COSPLAYING

THE MARVELOUS WORLD OF
Cosplayers around campus share their stories

If you have dressed up for Halloween, you have cosplayed. Whether it was store-bought, or a homemade costume you made out of that old T-shirt lying in the corner of your closet, if you dressed up as one of your favorite fictional characters, you have cosplayed. Cosplaying is popular among all ages, but there is a large community of teens and adults who take the craft to a higher level.

Cosplay is a word used to define the act of dressing up in costume and makeup that represents characters from video games, anime, television, movies and books. Oftentimes, people also act like the character they are portraying while in costume whether it be on social media or in-person with others. This phenomenon gained popularity in the mid-1980s by the founder of Studio Hard, Nobuyuki Takahashi. He and a few others showed up in costumes at the 1984 World Science Fiction Convention (WorldCon) in Los Angeles, California, and from then on, cosplaying grew into what it is today.

Themed conventions similar to WorldCon such as Anime Expo, D23 Expo and Comic Con are now centered largely around cosplaying. Attendees will show up to these conventions with multiple cosplays and change throughout the day. Cosplay competitions also give people the chance to show off their cosplay creations and get judged by a panel of judges. Awards for competitions like this can range from simple recognition to prize money of as much as $200.

Those who choose not to participate in competitions also have the option of walking around the convention centers to meet and interact with others or even take photos of or with other cosplayers.

Gavin A. Duran, a senior comedic arts and theatre double major, attended his first convention in 2016 at Stan Lee’s Comikaze. Now, it is known as LA Comic Con, an annual convention that is hosted at the Los Angeles Convention Center in Downtown.

He explains, “I grew up a comic book fan, so I always saw the heroes and the characters just in comics. I thought they had such cool outfits, cool personas... it would be awesome to try to bring that to life.”

At his first convention, Duran dressed up as Batman while his friend dressed up as Joker. After that, he was hooked on cosplaying. Since then, he has attended LA Comic Con three more times including the most recent one in December of 2021. There he dressed up as Spiderman but with his own take on the costume. Instead of the classic red and blue look, Duran’s Spiderman is dark blue. He explains that he was inspired by a cosplayer he follows on Instagram who did their own version of Spiderman as well. In fact, this style of changing a character’s look is popular in the cosplay community.

Alternate versions of popular characters allow cosplayers to dive deep into their creativity and bring out a unique version of their character. Some cosplayers will even create a gender-swapped version of their favorite characters. From zombified Snow White to Santa Clause wearing the Infinity Gauntlet or a female version of the Joker, the possibilities are endless when it comes to alternative style cosplays. With the Marvel Cinematic Universe’s (MCU) recent dive into the multiverse, alternate Marvel character cosplays are gaining popularity within the community.

Eden Sides, a junior theatre major, has created her own alternate version of the MCU’s Winter Soldier, otherwise known as Bucky Barnes. Hers is a female Winter Soldier who is depicted with long, braided brown hair and black lipstick, but the rest of the costume is about the same with his iconic metal arm and all-black attire. “She is very dystopian, kind of like a character from a video game,” Sides says.

She first wore her female Winter Soldier cosplay to Disneyland’s Oogie Boogie Bash that is held annually from September to October. Sides recalls, “We realized we could take our cosplays to that because there are other cosplayers that go to that... that was really fun, and that was our first time wearing our costumes out in public. Lots of people were complimenting us!”

Outside of annual conventions, many cosplayers will host or attend other events where dressing up is also the norm such as Renaissance Faires, Halloween events or cosplay-specific meets where people in the same city or town will gather at one location in costume and spend a few hours getting to know each other or taking photos. For those in Southern California, the Oogie Boogie Bash at Disneyland is a popular cosplay destination since adults are not allowed to dress in full costume within the park during regular hours.

Some older Disney fans do find a way to get around the rule against dressing up at characters during regular park hours. One way that many people do this is referred to as “Closet Cosplaying.” The term practically defines itself in which a cosplayer pulls everyday clothing from their closet that they can piece together to represent a character they want to dress up as. A red T-shirt and yellow pants can represent Winnie the Pooh or a vest over a white button down and jeans can represent Han Solo. There are even those dedicated to making their own original characters based on the worlds within movies and television shows.

The Star Wars cosplay community is a good example of this. There are entire cosplay groups dedicated to original character development such as Rebel Legion and Mando Mercs. James Kruppa, an adjunct professor of journalism and new media at CBU, attends conventions with his family and often dresses up as a Stormtrooper. When he is in costume, his wife, Jessica, usually helps him maneuver his way around the area since visibility and movement within a trooper costume are limited. While she helps him, she usually dresses up as a Jedi, but currently Kruppa says that she is working on her own character based on the Mandalorians from the Star Wars galaxy.

Many original character cosplayers will create a backstory for their characters that may or may not intertwine with the main characters of the series they are inspired by. These characters will also have a lot of accessories and their own personalities that help

Above: Gavin A Duran, senior comedy arts and theatre major, dressed as an alternative version of Marvel’s Spiderman.
Left: Duran dressed as Marvel’s Captain America.

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  (freshman mechanical engineering major)
them fit into the fictional universe. The opportunities for character design are endless, especially with the wide variety of species.

Ashely Fisher, a sophomore theatre major, created her own original Star Wars character named Soly Pavan; a half human, half Togruta—if you know Ahsoka Tano who is originally from Star Wars: The Clone Wars, she is a Togruta. Fisher even created a short series on her TikTok, @fishe.n.chips, about Pavan where she talks about her backstory.

A portion of her followers on TikTok followed her for that original character content, “Right after The Rise of Skywalker came out in the spring of 2020… there were so many Star Wars cosplayers at that time… I was one of the many… and quite a few people followed me for [Soly Pavan], and they continued to follow me after that.” Though Fisher has not officially talked about bringing Pavan back to her TikTok account, her followers are still sticking around for her other cosplays such as Milo from Atlantis: The Lost Empire, Gianella from Luca and her own alternate version of Ariel from The Little Mermaid.

Despite the large portion of the cosplay community that dedicates time to creating their own characters or alternate versions of known favorites, there are also those who dedicate their time creating cosplays that are as accurate to a specific character as possible. There are certain groups that are focused solely on screen accurate costumes, and some of those groups have even been selected to be a part of the actual movies and television shows as a result of their accurate character costumes.

The 501st Legion is one example of a cosplay group that has provided its members with the opportunity to play extras on Star Wars for recent shows such as The Mandalorian and The Book of Boba Fett. A majority of the storm troopers within those television shows and even a handful within the most recent movies are members of the 501st. Information about their events and how to join the legion can be found on their website: mandalorianmercs.org.

Sam Mudry, a freshman mechanical engineering major, was inspired for his first cosplay, Hunter from Bad Batch, by the 501st. However, as he learned more about the group, his original intentions for cosplaying changed, “These are professional [cosplayers] who love Star Wars like me, and originally I thought that’s what I want to be just so I can costume. But as I looked further into it I realized why I truly want to join the 501st, and that’s because of the work that they do.”

Not only does the 501st Legion attend conventions and parades or participate as extras on sets, but they also host charity events to raise money and visit hospitals to help bring joy to children and their families isolated inside. That is what Mudry strives for when it comes to cosplaying. “I love bringing joy to other people through my cosplays. My mom was an ICU nurse for a very long time; I’ve seen how hard it can be on people to be in a hospital room. To have something like [cosplaying] bring joy to people during those hard times is really awesome,” Mudry says.

In order to join the top ranks of the 501st Legion, however, members must have screen accurate costumes in order to maintain that Star Wars in real life feeling. ➤
Some will buy a full trooper suit online. A decent suit can cost around $300. A more screen accurate suit can run into the thousands. Others, like Mudry, will build their own from a wide range of different materials. This is usually the cheapest option, but the most time consuming. Mudry has built three of his own cosplays; a Stormtrooper out of cardboard and paper, Hunter’s suit from a 3D printer and Boba Fett’s suit out of a mix of 3D printed parts and metal sheets.

“[3D] printing can still take a long time.” Mudry explains, “My Boba Fett helmet, to print all the parts for that probably took around 50 to 60 hours.” However, those long hours of printing still left room for him to work on other things such as schoolwork or attending class since the 3D printer will run on its own. When Mudry needs to connect the pieces and paint, on the other hand, that is where most of his time is dedicated solely to that. When he painted Hunter’s suit, it took him two weeks.

Not all characters have complex outfits—especially those outside of the Star Wars universe—and therefore building a costume for them does not take as much time or money. For example, Fisher’s cosplay of Giulia from Luca is a beanie, striped T-shirt and jeans. Most people already have those items in their closet. The only thing that most people might not have is a curly red wig or naturally curly red hair. Characters from movies or television shows that wear more realistic clothing—especially compared to Sci-Fi and Fantasy characters with more complex outfits—provide an easy way for new cosplayers to join the community.

Cosplay is not as intimidating as some people make it out to be. The best way to get into the craft is by simply trying. There are thousands of characters to choose from, and not all of them have costumes as complicated as they may appear. If starting a cosplaying hobby complicated is the way to go, Mudry is a good example of someone who took a dive into building a detailed costume on his own. However, Duran, Sides and Fisher bought their first few costumes online. Some beginning advice from Sides: “Just start. Put something together that inspires you and makes you want to look like a character whether it’s accurate or not. And if it doesn’t look the best first time that’s okay. Lots of cosplayers are constantly updating their costumes.”

There are also plenty of popular cosplayers that post their costume processes on social media. Duran explains, “It’s really helpful to look at other cosplayers because they’ve already gone through stuff. They have so many tips…and it’s so helpful to look up to those cosplayers…it’s really encouraging and it’s very helpful, so I would say it’s very good to be following the community for those reasons.”

Social media is a great way for cosplayers around the world to connect with each other. Especially during the Covid-19 lockdown, apps such as Instagram and TikTok gave users the opportunity to continue cosplaying and interacting with each other without the need to meet in person at an event or convention. Mudry is constantly posting shoutouts on his Instagram stories to others in community to show his support, Fisher has friends that she has connected with through her cosplaying account on TikTok and Sides has gotten a chance to meet some of his cosplay idols in person by following them on social media and reaching out to them when she attended Oogie Boogie Bash.

In Sides’s opinion, one of the best things about the cosplay community is the chance to be around people who share the same interests and are willing to nerd out together. For Duran, a favorite memory of his at the most recent Comic Con convention was when he and four other Spiderman cosplayers danced together in the middle of the convention floor. He looks back on that moment and says, “It’s a very fun memory because it was just all of us having a great time and nobody’s judging. Nobody’s there to put down your creativity. Everybody’s there for the same reason. Everybody’s there to create.”

Cosplaying offers those in the community a wide range of different opportunities. From attending conventions, participating in competitions or even possibly playing an extra in a movie, in the end, the craft is simply a creative outlet that brings people together. Duran summarizes the craft well by saying, “[Cosplaying] is a love letter to comics and to fandoms.”

Left: Eden Sides, junior theatre major, dressed as an alternate version of the MCU’s Winter Soldier.
1: Fisher dressed as her original Star Wars character, Soly Pavan.
2: Fisher dressed as Giulia from Luca.
3: Sides dressed as Yelena Belova from the MCU.
4: Duran and Sides reacting a fight scene between Captain America and the Winter Soldier from the MCU.
5: Mudry dressed as Hunter from Bad Batch.