

To Boldly Go: Cosplay \neq Consent
By: Kelly Everitt

I am a cosplayer. That means I am one of those nerds who dresses up like my favorite fictional characters and attends comic-cons. I have been doing this for 25 years, well before it became mainstream. My first con experience was in the mid-80s when I was 12 and met George Takei for the first time. Talk about an introduction into the realm of the nerd!

Colorado has many cons year round including the two I regularly attend: Starfest in April and Denver Comic-Con (DCC) in June. These conventions are places where fans can wear masks, paint, run around in costume, and be accepted, even praised. However, there is also a dark side to this in the form of prejudice and misogyny. What was once the realm of Trekkies and gamers is now mainstream. Even Entertainment Weekly devotes an entire issue to San Deigo Comic-Con (the largest con in the country) now that major studios have taken note of a very captive and engaged audience. It has gotten to the point where some major movie trailers are first seen by the public at these cons and, each year, a major movie studio judges Starfest's infamous balcony contest. Cons are huge business and huge for charity. DCC, for instance, is completely non-profit as a benefit for Comics in the Classroom, a local literacy campaign.

As the general, non-nerd public is now attending these cons, those who are disrespectful to the culture are as well. For the most part, the "normals" as the non-nerds are affectionately called by the cosplay community since they attend conventions in normal street attire (jeans, t-shirts, etc) are wonderful! This goes double for the children. In my experience, "normals" and their children are like kids at Disneyland for their first time at a con. They get to meet their favorite characters such as Batman, Green Lantern, Sora, Princess Leia, Superman, Wolverine, and Rogue. As cosplayers, we play up to it. There is even a local branch of the national Heroes Alliance and 501st Legion who cosplay as comic book heroes and Star Wars characters for charity. I have yet to meet anyone who cosplays that is not generous with their time and will often play the part of who they dress as for a quick photo with other attendees, especially kids. Why, the most fun I've had cosplaying so far was this year at Starfest and DCC as Daenerys "Khaleesi" Targaryen from Game of Thrones. As I was "looking for my army", my "loyal subjects" (aka other attendees and cosplayers as well as more than a few vendors) played along with me. One of the funniest cosplay moments I've ever witnessed was in Orlando, Florida at Megacon a few years back where two girls were dressed as Marty and Doc from Back to the Future. They ran through the main hall with "Marty" screaming, "Doc! I have to tell you about the future!" "Doc" was yelling back that he is not to know such things. Entire families get involved. At Starfest this year, an entire family dressed as various characters from the various Star Wars movies got into a mock lightsaber battle in the hotel atrium. Even the toddler got involved.... dressed as Yoda.

It is at these cons that many of us come out of our shell and have a great time among fellow fans. Many times, this involves wearing rather revealing costumes. There are strict guidelines that the convention organizers insist on everyone following, and, if anyone is not dressed to those guidelines, they are asked to leave. This does not stop inappropriate remarks, pictures, and harassment from happening, however. This also does not stop "slutshaming" from happening when the photographs are placed on the internet.

For example, this link

https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=643265572365795&set=a.163029403722750.42222.134525006573190&type=1&relevant_count=1 points to a widely circulated photograph and story about the good nature of the cosplay community. A little boy got separated from his father at a con. He

approached two cosplayers dressed as Wonder Woman and The Flash as he recognized the characters and asked for help. The two cosplayers were only too happy to oblige, calmed the child, and eventually reunited him with his father. This kindness from cosplayers to others, especially children, is overwhelmingly common, even when we cosplay villains and the grotesque (like zombies). Then, look at the comments. “to bad wonder woman is practically naked and the flash is covered from head to toe. Great job subliminally reinforcing stereo types” “She would be more of a hero if she didn't have most of her ass hanging out. It is ridiculous what we expose children to and then expect them to behave differently.” Earlier this month, this blog post <http://www.thisview.org/?p=127> made the social media rounds telling of one cosplayer’s experience of “slutshaming” when she went to Balticon this year dressed in a to-the-last-stitch screen-perfect Star Trek medical personnel uniform from the original series, which is characterized by a rather short skirt. At DCC, a blog pointed out that Andrew Mark of Legacy Action Comics was being the posterchild for sexism at the Women and Body Image in Comics panel. The writer states that this happened among other things, “When I tried to explain the difference between attraction and objectification, responded by saying inequalities in objectification were clearly women’s fault, because women need to objectify men more”. This blog does contain potentially objectionable language. <http://geekygothgirl.tumblr.com/post/52526859709/on-sexism-and-comic-con-panels>

Here are more tales of the creepy here from an attendee’s time at E3, a major gaming convention, this year. http://kotaku.com/the-creepy-side-of-e3-513484271?utm_campaign=Socialflow_Kotaku_Facebook&utm_source=Kotaku_Facebook&utm_medium=Socialflow One of the stories that made national news was from Microsoft’s game demo. Over half of the gamers are women (source: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/jun/11/report-nearly-half-gamers-are-women/#.Ubndh3AheUQ.twitter>). Yet, the Microsoft producer quipped to his losing female opponent in a game demo ““Here we go. Just let it happen. It'll be over soon," he says.” <http://multiplayerblog.mtv.com/2013/06/12/e3-rape-joke/>

San Diego Comic-Con is addressing this issue of bullying and sexism even post-convention with a panel this year. Screenwriter Jane Espenson (Once Upon a Time) is slated to be on the panel. <http://www.chicagonow.com/portrait-of-an-adoption/2013/06/san-diego-comic-con-to-feature-anti-bullying-panel/>

When someone is in costume at a con, yes, it is ok to look. Yes, it is ok to take pictures. There is a published etiquette in the convention guides that is enforced as well. Please no pictures in non-flattering moments (eating or adjusting). Candid shots are often ok in a group setting (such as the main convention floor). As often as you can, ask first to take a picture, especially if the cosplayer is a child. Not only is it plainly polite, but cosplayers regularly have a character specific pose or two that will showcase their costume better than them standing in line for a panel. You are not to take any cleavage only shots, upskirts, or use any of the pictures for material gain. As a matter of fact, DCC lists this specifically in their harassment policy:

“(Inappropriate photography is defined as photography where the subject feels they are being stalked, exploited, degraded, or disrespected through being photographed. While it is reasonable that photographers will be photographing costumers and other parts of the convention, should this photography become harassing or sexual in nature, the photographer will be subject to the above harassment policy.)”

<http://www.denvercomiccon.com/2013/geek-survival-guide/harassment-policy/>

So, what sort of material gain you may ask? It is not for professional photography sites. They always ask permission. When they take your picture at a con, they give you their card with all of their contact information. If the photograph is not to your satisfaction, they will take it down. Otherwise, it is for their portfolios with watermarks. Again, they will not take your picture without your permission. Where it crosses the line is when the photograph screenprinted onto pillows and sold to the general public. This actually happened. Read the story here. <http://fashionablygeek.com/costumes/creepy-cosplay-pillows-are-no-longer-a-thing/>

So why do cosplayers do this? We do it for ourselves. It doesn't matter if the costume is a Battlestar Galactica Viper Pilot, slave Leia from Star Wars, a cross gender Loki from Avengers, or Red Sonja. There's something about the characters we portray that is a part of us. The majority of cosplayers and those who enjoy watching and interacting with us are kind, respectful, and just having fun playing dress up. Some good examples of respectful interaction with a cosplayer are my personal ones. In addition to the aforementioned Game of Thrones character, I cosplay Harley Quinn from Batman. I play her as the leather clad stripper/biker chick in the Brian Azzarello graphic novel "The Joker". When people come up to me and ask for my picture, I play to the camera. If they are filming, I'll toss them some of her key lines like "Hey puddin'!" They laugh, thank me, and move on. At DCC, during Klingon Karaoke (yes, it's a thing), I cosplayed her again and sang Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance" and Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" in character. At least one of those has ended up on youtube, much to my delight. That is part of the fun of cosplay. It's not just dressing up but playing into the character. Others are encouraged to play along. However, some take it too far and believe that just because a person, male or female, dresses in a costume, they are now a toy. Just as other harassment, you are not allowed to touch me, take upskirt or cleavage only shots, catcall, smack my rear, follow me around with a camera, stalk me into an elevator, or stare at my breasts. Cosplayers are paying to be at a convention, not the other way around.

I have heard some say "well, if you are going to dress up, why are you inviting comments and harassment by wearing a chain mail bikini?" regarding a Red Sonja cosplay by someone else. The answer is the same for a woman who wears a sports bra when she jogs, or a pencil skirt to the office, or a thong to the beach, or a sweat suit to watch tv. It should never matter what we wear. We should be able to walk naked down the street with no harassment. No fear of rape. No fear of perverts. At cons, if we want to wear a slave Leia outfit, we can. If we want to wear a fuzzy anime bikini, we can. If we want to steampunk, we can. If we want to cross gender play Loki, Thor, stormtroopers, Joker, or others, we can. Because we want to. There are rules of what we can and can't wear. Basically, this is a family convention (I saw a four year old dressed as Doc Oc from Spiderman that was just so adorable). So, keep it PG-13. If it is something that can be worn on network tv during prime time, it's usually fair game. No swear words on shirts. Keep the fx blood down and no dripping.

Cosplay is not only fun, it is therapeutic. On the Denver ComicCon facebook page, a mother relayed that this year, her 12 year old son went his first con. He was petrified to get out of the car in his costume. Once he did started to walk down to the end of the now infamous line to get in, he was not greeted with the points and stares he gets at school. He was greeted with cheers and encouragement. His mother said that by the time he got inside, he was strutting with confidence he never had before. And then there is this blog, where cosplay saved a player's life. <http://ifanboy.com/articles/cosplay-saved-my-life-or-at-least-my-sanity/>

Please visit 16 Bit Sirens and Cosplay is Not Consent. They are the origin of the cosplay =/= consent movement. <http://www.16bitsirens.com/consentnext/> and <http://www.cosplayisnotconsent.org/>

respectively. We will see you at Slutwalk Denver on July 6. I'll be the one cosplaying Pris from Blade Runner.