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Cosplay and the Art of Play

Exploring Sub-Culture Through Art

GARRY CRAWFORD
& DAVID HANCOCK

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Preamble and Acknowledgements

This project began life as an art-led doctoral research project undertaken by David Hancock and supervised by Garry Crawford, Paul Sermon, and also initially, Mathias Fuchs. So, our first thank yous and acknowledgements must go to Mathias Fuchs for his input into the early direction of the project, but especially, a big thank you to Paul Sermon who had an important guiding role throughout the doctoral research on which this book draws and builds.

David Hancock's work has throughout most of his career focused primarily on various subcultures, and for his Ph.D. thesis, he chose to consider and research cosplayers and cosplay culture. What first led him to this was an interest in telepresence and how cosplayers make physical characters and representations that may previously only exist in films, comic books, and video games. As the main focus of his doctoral research, David Hancock produced well over one hundred watercolour paintings, sketches and drawings, and also several sculptures and videos, creating a large body of work that explores and represents this subculture. As a key part of this practice-led doctorate, Hancock also wrote up an empirically informed thesis that explored not only the inspirations

and meanings behind his artwork, but also how this interprets and represents cosplay culture. It was then after the completion of the thesis, that we decided that some of the ideas that Hancock had started to explore in his Ph.D. were ripe for further investigation and hence, this book.

This book has been primarily written by Garry Crawford, but it very much draws and builds upon the data gathered by David Hancock, his initial ideas, and importantly his artwork. It is David Hancock's thesis and artwork that form the foundations of this book, which have then been developed further by Garry Crawford. The writing process has been that Crawford begun each chapter with Hancock's original work, and then sought to develop, expand, and explore further those initial ideas, and then once drafted, each chapter was returned to Hancock for his added input, editing, and approval, to ensure we have stayed true to the original ideas and data. Hence, this book is fundamentally different to the doctoral thesis; they are different pieces of work, but both share and build upon the same data, artwork, and essence. The project then has become much more than a doctoral thesis and now includes several outputs, including the thesis, this book, the artwork, numerous national and international exhibitions, several conference papers, and at least two published articles. Hence, we must also acknowledge and thank the publishers of the *Journal of Fandom Studies*, in which we published an earlier version (Crawford and Hancock 2018) of what would become Chapter 7, and also, *Critical Contemporary Culture* in which Hancock (2015) published an overview of his original doctoral thesis.

We hope, and certainly feel, that this has been a very fruitful collaboration between a sociologist and an artist. Our pairing was from the outset, unusual, and has produced some interesting and new ideas, and we have both learnt a lot from each other during this process and certainly feel we have produced something different here. It is also something we hope will contribute to numerous areas and debates. However, we could not have done this without the help of those around us, and hence, we owe several people some thank yous.

First and foremost, we would like to thank all of the participants, most importantly those who David Hancock formally interviewed for

the research and those who posed for him and made his artwork possible, but also, all of those we spoke to at events, conversations, meetups, and online. Also, a thank you to the wider cosplay community who we observed, both online and offline, for several years, and have always been very generous in sharing their time and thoughts. Their actions have inspired David to make this wonderful body of work that he is immensely proud of. We are extremely grateful for their support and assistance throughout. Though this book is undoubtedly academic in its focus and target audience, it is still about cosplayers, and we hope that they feel accurately and sympathetically represented in here.

We would also like to thank Palgrave, and especially Sharla Plant and Poppy Hull, and similarly the series editors Karl Spracklen and Karen Fox for commissioning the book and providing excellent support throughout.

In terms of our personal acknowledgements, Garry Crawford would most importantly like to thank David Hancock. It has been a pleasure working with such a talented artist and scholar both as a doctoral student and now on this book. Garry would also like to thank all of his colleagues in Sociology and Criminology at the University of Salford. Also, a very important and necessary thank you to Daniel Muriel. The writing of this book overlapped with finishing off *Video Games as Culture* written by Muriel and Crawford, and undoubtedly, some of the ideas and themes from that book have informed and fed into this book. Daniel is a great scholar who significantly advanced my thinking in several key areas.

Garry would also like to thank Paul Joyce for always being willing to share ideas and a pint. And finally, but most importantly, Garry would like to thank Victoria, Joseph, and Grace, for always being there and putting up with him writing another book.

David Hancock would like to offer special thanks to Debbie for all the many, many hours of discussion, support, advice, and finally proofing that she put into the original thesis that was the starting point of this book.

A special thank you should also go to Garry Crawford who has worked tirelessly to transform my initial research into this beautiful written book, and offered advice and support as his Ph.D. supervisor.

His support in understanding cosplay and contextualising it has been hugely influential to the original research and putting together the initial thesis. David would also like to offer a personal and special thanks to Paul Sermon, who supported his artistic practice throughout his Ph.D., offering assistance, guidance, and many opportunities. Paul has encouraged and offered constructive and enlightening dialogue that has inspired David's artistic practice and research.

Thanks should also be given to all the artists who have inspired David, or assisted and engaged with him throughout his research. Particular thanks should go to The Digital Romantics: Simon Woolham, James Moore, Andrew Brooks, Iain Andrews, Clare Booker, Helen Knowles, Kari Stewart, Tom Ormond, and Ian Kirkpatrick and Julien Masson, as well as to Juno Doran, Ulrika Wärmling, and Alex McQuilkin, and all the other artists whose work is discussed and drawn on in this book and the wider body of work.

David would like to thank the University of Salford who has supported his research through the Ph.D. and enabled him to embark upon this journey.

Thanks should also go to all the galleries, curators, and organisations who have funded, supported, and exhibited David's work, as well as providing opportunities for public engagement. These include: Arts Council of England; Dominic Mason and staff at 20-21 Visual Arts Centre; Marguerite Nugent, Helen Oliver, and staff at Wolverhampton Art Gallery; Yvonne Hardman and staff at Touchstones; Vic Allen, Dee Grijak, and staff at Dean Clough Galleries; Robert Teed and Paula Jackson at The New School House Gallery; York Theatre Royal; Antoni Ferrer and staff at Hanmi Gallery; Denise Courcoux; Michael Borkowsky and staff at Third Person View; Hayley McPhun and Cambridge House; The Base; Sunarts; and the PAPER Team.

Finally thank you to Charlotte Gould, Mathias Fuchs, Colin Fallows, Gaynor Bagnall, Marie Griffiths, Jacques Rangasamy, Paul Hayward, Chris Rivlin, Helen McCarthy, Ken Pratt, my family, and friends for all your input along the way.

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Introduction: What Is Cosplay?

Introduction

This is a book about cosplay, but also much more than this.

It is our central argument that cosplay can be best understood as a craft, a subculture, and a performance, all of which are created and recreated in the everyday online and offline lives of cosplayers, but take on greater significance in certain locations, such as at science fiction and fantasy convention and meet-ups. However, in doing so, we hope that this will contribute to our understanding of many other related areas such as craft, creativity, fan culture, identity, leisure, performance, play, practice-led research, subculture, urban spaces, and much more.

In seeking to understand and explore cosplay, this book draws on traditional ethnographic methods while also more innovatively employing art as both a method of research and as a form of data. A substantial part of this book is theoretical and seeks to explore, develop, and set out a number of theoretical tools that we suggest are useful in exploring cosplay and cosplay culture. However, these are theoretical ideas

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that are empirically informed, and in particular, this book draws on data gathered over a period, in excess, of five years. Much of this research has followed a traditional ethnographic path, where David Hancock has attended events and meet-ups, spoke to cosplayers, followed this community online, and conducted a series of formal interviews with thirty-six cosplayers. However, as we shall explore in more detail in Chapter 3, at the core of this project has been the use of art as a means of both gathering and representing data. This project and book are, therefore, a meeting and blurring of sociological and art-led research, which has involved the production of well over one hundred watercolour paintings, sketches and drawings, and also several sculptures and videos, representing a significant body of work that explores and represents this subculture.

The book begins in the following chapter with a discussion that seeks to locate this artwork within the context of other artists who have similarly been involved with, or drawn on, subcultures in the creation of their work. We then more specifically consider the use of art in research, before dedicating a chapter to each of the topics of subculture, performance and identity, crafting, and place, before concluding with a final and much broader chapter that seeks to consider the wider role of creativity in contemporary society. In each of these chapters, apart from the conclusion, David Hancock's artwork is presented in a number of focused discussions. Each of these inserts uses Hancock's artwork to focus our attention and discussion on specific issues central to our analysis. Hence, each of these inserts uses artwork to represent the research, but also as a tool to further explore key aspects of this. We begin this with a discussion below of Hancock's 2014 pencil crayon drawing of *Link (The Wanderer)* (Fig. 1.1). This we use to discuss the origins of the overall project, and also the relationship between the digital and the physical, and how cosplayers 'make real' the often ephemeral. What then follows for the remainder of this chapter is a discussion of 'what is cosplay?'; a question, one may assume, that would lead to a fairly short and simple answer, but as we shall see in this chapter and the rest of the book, pinning this down, is far from straightforward.

Link (The Wanderer)

The starting point for this research was an exploration of how media texts, such as video games, are (re)interpreted and (re)located within everyday life. What could be referred to as the place of the 'virtual' in the 'real'—if that were not such a problematic statement.

In particular, a key early artistic influence for David Hancock came from his reading of Casper David Friedrich's painting *Der Wander über dem Nebelmeer*, or *The Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog* (1818). In particular, Friedrich's use of the Rückenfigur (the view of the figure seen only from behind) is an example of a third-person perspective; a viewpoint now commonly seen in, and typically associated with, video games, such as *Tomb Raider*, *Gears of War*, and *Max Payne*, to name but a few.

In particular, what is quite striking is how a contemporary viewer might, therefore, see *The Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog* from the perspective of a third-person video game. This idea of viewing an earlier work through a more contemporary lens is explored by Svetlana Alpers in her book *The Vexations of Art* (2005). In this, Alpers considers the remark made by the nineteenth-century French critic, Baudelaire, that 'Velázquez can be described as resembling Manet' (Alpers 2005, p. 219). The notion that a seventeenth-century painter, Velázquez, could be influenced by the artist Manet, working some two hundred years later, at first seems

Fig. 1.1 *Link (The Wanderer)*, pencil crayon on paper, 2014

absurd. However, after Manet, the work of Velázquez is seen in a new light. Manet thus becomes a filter to how a contemporary viewer might read a Velázquez, and so perceptions of his work are shaped accordingly. Similarly, we can see this reverse influence in Friedrich's *The Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog*. When viewing The Wanderer, we cannot help but view this from our contemporary perspective and understand this as resembling a third-person perspective video game.

The Wanderer has been used in many contemporary contexts, such as a cover image for numerous books, including Dover Publications' edition of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1994), Ted Honderich's *The Oxford Guide to Philosophy* (1995), and amongst many others. It has also been the inspiration for many other paintings and images, which include numerous film posters, such as those for *V for Vendetta* (2005), *Watchmen* (2009), and *Inception* (2010), and several video game boxes too, including *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017).[1]

It was, therefore, the appropriation of *The Wanderer* within contemporary popular culture and, in turn, how a modern audience, raised on a diet of video games and movie posters, might see this painting, which was, in many ways, a starting point for this project. In particular, Hancock used *The Wanderer* as inspiration for a number of paintings and drawings between 2011 and 2014, including *Link (The Wanderer)* (2014) (Fig. 1.1), featuring a cosplayer dressed as the character Link from Nintendo's hugely popular video game series *The Legend of Zelda*.

In the drawing pictured here (Fig. 1.1), we see a cosplayer, Mikey, restaged in the seminal pose of Friedrich's *The Wanderer*. It is through this image that Hancock asks the viewer to see the world of Zelda and Link through Friedrich's work. In this use of the Rückenfigur, we see Link as similarly 'turning his back on the world of the spectator to be fully engrossed by the world of sublime nature or to look inward to the sublime depths of his imagination' (Beech 2004, online).

As we shall explore further in Chapter 7, for cosplayers, their environment can take on significant meaning; as it is not only where they are physically located, but this can also become a resource they draw on in their play and the creation of new narratives. The cosplayer Mikey is therefore here, both a wanderer in a park in Cheshire, but also through his play, a wanderer in Hyrule, the fictional world of *The Legend of Zelda*. As with Friedrich's painting, 'we oversee the experience of someone else, someone who was already there in a past long before our arrival', as Koerner (2009, p. 192) writes in his book on Friedrich. Hence, the viewer has the same feeling looking at Friedrich's painting as we do when playing a video game or watching someone else's cosplay: that of being granted access to only part of a wider narrative, to being an observer, or temporary presence, in someone else's story. As Koerner (2009, p. 192) continues, 'I had a sense of undisturbed presence, here I am not the first in this landscape, for the traveller remains spatially and temporally before me'. As such, both the avatar and the artist never fully allow the audience to

experience the scene alone; this is always filtered through the perspective of another, from a third-person perspective. However, as we shall see, cosplay enables, at least partially, the stepping into a first-person role, which allows the cosplayer to see the world through the character's eyes.

What Is Cosplay?

In this section, we specifically focus in more detail on cosplay, and in particular we address the fundamental, but far from straightforward, question, of 'what is cosplay?'.

The term 'cosplay' is a contraction (or portmanteau) of the words 'costume' and 'play' (Lamerichs 2015, 1.1), or as Lome (2016, 1.2) suggests, possibly more accurately, it might be seen as a combination of the terms 'costume' with 'role-play'. Put simply, cosplay would appear to be typically about individuals taking on (certain aspects of) the appearance (and to some extent mannerism and characteristics) of characters from manga, comics, graphic novels, video games, films, or similar. However, once we start to scratch the surface of this activity and its associated communities, we begin to see that it is much more complex and multi-faceted, and to some degree diverse, than any simple definition can ever hope to capture. Certainly, what is and what is not cosplay is hard to define, as both academics and participants frequently define its forms and boundaries differently.

A lot of the existing academic, and many of the non-academic, discussions of cosplay wrestle with this idea of defining, or at least setting the parameters, of what is cosplay? This is to be expected and is a typical and important phase in the development of any new area of research. It is necessary to ask the key questions of what is it we are looking at here, how we define it, and what are its fundamental characteristics? One only has to look into the not-very-distant past of early game studies, to see very similar debates raging there and, in many respects, still continuing today (see Perron and Wolf 2009). However, there does come a time when it is necessary to take stock, reflect on what has already been argued and set out, and use this as a basis to move discussions forward,

and this is the purpose of this section. Not to silence debates, or even provide a definitive answer as to what cosplay is, but rather, to set out what the key debates, definitions, and ideas are in the field at this point and, then hopefully, to use this as a basis on which to build new discussions and carry debate forward.

In particular, it is the purpose of this chapter to identify and contextualise the substantive chapters that follow. In doing so, in this section we start by charting the (commonly accepted) history and origins of cosplay, and how it was the interactions and exchanges between fan and convention goers and practices in the West and East (and most specifically in America and Japan) that are typically understood as key in defining the contemporary nature of cosplay. Next, we consider who and what are commonly defined as cosplay practices and participants? As we see, existing fan and academic definitions of cosplay can vary from the very specific, such as seeing this as the practice of wearing costumes inspired by Japanese manga and anime at conventions, to the very broad, which includes activities and communities including steampunk, Furries, zombie role-play, live-action role-play (LARP), and much and many beyond this. Finally, we suggest that our reading and review of the existing literature seems to point clearly to three key defining aspects of cosplay, and we also add to this a fourth, that is present, but probably less evident in existing definitions and debates. These then are costuming, performance, community, and place, and these are the four key defining areas we then focus on in more detail in Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7.

The History of Cosplay

The making and wearing of costumes that draw their inspiration from forms of popular culture is not new. An often cited, early example of this was when science fiction fans Forrest J. Ackerman and his daughter Myrtle Rebecca Douglas attended the 1939 World Science Fiction Convention in New York City dressed in outfits inspired by the 1933 film *Things to Come* (Lotecki 2012). However, it was in the 1960s and 1970s, with the advent of television series such as *Star Trek* and later

films such as *Star Wars*, that dressing up as characters from popular culture started to become more common at American science fiction conventions (Lamerichs 2011).

It is generally accepted that the term 'cosplay' was first coined by Nobuyuki Takahashi in 1983, while reporting on the phenomenon of Americans dressing up for the Worldcon (World Science Fiction Convention) (Bruno 2002). It is then suggested that Takahashi's extensive writing on the subject for Japanese science fiction magazines and the publishing of his photographs of American science fiction fans inspired many in Japan to similarly take up this practice.

However, this is not to say that dressing in costumes at science fiction and fantasy conventions did not occur in Japan before the early 1980s. Certainly, it is suggested that the science fiction author and critic, Mari Kotani, while attending the *Ashicon* Japanese Sci-Fi Convention in 1978, went dressed as the character *Umi no Toriton* (Triton of the Sea) (Thorn 2003, p. 175). Furthermore, in his *Otaku Encyclopaedia* (2009), Patrick Galbraith claims people were cosplaying at COMIKET in Japan in the 1970s (Galbraith 2009, p. 51). In particular, the *Yamato Fan Club Plaza* newsletter contains photographs of people in science fiction inspired costumes in Japan in 1978 (Galbraith 2009). Japanese fans of manga and anime, often termed *Otaku*, have a long history of dressing as characters from films and comic books. However, it is suggested that it was Takahashi's writings and photographs in the magazine *My Anime* from 1983 that significantly inspired this to become more commonplace at Japanese science fiction conventions.

In turn, it is evident that Japanese culture has had a significant and profound impact on Western popular culture and science fiction fandom and its practices. It is evident that there is a fairly long history of the influence of Japanese popular culture in the West. Some early and notable examples include, when Osamu Tezuka's *Astro Boy* comics were redrawn and published in America from the mid-1960s onwards and then in the late 1970s the Japanese anime series *Science Ninja Team Gatchaman* was adapted for American television as *Battle of the Planets*. Then, significantly in the 1980s we start to see more Japanese imports, such as the manga series *Dragon Ball*, and then *Akira*, which was a globally successful and influential film in 1988. From the 1990s onwards,

many mainstream bookstores and comic book sellers in the West started carrying imported and translated manga, and it is also important to acknowledge the impact on Western popular culture of the hugely popular 1990s Japanese video game *Pokémon*, and its plethora of associated media and products.

Of course, long before all of this, there is a very significant and complex history of the West's relationship to, and at times fascination with, the East. For example, Edward W. Said's influential book *Orientalism* (1978) highlights how the West's representations of the East in both popular culture and scientific and academic texts create, on the one hand, a romanticised view of what the West lacks in terms of spirituality and exoticism and, on the other, justify Western imperialism, by portraying the East as degenerate and weak (Longhurst et al. 2017). Said's work, primarily based upon readings of nineteenth-century literature and academic publications, argues that the East (the 'Orient') and its inhabitants were portrayed and understood as radically different to the West and its people (the 'Occident'). This is a form of 'geographical essentialism', which dichotomises regions and people, and assumes an inherent difference between the two (Longhurst et al. 2017). Japan and the Japanese become particularly demonised in the West during and after the Second World War, but the West's fascination with (and essentialised view of) Japan and its way of life never completely recedes, and the rise of Japan in subsequent decades as a technological superpower added both to the fascination and fear of this nation and its people, a clear example of which can be seen in the film *Blade Runner* (1982), which depicts a future America full of Eastern and Oriental imagery, inhabitants, and language. Today, as Lamerichs (2013, p. 154) writes, 'the relationship between Western countries and Japan is…significantly performed in relation to its [Japan's] pop-culture'.

It is suggested that due to the rising popularity of Japanese manga (comic books) and anime (animated films), particularly from the late 1980s onwards, we start to see the increased frequency of individuals at science fiction and fantasy conventions in the West dressing as manga, anime, and Japanese video game characters, and it is this practice which, in the West, first starts to be referred to as 'cosplay'.

It has frequently been suggested that this (re)imported Japanese-influenced form of costuming significantly differed from the kinds of dressing-up traditionally seen at Western conventions. For example, Helen McCarthy, a writer, designer, and early pioneer of cosplay in the UK, suggested that 'masquerade or hobby costuming in the Western sense' was very different from the 'Japanese approach to the hobby of costuming'. As she continued:

> Having been both a convention costumer and a historical re-creation costumer, my view is that cosplay is a blend of the two styles, with the SFF [science fiction and fantasy] media inspiration of convention floor and masquerade costuming filtered through a whole-character, whole-lifestyle approach that has more in common with the meticulousness of historical re-creation. Convention costume can be of the joke or pun kind. Cosplay usually approaches its subjects with greater respect for their original form and content. (personal communication, 2014)

Here, McCarthy is expressing a typical and often cited assumption that prior to the rising popularity of Japanese-inspired cosplay, the kinds of costuming frequently seen at science fiction and fantasy conventions in the West were typically done as a one-off, or very infrequent, activity, where a costume had been (most typically) purchased ready-made or else constructed with minimal effort. Most often these were science fiction and fantasy fans dressed as the main object of their fandom, such as (most typically) a comic book superhero, television, or film character. Hence, the aim of the typical Western-costumed conference goer was primarily to demonstrate their fans' interests in a particular character or text, and hence is typically seen as more akin to 'fancy dress'. This then is often contrasted with the (Japanese-inspired) cosplayer, for whom the wearing, and often construction of, the costume, and the playing out of a character's role, becomes much more of an end in itself, and not simply an extension of their fandom.

Therefore, the widely accepted chronology, within the both cosplay community and academia, is that the Western, and in particular American, practice of conference fan costuming was exported to Japan in the early 1980s and blurs with existing *Otaku* cultures and practices.

The popularity of Japanese popular culture then sees this form of costume play (re)imported into the West, where it begins to influence and shape the nature of costuming and character portrayal at science fiction and fantasy conventions and beyond, as Lamerichs (2011, 1.3) writes 'many Westerns fans nowadays learn about costuming not through science fiction or fantasy genres, but through Japanese cosplay'. Of course, this is a rather neat, probably far too neat, chronology. As studies of processes of globalisation clearly demonstrate, cultural influences rarely, if ever, take turns to flow one direction and then back again. The exchanges and flows of cultural influences are multidirectional, complex, and rarely easily mapped (Robertson 1995). Hence, it is important to not see the relationship between the East and West as dichotomised and simply as one-way or two-way flows of influence. As Appadurai (1990) teaches us, in an increasingly globalised world, people, technologies, finances, ideas, and media move and intersect in complex ways. Therefore, it is difficult, if not impossible, to try to simply map out the origins and spread of any one cultural phenomenon, such as cosplay, in a globalised world of immeasurable and constantly evolving exchanges. However, this simplified chronology does highlight the important influence (and interpretation of) Japanese costuming practices and cultures have had on shaping the contemporary nature of cosplay.

Defining Cosplay

As Kirkpatrick (2015, 3.1) states 'cosplay is not easy to define'. For some, cosplay is fairly narrowly defined in terms of costuming (and the various practices and cultures associated with this costuming) that relates only to Japanese manga, anime, and video games. However, others see all forms of costuming at science fiction and fantasy conventions (and beyond), such as dressing up as characters from Western comic books and Hollywood films, as forms of cosplay. Others are even more broad in their terms, such as Lotecki (2012), who sees steampunk, Furries, zombie role-play, LARP, and historical re-enactment, all as forms of cosplay. This is of course, where we encounter one of our first difficulties. As what and who various writers and commentators include in their definitions and discussions of cosplay can

vary greatly. In particular, there are several similar and aligned practices that border on cosplay that could, and sometimes are, be included in definitions of cosplay. This includes the activities highlighted by Lotecki above, but also others, such as lolita (discussed in Chapter 2) and Disneybounding.

Disneybounding is an activity that is very similar to, and at times can be almost indistinguishable from, cosplay; however, there are some key differences between the two practices. Disneybounding is, at least partially, the result of a ban on individuals over the age of 14 dressing in costumes inside Disney theme parks; which Disney World in the online FAQ label as 'inappropriate attire' (Disney World, online). Put simply, adult cosplay is not allowed in any Disney theme parks (Kondooljy 2016). Hence, to get around this, many have resorted to dressing in a 'manner that recalls (but not copies) their favorite [Disney] characters' (Kondooljy 2016, online). That is to say, they wear 'regular' clothing inspired by Disney characters, such as leggings or a skirt that matches the green of Ariel's (from *The Little Mermaid*, 1989) fishtail, accompanied by a purple top that likewise mimic's Ariel's apparel (see, e.g., Disneybound.co). This is, therefore, an act similar to cosplay, but at the same time quite different, as those participating in this are simply wearing regular clothing, but put together in a combination that is reminiscent of a particular Disney character. However, it is also quite likely that those who engage in Disneybounding may well also be cosplayers. This may also be true for many other similar practices. For example, it is likely that many of those who engage in steampunk, Furry, zombie, and LARP costuming may well also be cosplayers. Hence, defining who is a cosplayer, and what is cosplay, can prove problematic, as those who partake and are part of one particular community of practice may well be (and most probably are) part of others.

Disney

Many individuals cosplay Disney characters. Disney[2] provides a wealth of characters and source material for cosplayers, but particularly common and popular characters to see cosplayed are Disney princesses, such as Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* (1989), the eponymous *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), or Snow White from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937).

Part of the continued popularity of Disney films and in particular their 'princess' films are their nostalgia. For many cosplayers, as children they would have watched both contemporary and classic Disney films, and hence these have nostalgic connections to their own childhood. As Anne Marling (1999, p. 27) writes 'we have false memories of the Disney films of our childhoods, I think. In retrospect, they seem sugar-pie sweet and neatly detached from the problems of the culture in which they were conceived, made and marketed' (cited in Do Rozario 2004, p. 37). There is certainly, for many cosplayers, a direct link to their own childhood memories in their cosplaying of Disney characters. One of the most popular Disney cosplay characters is Peter Pan, and the cosplayer and disneybounder Cheryl Wischhover suggests that a reason for this might be that cosplayers 'like the never-growing-up aspect of his story' (Wischhover 2016, online). However, it is also important to note that traditionally Peter Pan is, and always has been, played on stage by women; hence, Peter Pan is a character, from its very first appearance on stage in 1904, that is typically crossplayed (see Chapter 5).

Furthermore, Disney's animated films are themselves also very nostalgic, both in terms of how they often draw on and reinterpret traditional fairy tales but, as Do Rozario (2004) suggests, more than this they also typically portray a patriarchal and nostalgic world of traditional and subordinate feminine roles. Disney films and characters, therefore, provide a solid and known world; one from our childhood but also one of traditional roles and stability. Disney animated films tend to feature men as gallant and brave heroes, and women as beautiful princesses.

Of course, part of the appeal of cosplay, as we shall discuss further, later in this book, is the opportunities it affords for play, or possibly even, subversion. In particular, Disney characters are often played as 'crossplay', where female cosplayers dress as male characters, or more typically, men dress as female characters (see Chapter 5). Amon (2014) suggests that this is one way that cosplayers challenge and deviate from the accepted Disney narrative. Disney character crossplay is a topic discussed by several authors, and it is a facet of cosplay that is explored in the artwork of David Hancock, such as in his watercolour paintings of Alex as Donald Duck (Fig. 1.2) and Catherine as Goofy (Fig. 1.3).

As will be discussed further in Chapter 5, cosplay offers an opportunity to play with, and play out, various identities and characters, such as taking on (aspects of) different gender roles. This can be for some empowering. For example, Margaret Haynes (2017) discusses a male cosplayer who frequently cosplays the female character Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*. This, Haynes suggests, allows him to not only play with his gendered identity, but also gain confidence by posting pictures on social media of himself in costumes that have taken a great deal of time, money, and skill to produce. However, what Hancock also sought to capture in his paintings, such as those of *Donald* and *Goofy*, is the fun and playful nature of cosplay. For Alex and Catherine, cosplay is not necessarily

Fig. 1.2 *Donald (Alex)*, watercolour on paper, 42 × 30 cm, 2012

Fig. 1.3 *Goofy (Catherine)*, watercolour on paper, 42 × 30 cm, 2012

just about *being* the characters, or being masculine, but rather as these paintings seek to capture, for them, as with many others, it is the playful nature of cosplay that is important. This is a key aspect of cosplay, which is present in Hancock's work, and it is important that we do lose track of this in the analysis that follows. The reason that many, if not most, people cosplay is because it is a fun[3] thing to do. This then is another key value to the use of art as a method (discussed further in Chapter 3). As, though in the contemporary art world, art is often taken very seriously, it is important to recognise, as both Kant (1790) and Schiller (1793) argue, that art is playful. Moreover, Katarzyna Zimna (2010) suggests that play is not only an external strategy used in the creation of art, such as in surrealist or postmodern art, but it is also internal to the philosophical tradition of art. Zimna argues that though art is often seen as labour, such as in the phrase 'a *work* of art', there is a contradiction at the centre of art, which makes it both work *and* play. This we also see in cosplay. Cosplay involves time, effort, and skill in researching and creating costumes, maintaining social links, and perfecting performances. Though cosplay undoubtedly involves work, it is also a fun and playful act, and this is why most people do it.

However, it would seem the most common distinction for most cosplayers, and in turn most writers on cosplay, of what sets cosplayers apart from other costumed science fiction and fantasy fans—including steampunk, Furry, zombie, LARP, and Disneybounding costuming—is that cosplay is not just an isolated activity, but rather it is one aspect of participation within a wider community and culture, which revolves around, but is not limited to, the act of dressing up. Hence, as Helen McCarthy suggested above, cosplayers may have more in common with those who regularly engage in historical re-enactment, than your typical science fiction and fantasy fans.

Moreover, though cosplay may have links to Western fancy dress and masquerade, it is suggested that what makes cosplay significantly distinct is how the participants are keen to embody (at least aspects of) the identity of their chosen character. Once exported (back) to the West, cosplay becomes something different from fancy dress or masquerade, where people simply dress as particular characters but retain their own persona. In cosplay, the character's identity becomes equally important,