The masculinization of dressing-up

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Abstract

'Dressing-up' has often been seen as a gendered activity. In particular, costuming – the design and creation of costumes – has been viewed as a female pursuit. However, contemporary events and artefacts, particularly those related to fandom, frame dressing-up in contexts that are more acceptable to male audiences. Via cosplay, historical re-enactment, and the personalization of characters in online games such as *World of Warcraft*, a new generation of men are becoming more engaged with costume. This article will identify contemporary influences on the perception of the wearing and construction of costume, particularly with regards to costume as an expression of masculine ideals. It will discuss the costume as a marker of hypermasculinity, authority or preparedness, and identify how traditionally feminine domestic spaces and activities have been coopted by a new generation of males. It will present domestic activities such as sewing as rights-of-passage on the path towards masculinity.

Keywords

masculinity

Costume design and 'dressing-up' have long-been presented as gendered activities, associated with cosmetic acts of beautification, or childish fantasy. If costume can be justified as a functional object, particularly in that it is associated with the very masculine act of combat, it can be distanced from feminine acts of vanity, and childish acts of play. Historical and military re-enactment invites participants to consider clothing not as frivolous fashion items but as the tools of war, and a means of recording history. In multiplayer online games (such as *World of Warcraft*), the dressing and preparation of the avatar is a significant part of the player's gaming experience. Fron et al. (2004) observe that male gamers devote a lot of time and effort into developing their costume, justified by their use of terminology such as 'gear' rather than 'costume'. Such terminology suggests that the avatar's wardrobe is primarily a matter of function rather than style.

The notion of costume as functional object has also made the practice of dressing-up more acceptable to mainstream cinema audiences. Christopher Nolan (2008) took great pains to justify Bruce Wayne's costume in his recent cinema incarnations of Batman (*The Dark Knight* and its sequels), in which the Batman costume is depicted as pseudo-utilitarian. The superhero genre also presents numerous masculine characters actively involved in the design and creation of costume, including Spider-Man, who is seen sewing his own suit in the domestic space of his aunt's home. In sci-fi and fantasy fandom, fans acquire cultural capital through the design and creation of costume. Through accuracy and authenticity in costume, a cosplayer may

position himself as an authority. The organized 'masquerades' that take place at cosplay events add a masculine element of competition to this traditionally feminine act (Gooch 2008: 17).

Cosplay, re-enactment and the dressing of toys or avatars, are all practices that extend childhood play into adulthood. In this way, the growing popularity of these activities coincides with changes in mainstream clothing practices, as fashion is increasingly borrowing from childhood. Hadley Freeman of *The Guardian* observes an increasing desire to invoke memories of childhood through clothing such as animal hats, mittens and onesies (2013). Imaginative reconstruction of fictional narratives is common in childhood, and so dressing-up in costume has an apparent triviality and perceived childishness. Fashion too has connotations of frivolity (Barthes 1983: 242). Herbert Blumer's (1969: 276) canonical writings describe how the pursuit of fashion has been seen as 'irrational'.

Participants in costumed activities seek measures to distance their activities from childhood play, and from the frivolities of fashion. Contemporary practices of dressing-up are distanced from these unwanted associations by emphasis on authenticity, functionality and technology. In contemporary role-playing and cosplay environments, ranging from fan conventions to military re-enactment events, the emphasis is not on apparently feminine or childish issues of imagination, but on concrete, quantifiable concerns about authenticity. At MCM comic Con, for example, cosplayers are rewarded points on a scale of one to ten for accuracy and workmanship (2014).[1] Questions of authenticity lead to competition, and hence opportunities to display dominance. In cosplay and re-enactment, authenticity (the degree of accuracy

of adherence to the source) is the basis of competition, and in virtual environments

such as *World of Warcraft*, gear offers advantages in combat, the outcome of which

prompt movement up or down a hierarchy of players. Here too aspects of costumes

are ranked in quantitative terms, with a numerical rating system known as 'gear

score'. Further, by placing costume in the context of masculine acts, such as historical

recreation of battles and combat, or by presenting it as engineered technology,

masculinity is emphasized.

In order to achieve the particular authenticity and masculinity that is required in these

costumed activities, participants must engage in the design and construction of their

own costume. This requirement exposes them to the traditionally domestic or

feminine activity of dress-making. Ironically, the burgeoning trend for masculine acts

of dressing-up requires participants to get in touch with their feminine side. As will be

shown in this article, Spider-Man must engage with the domestic chore of sewing

before he can prove his masculinity in combat.

Competition and authenticity in cosplay and historical re-enactment

Cosplay is a form of participatory fandom that embraces costume while asserting

itself as distinct from childish acts of dressing-up. Bainbridge and Norris (2009: 7)

describe cosplay as a 'ritual of identification', which aligns the cosplayer with his

fictional hero or heroine through procedural play. Cosplay has evolved from diverse

origins, combining practices from fans of fiction and fact. Nicolle Lamerichs

identifies cosplay as a convergence of 1960s/1970s sci-fi fandom practices, and 'the

tradition of Renaissance fairs and historical re-enactment, as well as later practices

such as live-action role-playing' (Lamerichs 2011: 2). Although historical re-

enactment and cosplay are two vastly different practices in many ways, they both present dressing-up in an adult, masculinized context.

One of the strongest factors influencing fan practices is competition with other fans. This is true both of fans of fiction and fact, including pop culture narratives and historical events. Michelle McCudden (2011) identifies that fan communities develop hierarchies, in which status is achieved through various demonstrations of devotion. A fan who can prove that his or her devotion is greatest, moves to the top of the social scale. Fandom has a 'cultural economy', in which value is attributed to acts of devotion. Fans are able to build cultural capital through ownership of artefacts that are of high value within a particular fan community.

In this cultural economy, the acquisition or creation of a costume is an investment of sorts: a way to 'accrue capital which can then be converted to status' in a hierarchical fan community (McCudden 2011: 9–10). The costumes that are most valuable as cultural capital are those that are considered most authentic. Through accuracy and authenticity in costume, a cosplayer may demonstrate knowledge of the subject, and may position him or herself as an authority, thereby increasing social standing within the fan community. The cosplayer's place in the hierarchy is often achieved through organized competitions that provide opportunities to demonstrate the authenticity of a costume, and commitment to the subject of one's fandom. Many conventions include a competitive showcase in which fans parade their costumes, known as a masquerade (Gooch 2008: 17). These competitions provide legitimacy, and enable quantifiable claims of success or dominance.

There are agreed markers of authenticity in any fan community, and distinctions are made between garments that are 'genuine' and those that are 'authentic'. Curiously, genuine artefacts do not hold as much value in some fan communities as authentic copies. At MCM Comic Con points and prizes are awarded for accuracy, but competition entrants are forbidden from wearing 'commissioned or bought costumes' (2014). The preference for authentic-but-fake over genuine artefacts stems from two requirements of fandom: first, the investment of time and knowledge as demonstrated in constructing one's own costume, and second, the importance of an authentic experience.

The first of these requirements distances cosplay and re-enactment from historical forms of fancy dress, in which participants would sometimes seek original costume elements. Although historical fancy-dress and masquerade balls have been as concerned with excess as contemporary equivalents (perhaps even more so), they have more directly appropriated from their historical sources. In the 1880s New York, W. K. Vanderbilt's annual fancy-dress balls were the talk of the town. Her 1200 guests explored their fantasies of aristocratic heritage in costumes modelled on historical dress of the French court and British monarchy, and were so concerned with authenticity that the balls became a kind of window on history. Every minute detail of the attendees' costumes was copied from historical portraits. Guests masqueraded as Joan of Arc, Elizabeth I, and Marie Antoinette, among a parade of other memorable (or notorious) figures from the European past (Croffut 1886: 197). Although authenticity was as important to these costume wearers as it is in contemporary cosplay and re-enactment, it was achieved, where possible, through direct use of historical artefacts. Alva Vanderbilt's costume was adorned with pearls that had once

belonged to Catherine the Great. At her own ball, Cornelia Bradley decorated her dress with jewels worn by Marie Antoinette (Müller 2011).

The second requirement – the authentic experience – stems from the fact that cosplay is as much about 'play' as it is about costume (Winge 2006: 65). Authenticity lies in experiencing similar sensations and emotions to those experienced by the original incarnation of a character. This is also true of re-enactment, which is not merely about dressing as one's forebears, but also experiencing events as they did. The experiences of those historical figures who are the subject of re-enactment may only be replicated with costumes and weapons that are as new as they were when worn in historical settings. For example, if soldiers once stitched their own boots from recently softened cow hide, then the action of doing the same offers a more authentic experience than using an original boot that has become stiff with age. An authentic experience cannot be had with an ageing artefact, no matter how genuine its provenance may be.

The goal of authenticity provides costumed individuals with a method of quantifying the success of their costumes. There are opportunities to directly compare the costume with authoritative records, and to determine the accuracy of the reproduction using unambiguous methods of comparison. When such quantifiable characteristics are prioritized over intangible qualities such as attractiveness or fashionability, costuming is legitimized for participants who may reject other clothing activities on the grounds that they are superficial.

Further, some costumed activities align participants with unquestionably male subjects and events. In military re-enactment, participants place themselves in roles

that have been historically occupied only by men. There are sets of rules governing how the costume may be worn, dictated by the demand for historical accuracy. Such strictly regulated scenarios avoid the free improvisation of childsplay. These acts of dressing-up takes on mature and masculine associations with war and rule-making. In cosplay too there are opportunities to present oneself as hypermasculine. In superhero cosplay, for example, male characters represent the pinnacle of masculinity, with physiques and costumes that borrow from athletes and strongmen.

In his studies of costume for re-enactment, Stephen Gapps (2009: 98) observes the lengths to which some participants will go to achieve authenticity in their appearance. Beyond costuming, some participants choose to live a lifestyle that gives them a physique to match the costume. He acknowledges that in historical re-enactment, this level of bodily authenticity is nearly impossible to achieve. The same is true of superhero cosplay, which requires participants to aspire to an unattainable physique. For those bodies that do not match up to the ideal, costumes are designed to enhance the physical characteristics associated with masculinity. In order to imitate the muscularity of a hero, cosplayers are often dependent on padding, sewn between layers of fabric. Such padded costumes enable the wearer to not only dress like a superhero, but also to extend his physical presence. With chest padding, a cosplayer may occupy equivalent physical space to his favourite hero, thereby more accurately replicating the experience of being that hypermasculine character.

Costume or 'gear'? Terminology in *World of Warcraft*

In role-playing games, real and virtual, the dressing and preparation of the character is a significant part of the player's gaming experience. In the online role-playing-game,

World of Warcraft, for example, Janine Fron et al. (2004) observe that male gamers devote a lot of time and effort into developing their costume, justified by their use of terminology such as 'gear' rather than 'costume'. Such terminology suggests that the avatar's wardrobe is primarily a matter of function rather than style. Moreover, it is quantifiable. One choice of armour may offer more effective defence than another, enabling players to 'treat the costume as a statistic more than a decoration or form of personal expression' (Fron et al. 2004: 6). These gaming experiences 'may also serve as an entry-point for adults into dress-up, for whom its convergence with technology may dispel some of its more feminine [and childish] connotations' (Fron et al. 2004: 3). If costume can be justified as a functional object, particularly in that is associated with the very masculine act of combat, it can be distanced from feminine acts of vanity, and childish acts of play.

This virtual gear is assessed according to very different criteria than the real-world costumes described above. Much has been written about the authenticity of virtual characters that are direct representations of the user, and the way in which users choose to dress these characters in imitation of themselves. See, for example, Henrietta L. Moore's (2013) exploration of the pursuit of 'self-authenticity' in *Second Life*, in which she identifies the avatar as a hybrid of 'authentic self' and 'desired self'. These and other direct representations of self in virtual environments are clothed to imitate the real self, and so, write Bloustien and Wood (2013: 52) the process of dressing the avatar is cosmetic, comparable to real-life 'beauty practices', and in particular, a cosmetic 'rebirth' that permits a glamourized expression of one's 'inner self'. Therefore, for many users of virtual avatars, authenticity is a central concern, but this is an authenticity that goes hand-in-hand with frivolous, cosmetic concerns,

and is subject to the same accusations of frivolity as some real-life dressing-up. Inside *World of Warcraft*, the authenticity of gear cannot be scored in this manner. It is neither designed to resemble the real-life user (as in *Second Life*), nor as an adaptation of a costume that exists in another medium (as in cosplay). Although its design may be inspired by historical dress or armour, within the game world, players aspire to originality, not derivation. The process of entering *World of Warcraft* is a process of becoming Other (Bloustien and Wood 2013: 53). The units by which it quantifies the value of a costume must, therefore, relate to measures of success or failure within the fictional game world.

Players comments on the gaming forum, Game Skinny, highlight the statistical value of their avatar's costume, and the importance of choosing correctly. One female player, Lilly Babineau (2012) notes that 'gear can often be the difference between winning and losing in some battles'. For her and other players, character clothing is a matter of life and death. She observes that there are tangible consequences to making the wrong clothing choices, writing that 'it is important to know which gear is right for your character otherwise you could end up dying'.

These message boards also provide evidence that players use costume as a way of discriminating against one another. Babineau writes, 'if an expert has a low gear score, [World of Warcraft] party leaders might opt against them for a raid in favor of a novice with a high gear score'. Poor choice of clothing, or 'gear', can therefore not only have direct impact on a player's ability to succeed in the game, but also indirectly on relationships with the wider player community. Parallels can be drawn with playground discrimination on the basis of whether a pupil's clothes are perceived

as 'fashionable', but here, the discrimination is made impersonal by the application of quantitative criteria. Players are excluded on the basis of apparently unbiased judgements.

'Gear' is further distanced from real-life clothing and fashion items in the means by which it is acquired. Gear is not offered in the context of a clothing store or wardrobe, but rather it is acquired in combat contexts, as the spoils of war. Not all gear choices are available to all players. Players must earn the right to expand their wardrobe. In this way, gear is part of a reward system. Achievement grants access to new gear that allows the player to visibly flaunt his success.

Sewing superheroes

The desire to acquire cultural capital in a cosplay or re-enactment environment prompts participants to demonstrate skill and knowledge of the source in the construction of their own costumes. In these environments, the construction of one's own costume is considered a greater demonstration of devotion to the source text than merely purchasing a costume that has been commercially manufactured.

The importance of a home-made costume requires participants to demonstrate gendered skills, in particular, they must engage in the domestic activity of sewing. Costuming – the design and creation of costumes – has been viewed as a gendered activity. Sewing in particular has been presented as a feminine pursuit or domestic chore (Gordon 2009). So, in order to construct the hyper-masculine identity of a historical warrior or fictional superhero, a cosplayer must get in touch with his feminine side.

For cosplayers in particular, the importance of costuming skills is mirrored in fictional source material. The recent popularity of superhero adaptations at the box office has presented audiences with hyper-masculine stereotypes who are defined, in part, by their 'dressing-up'. Superheroes including Spider-Man and Batman are shown designing and constructing their own costumes. For Batman, the process is one of assemblage. He constructs his costume from separately sourced components, and presents himself as an engineer rather than a dressmaker (Brooker 2012: 92). Spider-Man, however, employs domestic and craft skills in the construction of his costumes. The film, *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Webb, 2012), shows him screen-printing the spider design that is to emblazon his chest. The Spider-Man comics show the character repairing his costume with needle and thread. The feminine connotations of costume sewing continue to persist outside of Spider-Man's fictional world. Interviewed about his role in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (Webb, 2014), actor Andrew Garfield described Peter Parker's sewing of the costume as 'a kind of feminine thing to do'. Pressed for details by his co-star, he continued, 'femininity is about… delicacy, precision… and craftsmanship'. He emphasizes that the result of this feminine act was a 'very masculine costume' (Miller 2014).

The Spider-Man comics explicitly present the design and repair of costume as a domestic activity; one that is beneath a 'big-name' superhero. *Amazing Spider-Man #129* (Conway, February 1974) depicts Peter accidentally piercing his finger with a sewing needle, protesting that, despite his fame he has 'still got to do [his] own sewing'. In contrast, Peter Parker's aunt is depicted sewing in the background, and seems to engage in this task much more willingly. It is worth noting that this activity

takes place within the home. Within the domestic space of his bedroom, Peter Parker engages in the domestic, feminine activity of sewing. Then, when he enters the outside world, he dons the costume and performs masculinity.

Earlier incarnations of Spider-Man, as depicted in Stan Lee and Steve Ditko's *The Amazing Spider-Man*, make reference to the contradiction between the feminine act of sewing, and the masculinity of the superhero. Parker sews his own costume, but protests that the task comes unnaturally to him. In issue #20 (Lee, 1965a), he is shown stitching his tattered costume back together, and hyperbolizes that his 'biggest problem is getting this sewn without stabbing [his] finger to death'. Later, in issue #27 (Lee, 1965b) he describes sewing as 'the one thing I hate most in the whole wide world'.

For Spider-Man, and indeed for other superheroes too, designing and sewing a costume is a right of passage. Although they may have acquired their superpowers previously, it is not at the time of power-acquisition that they become a superhero. The transformation is not complete until they don a new costume, and adopt the super-identity. Although some superheroes do adopt a ready-made costume (see, e.g., Green Lantern, or the many heroes who adopt the costumes of their predecessors), many design and make their costumes themselves. It is in this conception of their superhero identity, via costume, that they achieve their destiny. In this way, it seems essential that superheroes must explore their domestic identity in preparation for entering the hypermasculine domain of the hero.

Costume engineering

As noted above, another superhero, Batman, presents his costuming as a feat of engineering, thus presenting it as wearable technology rather than dress. Susan Elizabeth Ryan (2014: 25) identifies a convergence of fashion and technology as a blurring of the gender divide. 'Dress', she writes, 'is a female allegiance, while technology is a sign of masculinity'. Those cosplayers who construct their own costumes increasingly present themselves as engineers rather than costumiers, and in doing so position their practice alongside masculine endeavours. The inclusion of mechanical and electronic enhancements in costumes allows costume designers and creators to employ skills that one might associate more with engineering workshops than with feminine domestic spaces. Ex-NASA engineer, Mark Rober has employed his skills in the development of a line of 'tech-enhanced' halloween costumes with kinaetic components and smartphone connectivity (Godsall 2014). His costumes include masks with revolving eyeballs, a zombie with a beating heart and a Wolverine suit with retractable claws, all of which function via integration of a smartphone pouch, and a downloadable app. Rober's status as professional engineer and NASA employee adds authority to his activities as a costume designer.

Opportunities have arisen for mechanically minded cosplayers to develop functioning devices that resemble aspects of superhero costumes. Web-shooters became an integral part of Spider-Man's costume in his first appearance in *Amazing Fantasy #15* (Lee, August 1962), *The Amazing Spider-Man* comics continued to depict the web-shooter as a mechanical device, loaded with cartridges of web-fluid. Inspired by Spider-Man's gadget, German designer, Patrick Priebe, has developed a similar device that allows wearers to shoot artificial webbing. The device, attached to a glove with concealed button, shoots harpoon-tipped webbing when the wearer performs the

same finger gestures as Spider-Man does in comic books. The webbing is attached to a winch hidden under the sleeve of the costume, so that the web may be wound up, dragging whatever object is attached to the other end into the wearer's grasp. Other inventions by Priebe include a functioning 'Iron Man Laser Gauntlet', and a 'Steampunk laser blaster' (laser-gadgets.com). The creation of such devices is more an act of engineering than of costume design, requiring the application of skills that are traditionally perceived as masculine. Indeed, commentators tend to refer to Priebe as an 'inventor' rather than a costumier (Porter 2014).

These examples mark a trend towards wearable technology in costume design. When any craft practice, not least dress-making, incorporates new technologies, the resulting artefacts tend to be perceived as 'masculine, proprietary, and function-oriented' (Ryan 2014: 209). Ryan (2014: 7) observes that, while wearable technology did originate from experiments with enhanced functionality (with medical or protective applications), 'other applications… subjectify the body not through diagnostic or protective initiatives but by the function of garments as spectacle'. Costumes designed by engineers and inventors including Rober and Priebe create costumes that function primarily as aesthetic display. Wearable technology, therefore, is as much about 'ostentatious consumption' as mainstream fashion (Roche and Birrel 1994: 502), thinly veiled as engineering.

Iron Man's fictional mechanized suit provides cosplayers with an ideal example of how costume can be the result of technical innovation. Although he develops his own costume, Tony Stark (Iron Man's alter-ego) presents the process as equivalent to that of designing a vehicle or a weapon. Indeed, Stark Industries is a manufacturer of

military weapons technology, and the Iron Man suit is presented in the same terms as the company's other military output. Though his suit is the most technologically motivated of all superhero costumes, Iron Man's concerns are not entirely utilitarian. Like the manufacturers of sports cars, he streamlines the suit for aesthetic as well as functional purposes. The Iron Man depicted in Marvel's films is a narcissist comfortable with frivolity. His suit may be ostentatious, but it is clear that his concern for the aesthetic properties of his costume does not compromise his virility. In *Iron Man* (Favreau, 2008), Stark selects 'Hot Rod red' for his new suit. By framing the colour choice in reference to a mechanical object, one of the many cars in his garage, he presents his aesthetic concerns as unquestionably masculine.

The masculinity of his costume makes Iron Man an acceptable reference for real-life military technologies. The US Army is developing a tactical assault suit, TALOS, which has been jocularly described by Barack Obama as a real-life Iron Man (Anon. 2014). Such technologies increasingly blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, and between cosplay and real-life superheroes. By equating the real-life combat suit to Iron Man's costume, Obama employs a pop culture reference that makes military concepts more accessible to the average American civilian, and draws parallels between Iron Man's heroism and the values of the US military.

Conclusion

Cosplay environments are increasingly inclusive thanks to diversification of role models. The fictional characters who are the inspiration for many costumes are diverse in gender, ethnicity, and even species, and this has lead to a more diverse fan community. Nonetheless, archetypal subjects of pop culture fandom are still

hypermasculine, and even when they engage in domestic activities such as sewing, they appear not to compromise their masculinity. These fictional heroes' willingness to engage in costume design and manufacture invites audiences to do the same. However, even these heroes demonstrate concerns that such activities may compromise their masculinity, and so resort to presenting their activities in less domestic terms.

Just as fashion has been 'reframed within the masculine world of technology', so too has costume and cosplay (Ryan 2014: 29). Locating costume and dressing-up within the digital environment or *World of Warcraft*, or the practice of engineering, invites associations with masculine practices. These environments offer alternative terminology, enabling the avoidance of terms such as 'costume' or 'dress-making', in favour of terms such as 'gear' or 'engineering'. Authenticity and functionality appear to dominate costume design in these contexts, but in many cases these concerns merely serve to legitimatize spectacle.

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Note

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[1] The success of a costume is quantifiable in that it is given numerical scores for its effectiveness according to pre-determined criteria. Judges at the London Super Costume Championship are respected members of the costume-making community (including amateurs and those who have graduated to becoming professional costumiers and prop-designers), suggesting that one measure of success for a cosplayer is an invitation to judge others (LSCC 2014).