

# COSPLAY: A TRANSNATIONAL FAN

## COMMUNITY?

Fan costuming, or cosplay – that is, the art of dressing up as a fictional character from a popular media source – is now a favorite pastime of anime, fantasy and sci-fi fans around the globe. With their public performances, cosplayers contribute to the convention experience of other attendees.

Masquerade skits in particular help “reinforce a sense of identity among the established members” of the fan community<sup>1</sup> by evoking scenes from their favorite media, expressing shared ideas about the fandom, or making in-jokes that only fans would get. The same is true for *tableaux vivants* or evocative poses staged for photographs in the convention hall<sup>2</sup> – a common sight at almost any kind of media fandom event. Fans in costume make up a large percentage of attendees, especially at anime conventions, so their presence marks the boundaries of the convention territory and “the sometimes surprising limits of the genre” as perceived by the attendees.<sup>3</sup>

While they do serve as entertainment for other fans, cosplayers have established themselves as a distinct community within the broader fan community. Ethnographic research<sup>4</sup> reveals that cosplayers maintain a set of shared values, rules, specific practices and discourse, revolving around the (re-)creation of costumes from a source product; how to make or customize one’s outfit; how to present it to the audience, and how to interact with other fans in or out of costume. By showcasing and discussing their fanworks online, cosplayers form an image in their mind of what cosplay is like in other parts of the world, and

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<sup>1</sup> Bacon-Smith 2000, 60.

<sup>2</sup> Duchesne 2005, 22.

<sup>3</sup> cf. Bacon-Smith 2000, 60.

<sup>4</sup> Original ethnographic research, conducted for my doctoral thesis (Heinrich 2013.) Interview quotes in this paper are from extensive, qualitative interviews (conducted in 2007/08) with a total of 15 cosplayers/costumers from the US and Germany, who identified mostly as fans of anime and/or *Star Wars*.

what may or may not make their own approach so special. This is further enhanced by traveling cosplay guests or ‘ambassadors’ who share their views on international cosplay, thereby transcending or reinforcing the borders of the community.

A comparison of cosplay/costuming<sup>5</sup> across fan cultures reveals similarities and differences that can deepen our understanding of fans’ motives, the way fan communities work and what binds them together, and the role of the popular text in fans’ creative practices.

### *The Rules of Cosplay*

Every fandom has its own rules, defining which costumes are appropriate, for example pertaining to revealing skin, or how accurate the portrayal of a character should be. The Rebel Legion, an official *Star Wars* costuming club, has even adopted a charter that gives a detailed account of costumes from the movies and Expanded Universe which are considered “canon,” and lists the garments, fabrics, and accessories that are mandatory for each.<sup>6</sup> Most rules and regulations are more open to interpretation, however, and cosplayers constantly debate the standards of their community and the surrounding fandom.

One of these unwritten rules is that knowledge about costume-making and viable sources should be shared freely. *Star Wars* and anime cosplayers constitute collaborative knowledge communities that accumulate a body of “esoteric forms of knowledge” and allow the information to spread from cosplayer to cosplayer.<sup>7</sup>

JAINA SOLO: Yeah I tell people every- all the techniques that I do, I don’t have a problem with that, because really, the honest-to-god truth is that- it’s- it’s easier to just tell people, than to not tell people. Because when you don’t tell people, you get a- like- I

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<sup>5</sup> “Cosplay” is the preferred term in the anime/Japanese pop culture fandom, since the term – which is short for “costume play” – was coined in Japan in the 1970s or early 1980s (cf. Okabe 2012, 225, 229; Thorn 2004, 175.) The practice of “cosplay” is essentially a re-import: when American and European fans started dressing up as their favorite characters at anime conventions back in the 1990s (cf. Schodt 1996, 328ff; Heinrich/Tober 2010, 45f), they adopted the Japanese term, while other fandoms stuck to the more general term “costume/costuming” or developed their own terms (e.g., “suit” or “garb”) instead. For the purpose of this paper, “cosplay(er)” will be used as a general term to refer to any kind of fan costuming.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.rebellegion.com/about\\_standards.php](http://www.rebellegion.com/about_standards.php)

<sup>7</sup> Okabe 2012, 243f.

mean I get like ten e-mails a week, you know, asking me like how I did it. If I didn't tell people, I'd be getting fifty e-mails a week. Does that make sense, you know? Like- like the less you tell people, the more they wanna know, you know, and I find that the more I tell people, the less e-mail I get and-

*INTERVIEWER: That's probably also because the knowledge spreads-*

JAINA SOLO: Mhm, absolutely, that's absolutely the truth, and you know, [...] I understand where some people come with their trade secrets and stuff, and that's entirely understandable, but- I find that it's a lot more fun to just kinda share with people, you know, what you know because- you never know, you might learn something from them. (I.12)<sup>8</sup>

While all informants interviewed for this study were eager to answer questions about the construction of their costumes, some of them did express reservations about whom to share information with, and to what extent. Since the fans put so much effort into their (re-)creations, they believe that no one should be allowed to simply copy their work, but come up with something of their own instead:

SCRUFFY REBEL: A lot of people will ask like oh my god like where'd you buy that, and it's like no I *made* it! So, I'll try to definitely help them as much as I can, it's- it's kind of hard because there's certain costumes you do, where you know you spend so much blood sweat and tears, you know, so much time went into that thing, and you kinda want someone else to figure it out for themselves. (I.10)

The reference images that cosplayers base their costumes on – e.g., comic book artwork or screenshots from a movie – are anything but blueprints for self-made clothing. Creating a complete cosplay outfit involves hours of research (like watching the same scene over and over again to get a better look at the costume, searching for the perfect fabric, wig, shoes, etc.) and it usually takes amateur crafters a couple of weeks to put everything together from scratch. Even though some cosplayers buy their costumes or commission at least certain parts

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<sup>8</sup> All interviews quoted from: Heinrich 2013 (cf. footnote 4.) Interviews conducted in German have been translated for the purpose of this paper.

(like props or armor) from someone who is more skilled in that particular area, they are expected to apply their own ideas to the design and portrayal of the character.

YAYA HAN: I try to evoke the essence of the character. And that sometimes means straying away from the accuracy of the outfit, I will add things and um- not so much change things, but definitely add things to the outfit, to make it more interesting, or have more texture, or more dimension. (I.5)



**Figure 1: Yaya Han cosplaying as Felicia from Darkstalkers (video game) at Dragon\*Con 2008. All photos © Karen Heinrich.**

There is a widespread community ethic, among anime cosplayers at least, that the process of creation is an essential part of the costuming practice; so cosplayers love to chat (or argue) about different ways to make a particular costume. This process of “collaborative problem solving”<sup>9</sup> not only helps create a sense of unity, it also results in original works of “fabric fan art”<sup>10</sup> conforming to the standards of the fan community, as well as the taste and abilities of the individual fan.

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<sup>9</sup> Okabe 2012, 243.

<sup>10</sup> LIMEBARB, I.6.

## *The Internet as a Portal to Other Fan Cultures*

When looking for advice and role models, cosplayers turn to online communities between conventions. Social media and a shared interest in the fandom facilitate exchange across borders and language barriers. Cosplayers post photos of themselves in costume on fandom-related community sites, such as [cosplay.com](http://cosplay.com), [deviantart.com](http://deviantart.com), or [animexx.de](http://animexx.de); as well as general image-hosting and social networking sites like Tumblr or Facebook. All of these websites offer at least some of the following social networking functions: users can comment on other people's photos and costumes, they may "friend" or "follow" other users, create a profile page with personal information, document their costume progress and post tutorials, discuss their hobby on message boards, "like" and share postings made by other users, as well as helpful links and resources for costume-making. *Star Wars* costumers who join a costuming club (e.g., the 501<sup>st</sup> Legion) are asked to post photos of at least one costume that conforms to the club's standards, to be displayed on their official homepage; aside from this, most online activities are optional. Fans use media in a variety of ways to connect with other fans and display their fanworks, but the younger generation of fans interviewed for this study<sup>11</sup> seem to devote a significant amount of time and effort toward presenting an online portfolio of their work, and sharing their insights about cosplay with other fans. This online persona is connected to their alias in the fandom, which serves as a user name for any social networks and online communities:

SCRUFFY REBEL: I realize it's very important of having one name for wherever you post or have your images or everything, [...] I have certain friends that have kinda their logo name that's attached to them, so I try to definitely get recognized as much as I can, it's always good to have that instead of like your real name sometimes, to have like this alias. Um... so I definitely try... to use it as much as possible. (I.10)

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<sup>11</sup> I.e., age 30 and younger. Informants were aged between 20 and 43 at the time of the study.

By creating a recognizable image and “logo name,” cosplayers invite other fans and onlookers to ‘follow’ them online, even if they live in a different state or country and have never had the chance to meet them in person at a convention.

The practice of looking up international cosplayers online can be one-sided, “to see how others do it”<sup>12</sup> – but social networks make it easy to initiate and maintain personal contact as well:

STRIPPERVASH: I’ve talked to people from other countries, I’ve talked to people in Switzerland, Austria, Australia, um... Great Britain, Mexico, all these different people that cosplay that contact me because of the whole thing... (I.3)

JAINA SOLO: Oh I totally stalk everybody, like if I see a cosplayer that I really love, I totally stalk their website or their cosplay.com, and I try and leave comments on their photos and stuff like that, but um, but I do- I have been contacted by a few- several um international cosplayers, and I do have a lot of people on my [LiveJournal] friends list from other countries, [...] (I.12)

In this context, “stalking” jokingly refers to the practice of “following” another user’s postings and fanworks across platforms, perusing their profile page and friends list, etc., in order to get a comprehensive overview of this person’s activity in the fandom, and what other cosplayers they might be connected to.

It is clear from these statements that the act of following or contacting cosplayers from other countries does not mean that one intends to actually meet them all in person someday. Online contacts serve a double purpose: They give easy access to other fan cultures and local communities that demonstrate the variety of possible ways to do cosplay (or even to interpret a single character), thus giving the cosplayer pause to reflect on their own approach to cosplay. On the other hand, being connected and being able to talk to like-minded fans all around the world – who may have more in common with you than the neighbor next door<sup>13</sup> –

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<sup>12</sup> PLUESCHTIER, I.2.

<sup>13</sup> “With fandom, we see an association becoming more powerful than the geographic culture [...]. It has become possible, in a virtual sense, to choose one’s neighbor, choose one’s culture.” (Bacon-Smith 2000, 54.) Cf. Jenkins 2006.

serves to establish a sense of community across borders. When this connection is strong enough, they even imagine traveling abroad to meet other cosplayers one day:

JAINA SOLO: [...] the next time I go anywhere abroad, I'm absolutely gonna make it a point to get into contact and [...] set up a gathering or *something*, um... so I could meet outside cosplayers, because I'm convinced that um, you know we are all in this for the same reason, and I mean we would- I'm sure we'd all get along and, you know, I don't think the language barrier would be much of a problem, cause you know, you don't even need to like- speak to each other, you could just be like ((in a high-pitched, excited voice)) //ohh, ohh, aaahh,// you know. (I.12)

Assessing and admiring other people's costumes and visual performances is an essential part of the cultural practice of cosplay, both online and at conventions or local "gatherings" that are usually initiated through online communities. Jaina feels that, as long as everyone speaks the universal language of "cosplay," they would even be able to communicate across "language barrier[s]." However, since cosplayers only dress up for specific occasions and remain mostly invisible in their everyday lives, face-to-face interaction with fellow cosplayers is tied to an event of some sort, or a set-up meeting that requires previous online contact.

Since they are so aware that they are part of a global fandom and – in the case of anime fans – that their hobby originates from a different culture, cosplayers frequently look to other countries for inspiration. While German informants express admiration and even envy at the sight of American cosplay photography that to them looks so "professional,"<sup>14</sup> German and American anime fans alike look to Japan and imagine a "super mega anime wonderland"<sup>15</sup> that one can only dream of:

G-MAL: [...] one convention that I would be intimidated to cosplay at would be anything in Japan, I would-

JAINA SOLO: I would love to go to Japan | to cosplay. |

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<sup>14</sup> ELSCH: "Over there [in the U.S.], the truly professional cosplayers have really awesome photographers, they know how to pose, they've got awesome locations where they can go, I love that." (I.1)

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

G-MAL: | I would be | incredibly intimidated | to cosplay there, |

JAINA SOLO: | I would really wanna do that- |

G-MAL: I would love to attend it, and I would like to see- I have high respect for cosplayers there, or costume makers, ...

*INTERVIEWER: Mhm, so you've checked them out over the internet?*

G-MAL: | I've checked them out- |

JAINA SOLO: | Yeah, so- | Comiket,<sup>16</sup> you know, I mean I know there's like other events, but Comiket is like- in- at least in my perspective, Comiket is like the place to cosplay in Japan, you know, I know several Americans who've gone over there and cosplayed while they were over there, at Comiket, and um... that is like a dream, that would be really- that would be really awesome, I would really like to go to Comiket and cosplay, but- you know, I don't know if that's gonna happen anytime soon. (I.12)

These fans have such great expectations of the Japanese cosplay community that the concept of actually seeing it for real one day sounds both fascinating and frightening. Visiting the world-famous convention in costume and comparing oneself to one's Japanese idols is “like a dream,” and it is implied that it may have to remain a dream. In these comments, the Japanese fandom appears as ‘other’ onto which they can project their own ideals. When seen from a distance, the practices of fans abroad can serve as a positive model that one aspires to.

### *Style and Uniformity*

Events in the *Star Wars* and anime fandoms attempt to facilitate face-to-face exchange between international fans, for example by choosing individuals from other countries to appear at the event and perform for (or with) other attendees, in a way that conforms to the community standard.

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<sup>16</sup> Comiket = Comic Market, the oldest convention (since 1975) for *dōjinshi* (amateur manga), held twice a year in Tokyo. Also the biggest comic-book convention in the world (attendance 500,000.)





**Figure 2: Stormtrooper at the 501st Legion booth at Jedi-Con 2008 (Düsseldorf, Germany).**

Members of the *Star Wars* costuming club, 501<sup>st</sup> Legion, are famous for their portrayal of the Emperor’s troops, whose “most iconic image” – next to Darth Vader – “is a

stormtrooper.”<sup>17</sup> Troopers appear at promotional and charity events, and some conventions even use them for crowd control. In order to evoke the magic of the movies, however, and give the audience what they expect, cosplayers need to blend in and conform to the look completely:

TK-4877: It’s a mass costume. You’ve got a number and you’re sort of faceless, in this costume [...] When you watch the movies, it’s not really impressive unless you’ve got a hundred stormtroopers showing up somewhere, and it’s the same for conventions. (I.8)



**Figure 3: TK-4877 and TK-4876 as Snowtrooper Commanders from Star Wars: Ep. V - The Empire Strikes Back (private photoshoot, Germany).**

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<sup>17</sup> SCRUFFY REBEL, I.10.

To the uninitiated, all stormtroopers do in fact look the same, as long as they keep their helmets on. For those fans who specialize in “Imperial” *Star Wars* costumes, however, even minor variations – such as different shades of white plastic, dents and scratches in the armor – will make a difference. They help the costumed fans tell each other apart, but more importantly, they serve as distinguishing features that might even result in a “unique” style.

At an international *Star Wars* event (for the 2007 Rose Parade in California), members of the 501<sup>st</sup> Legion from several countries were invited to march together in the parade. TK-4876 and TK-4877 from the German Garrison relate the story how “the Americans” complimented their peers on the armor “made in Germany” and how proud they felt about it. They go on to explain:

TK-4876: You can tell who’s an American trooper by the size of the helmet [...] The ones that are made in Germany, the helmets are a lot more detailed, and also the outlines are a lot more defined.  
(I.8)

Even though *Star Wars* fans all across the world use the same point of reference (the *Star Wars* movies) for their costumes, they develop articulate regional or national styles. Troopers use the fan network to not only share “esoteric” knowledge about costume-making, but they also trade moulds and plastics and gather at private “vacuum-forming functions”<sup>18</sup> to work on costumes together, resulting in a uniform look among their “squad” or “garrison.” Displaying the results at an international event gives those troopers a chance to feel special, perhaps even unique, although back home “they all look the same.”<sup>19</sup>

#### *Ambassadors of Cosplay*<sup>20</sup>

In the anime fandom, prolific cosplayers are known for their individual style that they aim to express with every new costume. Being recognized by other fans for their work they

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<sup>18</sup> TK-4876, I.8. Vacuum forming is the process by which heated plastic sheets are pressed into or onto a mould, to produce the raw material for armor pieces and helmets.

<sup>19</sup> TK-4877, I.8.

<sup>20</sup> YAYA HAN’s self-description on her homepage, yayahan.com. In Asia, the term “cosplay ambassador” is used by event organizers and sponsors to advertise cosplayers who are invited as guests-of-honor or live acts.

have done, and even having “fans” of their own who follow them online and long to meet them at a convention, is a fascinating experience that they would not be able to make in their everyday lives – even though it can feel “creepy” at times “to get recognized by people you don’t know.”<sup>21</sup>

SCRUFFY REBEL: I always see friends who get like tons and tons of... you know, I’ll say like fan alert, you know people who’ll be like oh my god you’re so and so, and I have been you know... tracking your costumes forever, I’ve been paying attention to every cosplay you’ve done, I’ve been watching you since you did *this* costume five years ago, there definitely seem to be people who follow the *cosplayer* more than... a character and you know a bunch of different people that portray that character. (I.10)

Cosplayers value comments from “high-status insiders,”<sup>22</sup> especially by representatives from foreign countries that are perceived to have “better” cosplayers or a cosplay scene that is more “advanced.” German cosplayer ELSCH, who has gained quite an international reputation herself, talks about getting featured in a “famous” American cosplayer’s podcast:

ELSCH: I loved that, because I think her costumes are so pretty, in my opinion she’s a very creative person, especially her original designs, I love those, and when you know for certain that, wow, she’s been looking at my photos! Wow, she even thinks they’re pretty cool! That totally makes it worth the effort. [...] I mean she knows what she’s doing, she probably knows a lot more about sewing and cosplay than I’m ever going to know, so that’s pretty awesome. (I.1)

While cosplayers get a lot of attention when they present their work at a convention or online, what really matters is feedback from ‘qualified’ members of the cosplay community, especially ones they can look up to, or who perform special functions in the community.

In recent years, Western anime conventions have started to follow the model of Asian cosplay events and treat well-known cosplayers almost like celebrities. They award them the guest status, usually in exchange for hosting panels or judging the masquerade, and they even use them for promotion.

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<sup>21</sup> ELSCH, I.1.

<sup>22</sup> Okabe 2012, 238.

YAYA HAN: TNT [a Mexican convention] is very cool in the way that they not only advertise you and make life-size banners of you, they'll see what costumes you bring and they'll organize groups, like official convention cosplay groups, that regular cosplayer can join, [...] kind of as a showcase for the general audience. (L5)

YAYA has been invited to conventions in North and South America, Europe, and Asia over the years. She is not only an internationally renowned cosplayer but has also made a profession of being a freelance costume designer and selling cosplay accessories. Even so, she retains her fan status, with no professional training or status in the industry that would clearly set her apart from other fans. Cosplay guests-of-honor can be role models for other fans, perhaps even more so than professional guests (e.g., voice actors or writers.) After all, they're "just another nerd in a costume",<sup>23</sup> still cosplaying from their favorite series, for the fun of it. In accordance to the community ethic, they share their knowledge generously (for example, teaching costuming skills in panels) and other fans look to them for advice and feedback.



Figure 4: Final Fantasy XIII (video game) group cosplay at Dragon\*Con 2010 (Atlanta, GA, USA).

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<sup>23</sup> STRIPPERVASH, I.3.

Cosplay guests (as well as other fan artists) are chosen for the benefit they provide for the event. Being connected and having a reputation with fans worldwide certainly helps, but event organizers stress that they need to be able to contribute to convention programming and bring some sort of expertise that is sought after in the local community.<sup>24</sup> Cosplay guests can provide new insights for the fans at the hosting event, as well as their own community back home, as they talk about their trip, or even adopt new ways that they learned abroad.<sup>25</sup> Conventions and ‘famous’ role models facilitate exchange that might never happen if not for the fandom:

JAINA SOLO: [...] maybe about like three or f- maybe like three years ago, Mexico started to invite American cosplay guests, and you know cosplayers from other places, but mainly from America, um, so we- that has kind of opened up () like the () the borders between like the Mexican cosplay community and the American cosplay-

*INTERVIEWER: Have you been there as a visitor, or as a guest?*

JAINA SOLO: No, never have, um... never been to Mexico before, I live in San Diego ((lacht)) and I’ve never been- but um, but, I mean since that started happening, since American cosplayers have been going down to Mexico, we’ve started to learn a little bit more about the Mexican cosplay community. (I.12)

It is clear from JAINA’s account that it is only through the fandom that she started to consider this “foreign” culture, even though it has never been more than a 20-minute drive away. The concept of “travel[ing] to... a completely different country, that the language is totally different, and attend an anime convention there, that’s- that’s something... I mean that really sticks out my head.”<sup>26</sup> Yet a few months after this interview, JAINA would actually venture “south of the border,” following an invitation by a Mexican convention.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For an overview of guest selection criteria, cf. this interview series with event organizers: <http://commonster.com/selecting-guest-cosplayers-for-conventions-part-1-animecon-nl/>

<sup>25</sup> My informant ELSCH (I.1), who spent a whole year living in Japan, recounts how she learned a lot about makeup and posing from Japanese cosplayers, and even a new way to deal with the hobby by separating her cosplay persona more clearly from everyday life.

<sup>26</sup> JAINA SOLO, I.12.

<sup>27</sup> <http://artes9.com/2008/11/27/con-outlet-comics-outlet/>

When cosplayers travel to foreign conventions, they act as “ambassadors” to the fan community in their home country. They get to see the full range of costumes and performances, even the ones that do not get much attention online. They get a first-hand impression of the way conventions are run, and even the way other communities deal with what they perceive as critical issues, such as competitiveness among fan artists.

North American cosplayers YAYA HAN and LIMEBARB have both been invited to Latin American conventions, and their reports focus on the community spirit that they experienced during their stay:

LIMEBARB: I felt like there was somehow a lot more camaraderie between cosplayers, they supported each other, and... you know, I feel like mh... like- when somebody won an award, on stage at that competition, the other cosplayers could say, oh congratulations, and clap for them and give them hugs, but in America, I think we would have a lot of people who angrily storm off, [...] and they don't have that um... good sportsmanship. (I.6)

YAYA HAN: Aside from the fun atmosphere, there is always an- like a community feeling, um... it's like- you can *tell* that these people know each other. Uh... in the U.S., [...] people are in cliques, and they only stick to their own friends and they don't talk to the cosplayers maybe across the room, ever. Um... aside from maybe saying, ((in a high-pitched voice)) //hey, you have a great costume, can I have a picture.// But in Mexico it seems like really everybody knows each other, in Brazil the cosplayers help each other um... for this like con- like performance skits, you know, so it's- it's not even really a competition as it's like a... variety show where everyone like, helps each other on stage, helps put their props on there, you know so you like... uh see a cosplayer go up and he'll do his skit and then five skits later you'll see him helping someone else up, and it's like, *that* you don't get here. [...] That still is competition in the end. (I.5)

In her account, YAYA makes a clear distinction between ritualized interaction (asking someone for a photo) and what she perceives as genuine compassion from cosplayers toward their “competitors”; LIMEBARB seems to support her view. What both of them share is a feeling that something is lacking in their own cosplay community back home, which they seem to have observed abroad. This intercultural experience opens up new perspectives; the realization of similarities and differences with other fan cultures helps the fans reflect on their own attitude toward the famcom, and possibly bring that experience back home to tell their local community about it.



**Figure 5: Cosplayer Shizuku (as Asuka from Neon Genesis Evangelion) posing for the camera at Animuc 2009 (Munich, Germany).**

### *Conclusion*

Cosplayers are a highly specialized fan group that relies on online communities and social networks, as well as face-to-face encounters at conventions, to establish and maintain a sense of unity across geographic borders. Yet at the same time, repeated exchange with cosplayers from other countries serves to raise awareness for the diversity of fan cultures. Interviews with American and German cosplayers reveal that they actively construct differences to distinguish themselves, or their local community, from ‘foreign’ fan cultures. Of particular interest to cosplayers is how other fan communities deal with critical issues that touch upon the very essence of what “cosplay” means to them.

Cosplay, like any kind of fan art, is a result of constant negotiations between speculative readings of the popular text, the community standards that one aspires to, and



individual preferences – even more so as cosplayers literally bring something of their own to the fanwork and the performance: their body and their personality. Therefore, no two fanworks or ways to practice cosplay can ever be the same, but that does not mean that one of them has to be wrong:

PAMELANEKO: Well, one of the things that I love about cosplay, I actually have a love-hate relationship with this aspect of cosplay, is the fact that it's so open to interpretation. [...] And on the one hand it's really fascinating to see how people think that this 2D drawing was gonna look on their 3D body. But on the other hand it can be frustrating, because no one is ever satisfied, because everybody has a different image in their mind. And because they are a fan, they feel entitled to criticize, and... and it's like, I could never live up to someone's expectations of this fantasy anime girl. [...] You know, it's just natural to look at somebody and compare yourself to them, but the important part is that you don't dwell on it, and that you see the positive aspects of both, I mean it's the *differences*, that I think are so great. (I.4)

Whenever cosplayers meet at a convention or look at other people's costumes online, they are bound to notice these differences that may be a result of the material and patterns they used, the reference images they chose to work with, or the physical build of the wearer. In fact, the practice of “collaborative problem solving”<sup>28</sup> and talking about different ways to interpret the popular text is an essential part of this creative fan practice, and it is enriched by new input from outside the local community. This is not just true for the individual fanwork, but also for topics that affect the general way people ‘live’ the fandom, the way they talk to each other, and how they develop an individual style as a fan artist or a collective identity as a fan group.

Discussing and analyzing these performances of fan identity may help us not only to acknowledge the diversity of fan cultures, but to put it to productive use and actually further our understanding of fandom and fan costuming on a global level. This research project with cosplayers from two different continents, who associate themselves with different fandoms

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<sup>28</sup> Okabe 2012, 243.

(or with multiple fandoms at once), confirms that there are a number of different ways to practice “cosplay,” or “costuming,” that go beyond different terminologies. While the goal of this paper was to highlight some of these distinctions and how they matter to the fans themselves, an intercultural approach to creative fan practices can also hope to explain where these differences – as well as similarities across fandoms – come from.

A comparison between two or more fandoms illustrates the role of the popular texts that cosplayers are fans of, i.e. how these texts set the pattern for their creative adaptation. This becomes blatantly clear when contrasting uniformed *Star Wars* troopers with bikini-clad anime girls, but a close reading of the texts and fans’ interpretations may reveal more subtle nuances, too. It also helps to understand why certain texts appeal to cosplayers and other specialized fan groups, and why they lend themselves to interpretation through cosplay. However, there is no neat distinction along the lines of each fandom: two *Star Wars* fans from different generations or from opposite sides of the Atlantic quite certainly do not agree on everything *Star Wars*. Since popular texts are, by definition, open to interpretation and do not predetermine fans’ readings in a simplistic manner, a number of individual and social factors come into play – such as age, occupation, media competence, history and infrastructure of the local or national fan community.<sup>29</sup> All of these factors may shape the fanwork at different stages in its creation process.

By focusing on a specific kind of fanwork and its surrounding culture in different fandoms, we can hope to better understand the complexity of these creative fan practices, from popular readings to the finished ‘re-creations’ and their treatment in fan discourse. By highlighting the distinctions that fans make in the process and finding out where they come

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<sup>29</sup> As indicated earlier, the ways fans use social media for self-presentation seem to differ from fandom to fandom. The demographics of each fan group (with two generations of *Star Wars* fans vs. younger anime fans who already grew up with the internet) certainly play a part, but so does the source material (e.g., do the costumes and characters lend themselves to the construction of a collective identity, or to individual interpretations that display the cosplayer’s unique abilities and “assets”?)

from, we can hope to establish a common ground: what really matters to all of these fans, or to specialized groups that are connected across fandoms and cultures.

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