



ALPHA

Thought piece

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# How Cosplay is Breaking Language Barriers

**ALPHA**  
@TeamAlphaBCN  
games.thisisalpha.com

Cosplay crosses many forms of media. Along with video game characters there are, of course, cosplayers from the world of comics, sci-fi novels, anime, TV, and film. The first recorded cosplay attempts were in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and comprised alien costumes based on books as part of fancy dress competitions.

In 1936, however, at the first World Science Fiction Convention, two attendees came in costume: Forrest J Ackerman and Myrtle R. Douglas attended dressed in futuristic green capes and breeches, largely based on the film *Things to Come*. The move clearly inspired many others, as by 1940, the event had a whole masquerade element to it.

Video games are clearly a more recent entry to the cosplay scene. But gamers have taken to it with such enthusiasm that game conventions like GamesCom have become as synonymous with costumes as ComicCon. And in dressing as well-known figures from games, the cosplayers have been effective at breaking down language barriers, letting nothing come between their love for games.

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## A multilingual starting-point

The coining of the phrase “cosplay” is in itself a multilingual feat. Nobuyuki Takahashi of Studio Hard<sup>[1]</sup> attended the 1984 World Science Fiction Convention (Worldcon) in Los Angeles, and wrote it up in the magazine *My Anime*. He wanted to use a term to describe the costumery, but was not keen on the use of “masquerade” because in Japanese it translates as “an aristocratic costume.”



San Jose, California, USA - May 25, 2012: Cosplayer dressed as Yusei Fudo from Yu-Gi-Oh! at FanimeCon 2012.

Seeing something very different in the Worldcon fan displays, he decided to create his own word, using a common Japanese method of abbreviation. He took the first two moras of each word, and combined them, resulting in the term *kosupure* (コスプレ). And so dressing up as your favoured character became cosplay, and the fans never looked back.

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<sup>[1]</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosplay#cite\\_note-yeinjee-2](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosplay#cite_note-yeinjee-2)

## Names versus faces...

Working in games translation teaches you that names for characters and objects can change a great deal in translation. This is often necessary, as a word in one language can have a very different connotation when translated into another. For example, the Final Fantasy character Zidane had his name changed in French and Spanish thanks to a very famous French footballer of the same name, with whom Square did not want their character inadvertently associated. So Zidane became Djidane in France, and Yitan in Spanish.



1) Sheffield, United Kingdom - June 11, 2016: Cosplayers dressed as characters from Halo at the Yorkshire Cosplay Convention at Sheffield Arena

2) Brno, Czech Republic - April 30, 2016: Cosplayer dressed as a Haven Paladin from Heroes of Might and Magic VII during cosplay contest.

It can be difficult to communicate about a single character when a game has been translated. A hardcore fan might gush about Sonic the Hedgehog, where a Chinese gamer might understand all the words, but not realise that they are in fact talking about the Faster Than Sound Little Dude of their own games (which is what Sonic's name means in the Chinese version).

Not so with cosplay, where the visuals of a character are identical across translations, even if the boxes for the games differ in their choice of artwork. Attending a convention and meeting (and recognising) a fan dressed as a perfect Ciri doesn't require you to have language in common in order to express your appreciation.

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## Online sharing

It isn't just at conventions where language barriers are being broken down. Because cosplayers are scattered across the world, the online community has become a thriving multilingual one. Sites such as [cosplay.com](http://cosplay.com) let fans share their love of costume worldwide, and find inspiration from each other.

More significantly, fans are finding ways to communicate when it comes to offering advice. Where one English-speaking fan has successfully created a costume from scratch, another in Brazil might want to recreate it. With no language in common, there is a growing trend for communicating pictorially – via Instagram or through email, Skype and WeChat – to show the stages of making. These are an upgrade of the traditional dress-making pattern, and fans are finding ways of asking and answering questions on top.

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## Full localisation – and how cosplay might become more regional

Localisation is an ever-changing industry, and one where adaptations become more and more specific to regions and languages. Where games are being designed with Arabic-speaking markets in mind, versions with different screen layouts are now designed to accommodate right-to-left lettering.

More significantly, some games have been altered graphically for reasons of censorship. A surprising number of games had changes imposed when being sold into the US. *Final Fantasy VI*, for example, not only had a pub replaced with a cafe in the North American version, but also included semi-nude characters being covered up by skirts or additional clothing.

The end-point of this is interesting when it comes to cosplay. As games are released increasingly in countries with stronger censorship of nudity, the general trend for offering scantily-clad female (and at times male) protagonists is likely to create an increasing split between versions. So cosplayers may see their costumes lose a little universality, and meet versions of their characters from less liberal countries who have a lot more on.

So perhaps the future of cosplay is as regional as the future of localisation. But for now, it is truly global, and maintains its cross-language appeal.



*Dusseldorf, Germany - May 25, 2013: Cosplayers give free hugs at Japan Day event*

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