide” or “seclude”. (Forsberg, 7) Hikikomori is a term used for subjects who experience acute social withdrawal. Saito qualified this interpretation of the term as someone who has had almost no connection with people outside the home and has not left their house for at least 6 months. (Saito, 2013, 25) This is an acute social phenomenon, which was brought to light in the 2000s and estimates of the number of sufferers in Japan range from the conservative number

by the Japanese Ministry of Health at 6,151 to Saito's estimate or around one million sufferers in Japan. (Saito, 2013, ix) Although the estimated number of sufferers varies widely it is difficult to come to an exact number as it depends on the definition of the term and it can be a relatively short-term affliction. For the purposes of this article we can say that it is an issue that does indeed exist and is well documented. With regards to cosplay there is some overlap with takucos and some cosplayers who do cosplay at home do so for the reason that they have chosen to not interact with the outside world.

On the surface, hikikomori may not seem to be a condition that is conducive to cosplay. However, taking takucos into account there are situations where cosplayers who have withdrawn from public encounters with the general community will continue to practice their hobby. In the case of A san, she started cosplaying with her friends in a normal manner by going to event gatherings and socializing. As time went on however she

began to pull away from public events, her reasons were that she had 'no friends there' and was not interested in mixing with strangers. She also stated that 'personal relationship' (人間関係) difficulties were a factor in her withdrawal. At the time of first contact she expressed the breakdown of her cosplay activity as 70% takucos, 10% event and 20% studio cosplay. Although she hadn't completely removed herself from social interaction, a majority of her cosplay was done at home. She was not a self-described hikikomori although her friends had noticed a great reduction in her social activities and were concerned. She used the ambiguous term of 'helping out around the house' (家事手伝い) to refer to her activities and in reestablishing contact she has moved from Tokyo and is living with family in Okinawa. Her condition is currently improving although she is not cosplaying as much as she was before. (interview with A san, 2013, 2017) The case of A san demonstrates that the prevalence of digital cosplay had allowed her to pull back from the at times consternating community

environment of her hobby yet allowed her to continue cosplaying. Although this pulling away from social engagement would not necessarily have been impossible during the 80s or 90s, it is due to the advent of digital cosplay, takucos, and the documentation of hikikomori that cosplaying at home became a possible avenue for continuing her activities.

This pulling at the fabric of what once was the standard in cosplay comes in many forms. Through the digitization of cosplay activities one does not necessarily need to attend events to participate. The ‘splintering’ of activity that is prevalent particularly in Japan with studio cosplay, location cosplay and DVD ROMs. Studio cosplay is conducted in a smaller group, sometimes only a cosplayer and a photographer at one of the hundreds of cosplay studios around Japan. These are not very common at all in North America or Europe but providing a variety of backdrops and scene potential which makes them very popular in Japan. Location cosplay refers to travelling to natural locations usually in the outdoors.

This could be a temple, field or industrial landscape and is prevalent not only in Japan but other countries as well. Usually a cosplayer and photographer or a group of friends will travel to these locations by car or train to take photos reenacting scenes from their favorite manga or anime in the spirit of participatory culture. (Jenkins, 114) DVD ROMs are a medium for cosplay that is ubiquitous in Japan. They are compilations of studio or location cosplay images and videos burned onto a DVD and sold at ROM events, online or more general events like Comic Market in Tokyo. (3)

These are further elements of cosplay activity are for a community that does not need to gather in strictly one place. It has always been possible to travel to a location in the outdoors and take photos with an analog camera and while not a direct result of the digitalization; cosplayers have new options in how they want to share their photos through social media. In particular DVD Rom sales are interesting as they take these activates away from the original event location and return to that starting point to

promote this form of cosplay at the original source.

Cosplay as a hobby is constantly redefining itself. As youth find and accommodate new tools to augment their activities there has been a move away from the traditional event gathering. With the revelations through the digital era such as WIP, takucos and the more extreme reclusiveness of hikikomori this article demonstrates that although there is a notable break down of the construct of community, the digitalization of cosplay can augment community in a variety of ways. This postmodern approach to the hobby is strongly enhanced with the WIP by sharing upcoming costumes and providing insight into construction methods. In Japan, takucos has similar characteristics and moves beyond that by allowing those who cannot or will not attend the traditional event space to participate in the hobby. Even in cases of extreme reclusiveness, people who desire to continue cosplaying can do so in the safe space of their home. This form of distant participation can lead

to an eventual return to the social environment as cosplayers continue to engage in the activity they enjoy.

The introduction of higher speed Internet connections has impacted society in a variety of ways. For cosplay it has provided new digital spaces to share and interact with peers and fans. The provision for a digital buffer for cosplayer to augment their activities is poignant in Reika's statement 'We are alone, but not alone'. (Hitori da kedo, hitori janai) (interview with Reika, 2013) What may seem as a dispersion of community through digital mechanisms is in fact a reformation and augmentation of itself.

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Notes

(1) Cardboard was the most available material for robot costumes in the early years of cosplay but that is not to say that it is a substandard material. There are still cosplayers today who do amazing work with cardboard or paperboard and prefer using the material to others.

(2) A fansubber is a person or member of a group that organizes to add subtitles to anime. The term implies the voluntary

effort of fans to quickly translate their favorite titles. This is considered illegal by anime production companies yet with slowness of official subtitling or voice dubbing, fansubbing remains prevalent today.

(3) Comic Market is primarily an event for selling doujinshi (unofficial fanzines created by fans). It is one of the largest anime/manga related gatherings in the world bringing around 500,000 fans over 3 days together twice a year and is currently held at Tokyo Big Sight. Doujin clubs will draw lots for the chance to rent a table to sell their creations and on a certain day cosplayers can rent tables to sell their wares, often including DVD ROMs.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6