

## Articles

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Urban poachers

# Urban poachers: Cosplay, playful cultures and the appropriation of urban space

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## Abstract

This article considers cosplayers' use and transformation of urban space. Cosplay provides an important subcultural embodiment of contemporary popular culture, through which we can learn a great deal about contemporary forms of fandom, participatory culture and (mostly notably here) urban appropriation. This article draws on data gathered from a four-year ethnographic study, *which includes the use of art as a method*, but here specifically looks at a small cosplay community that regularly meets in a park in Manchester. The article argues that a useful way of understanding cosplay is to consider the relationship between play and culture. In particular, the article sets out a consideration of how cosplayers transform social spaces through the use of process of synecdoche and asyndeton, which link together and edit out parts of the built environment – or what we term 'urban poaching'.

## Keywords

art

cosplay

fans

play

poaching

subculture

urban space

## Introduction

The primary aim of this article to set out and explore a theoretical consideration of the (sub)cultural use and appropriation of urban spaces, and then apply this to an empirically informed example of cosplay. Cosplay provides a visible and important subcultural embodiment and appropriation of contemporary popular culture. Cosplay is academically significant as it offers an opportunity to add to debates around fandom, subculture, participatory culture, urban appropriation and much more beyond. However, and somewhat surprisingly, cosplay remains significantly under-researched. There is a small but growing literature on cosplay, which includes (but is not limited to), Norris and Bainbridge (2009), Lunning (2012), Pierson-Smith (2013), Rosenberg and Latamendi (2013), della Valle et al. (2015), Leng (2013), Lome (2016) and most notably, the work of Nicole Lamerichs (2011, 2014, 2015) – but certainly it is an area in need of further attention.

This article begins with a discussion of the work of Thomas S. Henricks (2014), which considers how the relationship between play and culture has typically been theorized; most notably here seeing play either as a form of socialization or a source of resistance, or culture as playful in itself. This, we suggest, offers a possible contradiction, which we seek to address by utilizing the work of Michel de Certeau (1984). Though de Certeau has been previously employed in many considerations of both urban exploration and fan cultures, his work is not typically used in considerations of play.

The article then outlines the research methods employed in our wider project, which includes the use of use of art, before considering how cosplayers (re)imagine and (re)appropriate certain urban spaces. This reappropriation of space could be viewed as an act of social resistance; however, we suggest, it is more in keeping with the idea of a community seeking a safe space. An act, which once underway, then transforms the meaning of an urban space, for both the participants and other urban dwellers.

Hence, though this article focuses on a specific group of cosplayers, primarily in one location, importantly it adds to our understanding of a popular global, but under-researched, cultural practice. Moreover, this also pushes forward our understanding play, fan practices, subcultures and significantly, sets out a theoretical framework for the understanding of (sub)cultural uses and appropriation of urban spaces.

## Defining 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'.

For some, cosplay is fairly narrowly defined in terms of costuming (and 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. And others still are even more broad in their terms, such as Lotecki (2012), who also includes steampunk, Furrries, zombie role play, live action role play (LARP) and historical re-enactment, as forms of cosplay. However, it would seem the distinction for most cosplayers, and in turn most

academics, of what sets cosplayers apart from other costumed science fiction and fantasy fans is that their costuming is not just a one off or isolated activity, but rather it is one aspect of their participation within a wider community, which revolves around, but is not limited to, the act of dressing up.

## Understanding playful culture

A key component of the word cosplay is *play*. It is a playful act and culture in which participants not only play out a role but also engage in a wider act of communal play. However, its playful nature, and the role of play in group and wider cultural practices, has largely gone under researched to date.

Henricks in his book *Play and the Human Condition* (2014) provides a useful categorization of the relationship between play and culture, under the headings of 'playing in culture', 'playing at culture' and 'playing culture'.

'Playing in culture' relates to the idea of play as a 'culture-building enterprise' (Henricks 2014: 190). Examples here include the work of Schwartzman (1978) on how play is an important form of socialization for children, or Huizinga ([1938] 1949) on the role of play in the development of civilization.

In contrast, Henricks considers under the heading of 'playing at culture' ideas of play as an escape from the prevailing order, and even possibly, an act of resistance to it. Notable writers here include the work of Bakhtin ([1968] 1984) on the 'carnavalesque', and Turner (1969) on the 'liminal' and 'liminoid'. For Bakhtin, the idea of the carnivalesque is derived from his work on European medieval carnivals, where he suggests there was a subversion of the normal social order, hierarchies, conventional roles and identities, and a revelling in the obscene, vulgar and grotesque.

The final category is 'playing culture', where Henricks considers ideas of culture itself *as* playful, and more specifically, points to the work of postmodernists and poststructuralists, such as Derrida (1976) and Foucault (1979). In particular, Derrida suggests that society and culture are never set, but are navigated via the use of language, which in itself is a constantly evolving and fluid system.

Henricks' conceptualization of approaches to understanding the relationship between play and culture is useful as it allows the reader to easily approach three key themes that appear recurrent in many of the writings in this area. That is to say, put simply, the idea of play as structuring, play as resistance, or culture as playful. However, this does leave us with a bit of a quandary, if not contradiction; as this illustrates that the relationship between play and culture has often been understood in quite different ways. Hence, we would like to suggest that a way forward might be found in the work of de Certeau, and in particular, his writings on *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984).

## Play in everyday life

Henricks (2014) does not discuss the work of Michel de Certeau; which is not surprising as de Certeau is not typically seen as a writer on play. However, as with the likes of Bakhtin and Turner the opportunities afforded by play *are* explored by de Certeau. In particular, we would like to suggest that de Certeau offers a possible way of reconciling the idea of play as both structuring and liberating, and also points towards both the opportunities and limitations of a poststructuralist approach.

De Certeau (1984) suggests that social life can be, and often is, constraining and oppressive; where individuals are largely 'marginalized' and have little say or no control over factors such as market forces. However, he suggests that everyday life is extremely

complex and multifaceted; allowing room for manoeuvre and individuality. In theorizing everyday life, de Certeau draws on the concepts of 'strategies' and 'tactics'. Strategies are linked to places and the appropriate actions specific to that particular time and place. However, de Certeau sees no 'single logic' to the social practices within these places, as there will always be room for individual action. These individual actions de Certeau refers to as 'tactics', which involve the disguises, deceptions, stubbornness and personalization of experiences that take place within sociocultural spaces. However, de Certeau is not suggesting that tactics exist outside of strategies; tactics are not a 'magic circle' (Huizinga [1938] 1949), but rather tactics are a constituent part of strategies and the two may often be indistinguishable from each other. A good illustration of this is language. Though language has a structuring logic, for example through the rules of grammar, the use of language is open to manipulation and even acts of subversion. Hence, it is the structures, or strategies, of society that also open up the opportunities for subversion and play. As de Certeau writes:

[...] the discourse that makes people believe is the one that takes away what it urges them to believe in, or never delivers what it promises. [...] It makes room for a void. In that way, it opens up clearings: it 'allows' a certain *play* within a system of defined places. It 'authorizes' the production of an area of free *play* [...].

(1984: 105–06, emphasis added)

De Certeau stresses the fluid nature of culture, which has similarly been emphasized by poststructuralist writers like Derrida (1976) and Foucault (1979); however, de Certeau also points to the limitations of a poststructuralist approach. For example, though de Certeau may appear to share many similarities to Foucault, de Certeau was critical of his compatriot's work. In particular, de Certeau was interested in freeing the individual from

the constraints of structuralism, but saw little opportunity for this in the writings of poststructuralists such as Foucault. De Certeau's reading of Foucault is that the disciplinary role of the panopticon is all-powerful, leaving little room for oppositional practices. Of course, it could be argued that Foucault is not as deterministic as de Certeau interprets him to be (see e.g. Ransom 1997); however, it is certainly the case that Foucault, and many other poststructuralist writers, do not specifically consider micro- and everyday practices, which may at times challenge or even subvert 'the reach of panoptic power' (de Certeau 1984: 95). Hence, we find de Certeau more useful here than Foucault and other poststructuralist, as de Certeau more clearly points to moments and opportunities of everyday subversion.

De Certeau's arguments here could be seen as akin to those of Bakhtin's ([1968] 1984) 'carnavalesque', Turner's (1969) 'liminoid' or Huizinga's ([1938] 1949) 'magic circle'. But while these, and other writers, are keen to emphasize these spaces as breaks from the wider social order, de Certeau has more in common here with Lefebvre's ([1974] 1991: 383) writings on leisure; where Lefebvre sees leisure practices and spaces as a continuation of 'the control of the established order'. That is to say, play does not break from existing social structures, but are moments or parts within it; moments that offer a glimpse of individual expression and the possibility of subversion. Significantly, de Certeau also has particular value here as he explores how these moments of individualization or resistance can take place in specific social and urban spaces. In particular, Lamerichs (2014) points to the work of de Certeau as potentially useful in understanding how the personal histories and social performances of cosplayers are played out as 'spatial practices' at conventions. However, this was not the specific focus



of Lamerichs' work and hence, she leaves a fuller application of de Certeau's work tantalizingly unexplored. In this article, we take up this invitation to explore de Certeau's application to cosplayers' use and appropriation of urban spaces.

## The research

This article draws on data gathered from a much wider and detailed four-year ethnographic engagement with, and study of, cosplay culture. As part of this research 36 cosplayers were formally interviewed between 2011 and 2014, mostly face-to-face and one-to-one, in public locations around Manchester, such as bars and cafes. Some interviews were conducted in small groups, and a small number (five) via Skype or e-mail. All interviews were undertaken by David Hancock. However, the research process and engagement with these cosplayers, and moreover, the wider community, extends far beyond these formal interviews, and also involved attending numerous fan conventions, expos and public locations where the cosplayers gather, engaging in countless informal conversations, photographing cosplayers and locations, following and observing this community online in numerous forums and spaces, and inviting cosplayers to exhibitions of the final work.

The overall project also uses art as a method of engagement, analysis and as a way to present and disseminated research findings. In particular, Hancock has produced over 100 detailed watercolour paintings of the cosplayers we studied; and this use of art-led research is discussed in more detail in [Hancock \(2015\)](#) and Crawford and Hancock (forthcoming, 2019). However, here, given the limitations of space and the specific focus of the article a discussion of this method is not possible, but put briefly, we suggest art

practice has enabled and enhanced the research undertaken in this project in at several key ways.

In particular, we argue that being an artist and possessing ‘subcultural capital’ (Thornton 1995) significantly aided access to this subculture, particularly, as this is a creative community, formed around an often cooperative creative process. Hence, allowing an artist access to their community and practices, seemed to fit well with a group that is often willing to cooperate with others and share knowledge to aid others’ creative projects. This we feel, also enabled a greater empathy between both the researcher and the project’s participants, as the researcher and participants both had shared experiences of participating and cooperating in creative practices. Furthermore, we suggest that art practice provides a wealth of additional ways data can be represented. Khatchikian (2018) suggests that experience is embodied and translating this into written words is not always easy, and at times, meaning can be lost in translation. Art practice then adds further methods through which this experience can be translated and expressed. Furthermore, artwork can also be a much more accessible way of engaging diverse audiences, such as by displaying it in public exhibitions and galleries, which can then (and in our project did) in turn, lead to the creation of further data, insights and understandings by engaging with the audience at these events. This is also because art can be much more openly subjective, and can therefore more readily invite discussion and critique from a much wider audience than traditional academic outputs typically do.

Specifically, this article focuses on the users and community of cosplayers who regularly gathered in a small public park, which we will call ‘Poplar Park’, close to the city centre of Manchester. Though participants in this subculture can be fairly diverse, the

majority who gathered here were white, middle class, and in their teens or early twenties, with a high proportion of female cosplayers. All participants and locations have been given pseudonyms.

## Cosplayers (re)imaging space

In writing about her work on cosplay the Beijing-based artist, Cao Fei, sees the cosplayers' immersion into their fantasy as a clearly defined state; with the cosplayer fully immersed into the 'contrived fantasy' of their character and unaware of the world around them. However, we question this assertion that cosplayers draw such a clear divide between their imagined fantasy play world and the wider physical and social world.

Bennett and Kahn-Harris (2004: 151) suggest that participants in subcultures 'symbolically appropriate public space to maintain and affirm their shared cultural identity against outsiders who do not share their lifestyle, enthusiasm or cultural interests'. Similarly, what became clear from this research is how cosplayers (re)image and transforms their surrounding environment to construct a safe space for their activities. Cosplayers, in acting out the roles of fantasy characters in an urban environment, destabilize the space by metamorphosing it into a fantasy arena for the role they have taken on. In this way the cosplayers transform the built environment into something new.

Of particular relevance here is de Certeau's distinction between a space and a place. 'A place is the order', he writes (de Certeau 1984: 117), it is a physical location and logic of that specific place. It is where every object has a proper place and where no two objects can occupy the same place at the same time. In contrast, space 'takes into

consideration vectors of direction [...] it is [...] actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed with in' (de Certeau 1984: 117). Space is how a place is experienced and lived; it is the movements within and through it.<sup>[1]</sup>

Of course, as with de Certeau's discussion of strategies and tactics, places and spaces should not be seen as separate, as in effect, they are both part of the same narratives; where place refers to (to use de Certeau's language) *being-there* and space to the *operations* within it (1984: 118). And it is these spatial stories, these narratives, which transform places into spaces 'and organize the play of changing relationships between places and spaces [where] the forms of play are endless' (de Certeau 1984: 118).

As one of the interviewees 'Matt' (Interviewed by Hancock, Manchester (2011) suggests, cosplayers see 'the space as a stage' and themselves as an 'actor' performing as their chosen character. Through this process cosplayers construct a fantasy within their own imaginations, but in turn, the urban environment also shapes the spatial stories and narratives that the cosplayer construct. As 'Madeline' (interviewed by Hancock, Manchester 2011) pointed out:

A lot of the scenes and environmental situations that the characters appear in the anime would be hard to come across or find in an environment such as a local town. You have to adjust how the character would think and be in that environment. Questioning yourself, if he was a real-life person, would he do that here?

Lamerichs (2014) employs Sandvoss' (2005: 64) discussion of fandom as a metaphorical 'home'. Sandvoss highlights how finding a community where they 'fit in' is like finding a home for many fans. Lamerichs suggests that for many cosplayers the convention becomes a happy and safe (home-like) place, where they can collectively play out their shared fantasizes. This, for Lamerichs, is an 'affective place'; in that, conventions are where fans create an imaginative space, which they emotionally engage in play,

performance and shared narratives. However, what is of particular interest, and what has been significantly under researched, is how fans utilize (and erase) specific aspects of the environment.

## ‘Urban poaching’

De Certeau utilizes the idea of ‘poaching’ in exploring the relationship between strategies and tactics and is one way of understanding how he sees audiences and consumers not as passive, but rather capable of drawing on the resources given to them, to create new understandings, interpretations or outcomes. This Henry Jenkins (1992) then employs and develops in his consideration of media fans, who he suggests, drawing on aspects of their fandom, create new interpretations, narratives and cultural products, which may (to some degree) go against the dominant narratives set out in mainstream media. Media fans, for Jenkins, can therefore be understood as subversive ‘textual poachers’; poaching from existing (‘official’) media texts to create their own products that challenge the traditional power relationship between consumers and producers.

However, less explored in fan studies is de Certeau’s related discussion of how individuals similarly draw on and employ urban space – what we refer to here as *urban poaching*. In particular, in understanding how individuals’ use, appropriate and personalize the urban environment, de Certeau draws on the ‘stylistics figures’ of ‘synecdoche’ and ‘asyndeton’ (1984: 101). Synecdoche is the linguistic act of using part of an object to represent the whole, such as the example de Certeau gives of referring to ships as a ‘sail’; such as the ‘a fleet of fifty sails’ (1984: 101). Asyndeton is ‘the suspension of linking words’ that are skipped over or omitted from a sentence (de Certeau 1984: 101). For de Certeau, these two linguistic styles provide important

metaphors for understanding how urban dwellers use the built environment, and moreover, these are concepts notably taken up by Iain Borden (2001) in his application of de Certeau to skateboarders – which we would suggest, has clear parallels to cosplay.

## The cosplayers' eye

For de Certeau, synecdoche and asyndeton characterize how individuals' appropriate certain aspects of the urban environment, while simultaneously omitting other objects in their surroundings. For Borden, this can clearly be seen in how skateboarders appropriate and transform everyday architecture to create an imagined skatepark. To the skater, urban architecture is seen through the 'skater's eye' as a series of obstacles to negotiate. Skaters modify the purpose of street furniture, subverting these objects' use for their own recreational activities. Borden suggests that skateboarders are constantly undergoing these twin processes of asyndeton and synecdoche; utilizing certain objects and omitting others as they skate the city. As Borden writes 'cities are at once real and coded, imagined and mediated' (2001: 219). As such, skaters view urban planning differently from the rest of society. As Borden continues, 'skateboarders undertake a discontinuous edit of architecture and urban space, recomposing their own city from different places, locations, urban elements, routes and times' (2001: 219).

Similarly, we suggest that cosplayers use their 'cosplayer's eye' to immerse themselves more thoroughly into the world of their character, and likewise use asyndeton and synecdoche to alter location and objects, creating a space (in the de Certeauian sense) that spans both the imaginary and the physical. For example, as 'Sarah' (interviewed by Hancock, Manchester, 2011) suggests, 'when in cosplay you do often look for environments that suit your character'. Furthermore, in an interview with a group of

cosplayers in Poplar Park, 'Elizabeth' (interviewed by Hancock, Manchester, 2014) explained how she reimaged a carved wooden statue: 'we still joke about occasionally, like I made that statue my husband. [Laughs] [...]. But when you see stuff around you play about with them'. For the cosplayer, the environment can aid with their immersion into the role, as they transform an area into a play space.

Another example of this can be found in an interview with 'Sienna' and 'Deana' (interviewed by Hancock, Manchester, 2014). Here they spoke of a permanent ornamental feature within Poplar Park and how this was incorporated into their play.

'Sienna' recalled:

They have those triangle stones and we got all the Hetalians from *Hetalia* together. We said one of the stones is Sealand [a character from *Hetalia*], and this is his land. Then we were pulling all the other countries, such as Italy and Germany [also characters from *Hetalia*] onto Sealand to see how many we could fit on. We said this is Sealand because he's so small; he's a micro-nation.

Similarly, 'Deana' spoke of other cosplayers who were dressed as characters from *Attack on Titan* (2009 to present) she recounted, 'some of the cosplayers will find a tree and stay up there all the time'. 'Sienna' added to the story, 'I remember at one meet, someone had climbed up a tree and got stuck, and they couldn't get down. They were screaming as this character, 'I'm stuck; Titan's going to kill me. Get me out of this tree now. Please do something!'

Borden (2001: 218) argues that 'skateboarding is an aesthetic rather than ethical practice, using the "formants" at its disposal to create an alternative reality'. In both skateboarding and cosplay the participant's perception of the architecture allows them to interact with it. With skaters, their 'skater's eye' allows them to disengage from the

historical, symbolic or authorial content of a space, and simply consider it as a skateable surface. A cosplayer will also see a building or feature through their 'cosplayer's eye', drawing similarities between the chosen building and a similar feature from their character's text. 'The "building" for a skater is only an extracted edit of its total existence' (Borden 2001: 214); and so, in the reality of the cosplayer, as with the skater, it is only the ludic aspect for which they have any use.

This appropriation and reimagining of urban spaces by cosplayers is also illustrated in the painting below, *Arkham Asylum* (Figure 1) by David Hancock. For example, 'Sophie', the cosplayer depicted in this painting regularly cosplays as Catwoman from the Batman video game *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (Eidos Interactive 2009). For the painting, a location was chosen in Wolverhampton (where she lives) that resembled Gotham. In a city made up of eclectic architectural styles, certain elements can distract the cosplayer from fully embodying their chosen role. It is therefore essential that the cosplayer is able to undertake the processes of asyndeton and omit elements from the urban landscape that do not conform to their fantasy. Similarly, they must also undertake the process of synecdoche in transforming a building, such as Wolverhampton Art Gallery, into a rampart from one of Gotham city's skyscrapers, in order to preserve their immersion and remain in character. In particular, this is represented in the painting below, which focuses upon certain details in the space: a limestone reproduction of the Elgin Marbles, and a ledge with an ornate balustrade. Though the painting highlights these key architectural features from the art gallery, they remain generic enough for 'Sophie's' fantasy of cosplaying Catwoman in Gotham city.





Figure 1: David Hancock, *Arkham Asylum*, 2013. Watercolour on paper. 150×170cm.

This, and other paintings (Hancock 2015; Crawford and Hancock forthcoming), and the stories told by the cosplayers, provide insights into how cosplayers interact with space, and how it can be used to assist in their immersion. Hence cosplayers, like skaters, see the city as canonically. That is to say, certain objects are arranged (certainly in their imaginations, if not physically), while others are excluded, or at least ignored as much as possible, in aiding their play and spatial stories. Here, cosplayers extend their interactions into a(nother) social setting, forming multiple narrative possibilities that build on the source texts or weave a number of texts together. Therefore, a cosplayer might reimagine the urban environment as part of an existing or inspired narrative, but in doing so, they are also simultaneously exploring the possibilities and limitations of the existing built environment.

## Acts of resistance?

A now famous, and often cited, application of de Certeau to the uses and appropriation of urban space is the work of John Fiske (2011). In his book, *Reading the Popular* (2011), Fiske draws on the work of de Certeau to examine places such as shopping malls and beaches where groups of people define their own spaces of leisure. In the opening chapter, *Shopping for Pleasure*, Fiske (2011: 10) proposes that 'shopping malls are cathedrals of consumption'; places where people come to worship commodities. However, for youths without an income to make purchases, malls can take on a subversive role. That is to say, rather than claiming the goods that they cannot afford, these disenfranchised youths instead claim space within the mall. Referring to this act as 'proletarian shopping' Fiske suggests that these young people are window-shopping, but with no intention to buy. They consume the images and space, instead of the commodities that they cannot possibly afford to purchase. Hence, they go to the mall for a wholly different purpose: to socialize, hang out and occasionally cause trouble. Fiske (2011: 13) suggests that this possession of space for alternative reasons 'offends and resists'.

Quoting de Certeau, Fiske talks of their 'trickster' behaviour, where these youths exploit their understanding of the rules of the system to turn it to their advantage. In some respects, cosplayers do share certain similarities with Fiske's (2011) 'tricksters', in that they are subverting and appropriating urban space for alternative uses. However, it is evident from our research that cosplayers often have a much more complex relationship with both consumption and authority, and hence, we would suggest, cannot be seen as 'proletarian shoppers'.

Firstly, though cosplay may be a creative and productive process, as with many fan communities – such as sports fans (see, Crawford 2004) – cosplayers tend to be highly committed, even ‘ideal’, consumers, who are often very ‘brand loyal’; consuming large quantities of material and merchandise relating to their particular fandom. Cosplay is primarily built around a love of mainstream sci-fi or fantasy movies, video games and pop-music; though often of Japanese origin. Cosplay does not try and subvert mainstream culture, but actively embraces it.

In many respects cosplay could be seen as a form of ‘textual poaching’; and to a large extent, it is. They are certainly ‘poaching’ in the sense that de Certeau discusses; in that they are ‘making do’ with the resources that capitalism gives (or, more accurately, ‘sells’) to them to create room for individualization. But in our research, we saw little similarities to the more subversive acts of, for example, fan fiction writers that Jenkins (1992) discusses. Unlike Jenkins’ fan fiction writers, cosplayers here were not actively seeking to challenge or subvert dominant reading of characters. In fact, they often try (as much as is possible) to remain faithful to the original characters as they are portrayed in the original source texts. Of course, by playing out the characters and placing them in new settings, such as in a park in Manchester, they are adding to the character; they are bringing their imaginations and individualization to the character. However, this is still in the context of trying to stay loyal to the original character.



Figure 2: David Hancock, (part of) *Advent Children IV*, 2014. Watercolour on paper. 150×120cm.

An illustration of this point could be cosplayers of the *Final Fantasy* video game series, such as 'Nathan' (interviewed by Hancock, Manchester, 2014) depicted above in his 'Cloud' costume (Figure 2), which is taken from a larger piece of work entitled *Advent Children IV*). Created in 1987 by Hironobu Sakaguchi and published by Square Soft (now Square Enix), *Final Fantasy* (1984–present) is a franchise popular with cosplayers. Each *Final Fantasy* game is unique, with a new game world (Morris and Hartas 2004: 102), and a new cast of distinctive playable characters. As an RPG (role-playing game) the structure allows the player to spend hours immersed in the game world, forming a well-developed relationship between the character and gamer.

In an RPG, such as *Final Fantasy*, the gamer's investment is essential to how they progress. Starting with a uniform character, they invest their time and effort to create a more powerful character; this is the payoff (Chandler 2009: 14). In particular, 'Nathan' spoke of his own relationship with Cloud, whom he regularly cosplays. Amongst the tight-knit cosplay community, 'Nathan' has become so well known in this role that both he and the other cosplayers find it hard to see him outside of his characterization; Nathan and his persona as Cloud have become one for both him and his friends. As 'Nathan' stated, '[t]hat's like the real me. I'm not Nathan, I'm Cloud'.

During the meets we observed, the cosplayers tended to stay in character as much as possible. They acted out sections of dialogue from their character's text or created new dialogue in-character; expanding the character's story in this way. As much as possible, they attempted to act in the way that they perceived their character would act in a similar situation. Throughout the meets their personalities and activities changed as they created a more convincing portrayal. For example, at one meet in Poplar Park, there were a number of characters from the same text, *Hetalia*, and so they had arranged prior to the meet to each come as a separate character. Those who were not from the same text also joined in and characters and texts were combined. 'Madeline' (interviewed by Hancock, Manchester, 2011) spoke of this behaviour amongst cosplayers, and how the meets become an opportunity for communal re-enactment.

Some quotes and words that represents your specific character are acted out. There are certain meeting places in town or at expos where cosplayers meet to do this. Some cosplayers do go all out in re-enacting scenes, especially when they see a person cosplaying from the same anime, usually walking up to the cosplayer and engaging into how their character would start to converse in that situation, the other cosplayer sees it as

a cue to act out that scene too [...] by the end, you even start to think how your character would think.

Of course, cosplayers do overlap with other fan communities. Many cosplayers may also be fan fiction writers, but each arena carries with it its own norms and culture, and certainly in our research, we did not see in cosplay the same kind of challenging of dominant textual readings that Jenkins (1992) discusses in relation to fan fiction writers.

Cosplayers rarely cause any trouble, with the worst of their offenses possibly being their over exuberance. Like Fiske's mall youths, they are drawn to 'cathedrals of consumption', such as malls and city centres; however, for cosplayers it is more often the case because these sites also provide access to purchasable objects associated with their fandom, such as comic books, and video games.

For example, during meets in Poplar Park, the cosplayers socialized, chatted, played together, discussed their outfits, and took and posed for photographs. People brought food and drinks, and had picnics. They also practiced dance routines to J-pop (Japanese pop music). 'Dawn' (interviewed by Hancock, Manchester, 2014), the meet host, also organized several activities. She did a quiz and the cosplayers also played traditional yard games. The age range of the cosplayers was usually from around 14 to 30, and many of the younger cosplayers would bring their parents along who sat off towards the edge of the park keeping a watchful eye on what was going on.

When their activities were interrupted by outsiders, cosplayers were often very willing to turn to authority figures, such as the police, to assist them. For example, as 'Sienna' explained, '[i]n Poplar Park we've had a lot of incidents with drunks, especially near Christmas and on St Patrick's Day, a lot of them came in'. 'Sienna' continued 'we don't mind them [using the space] but when they are interrupting what we are doing, and

they are saying stuff to you, it's not very nice'. On these occasions the cosplayers have asked the offending 'drunks' to leave, and if that has failed, called on the police to assist.

Hence, in many ways the behaviour of the cosplayers are more akin to another example, which Fiske gives, that of beach users in Perth, Western Australia. Fiske's (2011) study of *Reading the Beach* examines how the beach is split into a variety of unofficial and undemarcated areas, such as for nudist sunbathers, families and dog walkers. As Fiske observes, 'the beach tends to be divided into significant zones [...] these zones are vague, boundaries ill marked, if not unmarked, and consequently the meanings, the categories, leak one into the other' (2011: 36). What Fiske suggests, therefore, are that groups of people are drawn to areas where the activities they wish to undertake, or the facilities they require, are present; hence, they select spaces of leisure that suit their own personal or group needs. Moreover, Fiske clearly points to a desire in individuals to find safe and communal spaces for leisure with other likeminded individuals or groups who share their cultural values. Looking at Fiske's research on both shopping malls and beaches, we can clearly see that people are drawn to sites where they can congregate safely as a group. These areas need to suit their predetermined requirements, and once an appropriate safe location has been found, a group will often seek to take ownership of it.

## A safe space for [cos]play

Cosplayers need to find a safe space where they can meet and play with others. Originally the Manchester-based cosplayers would meet in (what we will call) 'City Park' (a large park located very close to the city centre). This initial site was primarily chosen due to its large open spaces and its central locale, which it was easy for all of the cosplayers to get

to, and its closeness to the main shopping area; however, over time this site became problematic.

City Park is located in the very centre of the city and close to the city's central transport hub. This is a busy, but for most people, transitional space, which they pass through quickly heading to other sites. Few people stop to pause in this space, save for on uncommonly warm days, or more normally, the odd homeless person or service sector worker on their lunch break. But these are mostly the unseen, or certainly overlooked, of city life: the homeless and excluded who litter the city centre, excluded from the consumer outlets that surround them, and the service workers, who become obstacles or contaminators of the environment, as they eat fast food or smoke cigarettes in spaces like City Park. In such a space, cosplayers become highly visible, as not transitional shoppers or commuters, or as they stepped over homeless and service workers. Cosplayers here, by undertaking an unusual and visible activity are very much on public display, and appear to be almost inviting engagement with the wider public. As 'Sienna' stated, 'when we are in City Park there is more general public, and they tend to judge us'.

'Sienna' continued

[one of the] problems in City Park [is that] [...] some of the cosplayers have weapons and people get threatened. [...] Someone had [...] a very big sword. And this old man said, 'I think he's going to attack me'. He called the police up, and they had to check him out.

They had to make sure it wasn't a real sword.

'Amanda' (interviewed by Hancock, Manchester, 2014) also pointed to similar incidents of being moved on by the police, 'when we were in City Park, sometimes the police would come over and wonder what was going on. They'd tell us to move because they said we were disrupting people, even though we weren't being loud or anything'.



Though the cosplayers were keen to call on the assistance of authority figures, such as the police, when they or their activities were being threatened, they have also been subjected to its direct power when they impinge on more central and populated locations.

Cosplay is a performance (more on this below), and a performance usually requires an audience, but this needs to be a receptive, non-challenging, and certainly non-threatening audience, in a safe space; and in most instances, the main target audience is other cosplayers; part of the group. Hence, the cosplayers moved to the much smaller and out-of-the-way Poplar Park. The park is lined by trees and hedges, and hence, much less open and public than City Park, and is generally quiet, most of the time. Even on a Saturday afternoons, there are few people using the park, so for the majority of the time the cosplayers have the space to themselves. Importantly, this is also a space adjacent to the City's 'Gay district', and hence, borders a space already associated with being more inclusive of diversity. According to 'Kim' (interviewed by Hancock, Manchester, 2012), 'the atmosphere seems friendlier [in Poplar Park as opposed to City Park]'. And as 'Sienna' adds, 'they [the local Gay community] don't mind us being on there. They see us there regularly. I think that's why the cosplay group chooses to meet there'.

As with Fiske's (2011) discussion of the subversive use of beaches and shopping malls, the cosplayers managed to secure a space for themselves that contained their most basic requirements. In the case of cosplayers, in finding this park – a large enclosed space that is centrally located and relatively quiet – they have begun to secure this site as (at least partially) their own. As 'Sienna' stated, 'Deana and me [now] hang out there anyway, even without our cosplays on'. However, unlike the youths discussed by Fiske (2011), cosplayers tend not to be actively seeking to be subversive or confrontational,

instead often looking to authority figures, such as the police, to help them maintain their safe space, and when cosplayers do engage with the other urban dwellers, this is often done as an extension of their performative play.

## Cosplayers, performance and other urban dwellers

Though a particular location might help cosplayers to immerse themselves more thoroughly into the world of their character, their appearance in a public and urban location also changes that space for others who happen to be there too. For example, one of the cosplayers interviewed as part of this research, 'Chris' (interviewed by Hancock, Manchester, 2014), regularly dons his stormtrooper cosplay outfit for charity events in local shopping malls or town centres. He described an event in a local (different) town centre, where dressed as a stormtrooper, he was approaching members of the public: 'I started going up to people going, "Halt! You there, Stop! I need to check your authority for the Empire". People were like, "Oh! OK". So I got really into it, frisking them and stuff like that'. After accosting them, 'Chris' would 'start searching their bags, pulling out notepads and say, "Are these Rebel plans?" People love it. They love to see that'. Though 'Chris' described a scene that was staged for a charity event, this scenario shows how passers-by can get caught up in the cosplayer's fantasy. In playing along with the events unfolding before them, they can become part of the cosplayer's narrative; even allowing 'Chris's' stormtrooper to embarrass them in public by going through their personal belongings. 'Nathan' also spoke of a similar incident when he was dressed as Zack from *Crisis Core*, a prequel to *Final Fantasy VII*.

One time I got on the train after a cosplay meet up, and these two boys were looking at me. I heard them saying, 'Dare you to ask him about his sword'. So they came over, and I decided it's time to have some fun. They are young and impressionable. So I said

[adopting an American accent] 'Hey! I'm Zack'. I talked to them in character, and they believed that I was Zack.

It is likely that the boys knew that 'Nathan' was not actually Zack, but for the period of the conversation they assisted 'Nathan' in maintaining his fantasy and they had a conversation with one of their fantasy heroes.

Similarly, 'Nathan' recalled a particular incident at a video game convention, where he was cosplaying Batman:

This little kid and his dad come over to me, and the kid who has Batman on his shirt excitedly shouts, 'Batman, Batman!'. I had flashbacks to when I was a kid, and you'd see someone dressed up, and you'd think it's that person. Like one time, I met the Turtles. I *really* did meet the Turtles! So I was like 'Wow! I'm in this role now'. So I was trying to keep in character but be a more friendly Batman. [adopts Batman's voice] 'Are you wearing me on your shirt? Gimme hi-five!'

A number of other cosplayers recounted similar tales where they encountered children who were also fans of the texts that they were dressed as a character from. In taking on the role of a character in public, they then often feel bound to maintain the character for the appreciation of members of the public. When asked about the responsibility that a cosplayer takes on in adopting a role, especially when interacting with children, 'Chris' suggested that:

It's something that I do think is very important. Certainly when you are cosplaying with kids, because like you say, they don't know any better. They don't know you are just a lad from Manchester. To them you are actually a stormtrooper. So you might as well act like one and uphold the dream. So if a kid comes up to you and goes, 'Hey! Scoutrooper how are you doing?' [Adopts American accent], 'I'm doing alright sir'. I play up to it and stay in character for as long as possible.

Again, here we see how cosplayers are not seeking to be threatening or subversive. Through their performances and play, cosplayers are often trying to bring pleasure, and extend their fantasy, to others. When cosplayers appear in public, they alter the public perception of that site. The location is changed temporarily by their presence in it. By filling the space with an assortment of fantasy characters they are thus able to create a safe place for play that often incorporates both the environment and others into their fantasy worlds. However, cosplayers have, thus far, only achieved small successes in claiming a public place for their own use. As they cosplay intermittently, they do not have a regular presence in a public space to make it fully theirs.

## Conclusion

This article considers how a subculture uses, reimagines and transforms urban space, focusing specifically here on the case of one location and group of cosplayers in a small park in central Manchester.

Cosplayers are an important subculture, through which we can learn a great deal about contemporary forms of media fandom, participatory culture, and cultural and urban appropriation. However, to date, this remains a significantly under-researched area and community. Hence, the research we present here develops our understanding of this fan community, but more than this, also moves forward our understanding of play and uses of urban spaces.

In particular, this article argues that a useful way of understanding cosplay is to consider the relationship between play and culture. [Henricks \(2014\)](#) suggests that often play has commonly been theorized as either a form of socialization or resistance, and hence, we suggest that de Certeau (though not typically employed in considerations of

play) offers a potential way forward, by recognizing both the limiting and enabling aspects of culture and play. Moreover, de Certeau also allows us to consider the uses and appropriation of urban space. The application of de Certeau provides a lens for considering cosplayers' 'urban poaching'; how they re-imagine and transform social spaces, particularly through the use of the dual process of 'synecdoche' and 'asyndeton', which links together and edits out parts of the built environment to create spatial stories and shared narratives.

This reappropriation and poaching of urban space could be seen as a form of social resistance, similar to the youths Fiske (2011) discusses, who hang around shopping malls causing trouble. However, cosplayers cannot similarly be seen as disruptive, 'proletarian shoppers', who subvert consumption and popular culture, rather cosplayers tend to be very brand loyal, committed consumers of mainstream popular culture, and are very willing to turn to the authority of the police to protect 'their' space. Cosplayers are not a subversive subculture. More fitting is probably the comparison to Fiske's beach users who seek out safe and communal sites for leisure with other likeminded individuals or groups who share their cultural values. However, in doing so, they are not simply transforming the space for themselves, but similarly others can get drawn into the play spaces, spatial stories and performances that the cosplayers construct.

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## Ludology

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## Manga/Comicbooks

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*Hetalia* (2006 – 2013) Gentosha Inc., Tokyo.

## Notes

1. It is worth noting that how de Certeau defines place and space is at odds, and in many ways quite the reverse, to how most contemporary cultural geographers define these terms. For most writers, space refers to physical location, while place is a space that is given meaning; it is how a space is experienced and lived (Longhurst et al. 2017).

2. *Hetalia* is an extremely popular webcomic that was later made into a manga and anime. First released online in 2009, it characterizes each of the Axis and allied nations during the First and Second World Wars, giving them a human persona. The comic is light-hearted and satirizes well-known historical events and nations.

3. *Attack on Titan* is a Japanese Manga first published in 2009 and written and illustrated by Hajime Isayama. It has since been made into a serialized anime, which was released in 2013. The plot revolves around a teenage boy, Eren and his foster sister, Mikasa, who witness their mother being devoured by a Titan. Titans are huge beings that almost exterminated the human race, and the remaining population reside within a huge walled city.

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