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Daria Wrona

Adam Mickiewicz University (Poland)

Cosplay in the perspective of rape culture. Context, origins and conditions

ABSTRACT. Many people do not have the knowledge on what cosplay is, even less about its positive correlation with the rape culture we live in. It's hard to disagree that the modern world is heavily influenced by the pop culture, current reality is based upon it, and so it cannot be omitted in such important things as education. Cosplay, as a generally new trend is heavily rooted in it and as such it's connected to the battle for equality, emancipation, sexism and many movements which are part of video games. Patriarchal influences and rooted patterns found in our cultural circle have impact on the appearance of costumes, which we wear; supply and demand with the addition of consumerism and hedonism dictate the look of created characters and cosplays characters which are most popular. Situations which demands attention are ones, where we breach someone's personal space, where molestation of rape occurs. Aspects which help here will be proper upbringing and education, which apart of implementing basic culture and its patterns will also sensitize towards the problems of sexual abuse. The issue here does not lie in the character models, scarce costumes or the unfair fight for equality, its indoctrination or inappropriate approach, but teaching respect and enjoying the phenomena which is cosplay.

KEYWORDS: Cosplay, rape culture, current generation, pop culture

Introduction—briefing of the issue

In current times many occurrences and elements of the culture remain subject to change, they are dynamic and incorrect. In postmodernity, with which we are exposed to and live in daily, there are often situations which are absurd, connected not only to mass culture as is, but also with the pressure on gender equality; over sensitivity, which is expressed by people agreeing with this kind of approach, it has its dualities—it impacts the decrease of rape culture, but at the same time, it help it's development. This is well perceivable in the topic of cosplay, as it is strongly rooted in popular culture. On the one side, one's body is one's own property, on the other hand it's quite to the contrary—it be-

came a currency, which one can use to gain what he or she wants or needs. Raising to the status of *sacrum* and *profanum* it complicates matters to the point, where it allows people to freely use their own image, on the other hand it became the forbidden fruit, which tempts ever so more. Young women, who are usually more often impacted by this problem become victims of molestation or rape due to beliefs and stereotypes connected to this forms of sexual violence. Where does this leave cosplay?

For the needs of my master thesis I created a complex definition of cosplay, based upon it I will analyze this phenomena in the context of rape culture, which surrounds us. So, cosplay is an activity, which involves

(...) mostly incorporating a chosen character from popular culture, often mimicking mentioned characters behavior and character, identifying with it. The foundation here is the costume and makeup, which make us look like the character and creates an illusion where others can interact with it. Often, it is also a statement of ones membership to a particular group or fandom (Wrona, 2017, p. 14).

In regard with the connection of the topic to rape culture an important aspect, which plays an essential role, is creating a likeness of popular culture heroes and thus—giving other people an opportunity to meet the characters they adore/respect/love. Sometimes, these feelings can morph into mania or desire and in case of people in their adolescent age, it's only natural for them to point their feelings and needs to objects, with which they have close contact. In current times, more and more adolescents have access to technology, so also to video games or platforms offering TV series on which they focus their interests and begin to fantasize about meeting particular characters. These fantasies are not only purely platonic, they can be ones of erotic nature, so meeting our object of interest can sometimes lead to preposterous situations of touching, molestation and, in extreme situations—rape. Of course it's not widespread or unavoidable. It's a rare occurrence, however usually not spoken about. For many reasons it became a taboo.

Unfortunately adults are also subject to this situation proving not to be free of this type of inappropriate behavior. However, let's begin with introducing the particular factors, which impact this state of cosplay in the rape culture.

Rape culture and its genesis

It is not true that the only impacting factor for the culture of rape is mass media and its wide spread. By same effect, the shift in the “ownership rights”, self-determination was not the only, clear factor, which impacted the treating of the body as a currency or commodity allowing barter transactions or, like in this case, exposing it to others and dressing up in costumes. For centuries woman was in a way a property of man, which means he was allowed to manage her, her body or even life, because of that this culture is based on rape as a modern model of current sexuality and heterosexual relationships. From here originated the conviction, that a married woman is a property of her husband and by that she cannot be raped in such a relationship. Single women or virgins were perceived differently, as more valuable than the ones with a husband, which can be seen in the fact, that a raped, not married woman (implied—virgin), was supposed to enter marriage to avoid punishment (Herman, 1989, p. 45–46).

Such an approach toward women created a situation where they were implemented to typical responsibilities and tasks. A woman should be a wife and a mother, so her sexuality was controlled by others. Of paradox were situations, where a woman would come out from her fathers keep straight into one of her husband, who controlled her sexuality—during her whole life she was not free; she made her vows as a virgin and remained faithful to her husband and often, in case of his death, if she remained without children, she would bear ones for her father’s relative. It was all rooted in strong dependence, where the fairer sex is controlled by the other. The status of man or religion is based on that, we often see patriarchy showing up not only in monogamy, but also filling work positions and social hierarchy with men. Inequality remains, which leads to subordination and false interpretation of rape. Because the body of a woman is not one of hers, it can be freely managed (Anderson, 2004, p. 33). I did however mention the current situation, in which women gain more and more access to their sexuality and self-determination, this can be seen in many aspects of life, such as choosing their own partner, career, access to education and finally the choice whether if they want to have children. It’s a big step forward, as not so long ago, these possibilities were just not there, which impacted amongst other things the emancipation movement. The release from the male control and the possibility of freely using their own body, on their own terms,

led to a situation, where the costumes now are bold and show a lot of the body. Where once women had the duty to cover every part of their bodies (which remains a part of some cultures to this day), today the situation is pretty much the opposite—only intimate parts and breasts are covered. The costumes from the seventies and eighties of the 20th century, were very open, showing sometimes through see-through tulle pubic mound or nipples.

It has led to a situation, where on the one hand emancipation and respect is called upon, but on the other hand we're not immune from straying into temptations. There is a constant conviction, where a raped or molested woman has brought these actions upon herself. In this, men are supported and not judged and by thus reinsured about their infallibility. It is of course not a scenario which plays out in the majority of cases, however it's possible, repeated and a subject of taboo in particular circles. So we have to ask ourselves a question here: where does the norm and respect lie and where can we admit, that the line has been crossed? In current times, more and more voices agree, that in case of sexuality between partners things that both partners agree upon are appropriate between them, situations where compulsion or violence does not occur. But what happens in case, where touching happens between not people in a relationship but strangers? Cosplayers deal with this kind of situations by the tens and hundreds. There are some people, which just want to meet their idol, others want to admire beautifully created costumes and there are these, who actually want to touch the cosplayers. In this kind of cases, the most comfortable and human approach to the issue, is stating that it's not appreciated. Cosplayers do however make often a big mistake here: they do not make this statement in the time of its occurrence, rather much later, even months after the fact. Such behavior does not disqualify the problem which is molestation or does not diminish it, it can be though understood from the perspective of people who dress up. After three days of an event the amount of people can be overwhelming due to simple, human exhaustion.

One more element demands attention, one which we usually don't even consider. The genesis of the rape culture is rooted deeper then we usually think, it does not come from the evolution of mass culture. It's present in many cultural circles, both the ones, we consider developed and those, which we consider ones from Third World Countries. However mass culture has shaped us for a long time now and has an impact on how we perceive many things, such as gender equality, transsexualism

or relationships. On one hand it strongly sensitizes and warns us but on the other, it creates a false view of the world, one which we are not resistant to. Current generations are born to a world, where their exposure to technology is considerable, very early they develop the necessary skills to operate a gaming console, a laptop or a TV. Of course, being fit is also a big thing, the ability to use one's own body and a hedonistic, rich way of life. In this reality, the human body easily becomes a commodity which can generate income or by barter be traded for other, better products. Under the facade of greatness, stereotypes and information are being smuggled which we register on a subconscious level. These are not subliminal information, such as ones used for example in cartoons and animations. These are the smallest elements used in advertisements, between colleges and at home. Behind romantic love, sadomasochistic, heterosexual relations are hidden (Herman, 1989, p. 45). Books treating on the subject are witnessing a real renaissance, which explains the great popularity of *Fifty shades of Grey* or a series about a millionaire *Gideon Cross*. In our cultural circle, even though there is a possibility for women to work and for their self-determination, we still live amongst familiar patterns. We cannot rape a wife but in spite of law and awareness and a woman coming back late night alone under the influence of alcohol is considered a harlot and thus can be used. On one hand it creates double standards, which are difficult to overcome, on the other it helps us point attention to these kinds of problems. Thus parities and pressure for gender equality came into being.

With such encoding of information, stereotypes and duplication of an family pattern a situation is born, where it's hard to distinguish rape from a "normal", heterosexual relation. Still, by marriage, even if not in the sanctity of church, woman is transferred from under her fathers keep to her husbands. Working or not, it makes no difference—she will most likely become a wife or a mother, regardless of her own will of self-realization. The culture of rape is more ingrained then we ever thought, because it's usually a subject, which is not brought up. More often than not, it's treated as a non-changeable truth, which we lead our lives by. What sense does it make in regards to cosplay though? Usually the heroes and heroines are an unachievable role model in terms of their looks and behavior, this promotes hedonism, independence and self-realization. While the last two elements are very positive, the first ones are more of a controversy subject. For young people and adults alike, games and mass culture became a separate world and with time, the only reali-

ty they know, such a model of life and apparition ideals can lead to complexes or intra- and interpersonal issues. How to create proper bonds or a lasting relationship, when it becomes apparent that it demands compromises and sacrifices? Where hedonism and doing what one does want fall into place? An additional problem lies with the unrealistic expectations towards the external looks of a partner and pornography. If it encourages us to “live life” and use one’s body, why not touch? Add to it usually quite scarce costumes in which young girls walk around and we have a dangerous mixture—molestations and rape, because they brought it upon themselves by the way they dress. But is it so? The majority of costumes takes inspiration from video games, they show young, confident girls, women always ready for intercourse; or so they appear, especially in connection with pornographic animations in which they appear, ones which are easily found on the Internet.

Our cultural circle is rich with sexualization of children, minors and adults as well. Through overexposure of the naked body we start to misjudge the lines or move them, we have a false understanding of what is allowed or we follow a worthless rule where “everything, which is not forbidden, is allowed”. How is one supposed to not get lost in such intricate relations and not cross the intimate space of another human?

Occurrence of sexism in pop culture

Directly connected to the rape culture is sexism, which occurs in almost every aspect of mass culture. It’s not however as one sided, as one might think; it touches both genders but often sexism towards man is belittled (mainly due to emancipation of women). Usually it is shown in a concept that men rule over women, which can be perceived, amongst other places, in the lack of equal treatment of the fairer gender or access to employment of public institutions and sexual abuse (Boles & Hoeveler, 2004, p. 291.) How is it now? Mentioned parities and emphasis on employing women, which was supposed to counter the issue, often creates a situation where men’s rights are violated and their treated with reluctance. What is important, is that not only women are victims of inequality from stereotypes and indoctrination of patterns. Often we see male and female models with perfect smiles, tan and unscathed bodies, which can successfully lead to complexes and create a false view of a future/good partner.

Video game characters are becoming in these days archetypes and models which we should follow in order for our lives to become exciting and meaningful. The problem begins, when we consider these characters as too real, a source of help to cope with reality or model our lives too much on them. Usually these characters are not weak nor ugly. Their charismatic, perfect in every way, relentless, they are what we can like and identify with. This is done on purpose, as people seek models, idols, someone who's in a similar/analogical life situation and deal with it. Additionally, these creations of designers, originators and programmers are made to be attractive, they are brought to life too feed the consumers and ignite their fantasies. Thin women with large breasts, piercing gazes and sweet lips will often sell better, then a plain counterpart. Of course much depends on the consumers taste and these are vastly different, dependent on the country they live in, cultural circles or even the memories and events they went through. Supply and demand dictate the rules of characters appearance, thus they are often created based on the qualities we lack in reality; or these, that our partner lacks, which can lead to distorted views and lack of common sense.

Where is sexism in all of this though? Many people seek it in the objectified treatment of the other gender in, amongst others, video games. There are occurrences where games allow to fulfill a variety of fantasies, not only sexual ones. Scarcely clothed women or muscular men are often a fundament for discussion. Many topics are brought forward, such as treatment of fictional models as submissive, something to dominate, to use freely. Often, the consequence of such thinking where reality and the virtual world mix in cosplay is molestation and rape. Cosplayers dress up in a costumes which resemble a character do not automatically agree to invade their personal space, even if the character they play would. One should never assume such a thing and try to invade one's personal space; perceiving a character taken straight out of a virtual world can lead to occurrence of false perception and an automatic objectification. It's not necessarily a situation which happens only to people rooted in the virtual world. Every single one of us can view a person hidden under a costume in such a way. Respect and proper treatment of fellow human beings as people and not objects is not helped by the elements of mass culture which are angled towards hedonism and shows how we should life live to its fullest and not worry about the impact it has on others. Of course it does have its pros and cons which I mentioned before, it brings attention towards dangers and respect towards women.

More and more attention is brought to the question on how women are perceived in video games, TV series and books. They are created to be the main heroes, they can overcome the issues they face and in no way are inferior to men. There are though voices of protest, which speak of a too great objectification of a woman's body, which came a long way from a decoration to independence. The situation is somewhat bizarre though, as despite efforts it becomes apparent, that many groups cannot be satisfied and the objectification of man and their sexualization is omitted all together. If we talk about *Bayonetta* the issue lies with the heroin being too sexy and unrealistic—a woman cannot have such proportions or move in such a manner. However no one addresses the fact, that *Geralt of Rivia* (*The Witcher* series), *Kratos* (*God of war* series) or *Dante* (*Devil May Cry* series) also look unrealistic when compared to people, we meet every day at work, school, college or in the city. It leads to a situation where we identify with them, but at the same time, in our minds comparisons are being made in which we come out poorly: we do not have stomach muscles like the Witcher, beautiful hair like *Ciri* or we're not as charismatic as the characters from *League of legends*. It all leads us to decisions influenced by our dreams, fantasy and perception of. Taking the likeness of pop culture charters, which are designed to be widely admired, we free ourselves and allow to become someone else, but at the same time, we can, unknowingly become victims of the rape culture. The paradox here, is that we help build it. That, which gave us freedom also gave us restrictions. The current culture, which is mass and popular is also a culture of rape which roots and even develops sexism further. This time it's not one directional and geared only towards women but it also touches men, they both become an object of interest by comparison, patterns, stereotypes and hedonism.

Gamergate, the controversy

To combat that outcome a movement called *gamergate* came into being. In its concept, it was meant as a mean to overlook reporter ethics in video game press, but it also touched the wide concept of gamers "identity" (Romano, 2014). Despite over 5 years, since #Gamergate's origin in the Internet, it still manages to remain as relevant as it is controversial. But what are we talking about here? The topic revolves heavily around

the general concept of inequality in relation to gender. It touches gaming as such, development and creation of video games and perception of women in games. Usually the target of video games were men, who played games with a high difficulty curve, but at the same time ones, which gave great satisfaction upon their completion. It was a reality, which was hard, one which women had no access to. With the popularization of Internet and development of devices more women begun gaming and more of them were brought into the secrets of coding, scripting and design used in video games. It brought substantial issues generated from a few reasons:

- Game development field begun to be perceived as strongly unequal in regard to accepting women into work and their general participation in it; similar to other branches, the issues of parities came was present;
- There is an issue in regard to women publishing their own games—if their creations are met with criticism often the authors of such, if male are being accused of;
- Lastly, there is the issue of female character models—enhanced, female body parts and scarce costumes create a situation, where some of the games are judged as ones geared towards male fantasies, exemplifying patriarchal approach in the present world and general sexism.

Gamergate was supposed to bring focus to the issue of inequality and try to combat the wrong perception of women in gaming. However that, which was suppose too defend and warn became a double edged blade and a salt in the eye. The general concept was good but it brought many misunderstandings and an inability of solving a problem, which it created by itself.

What is the relation to rape culture here though? Many centuries of tradition which impacted many cultural circles, in which women are subjected to man and the world is perceived as patriarchal has its influence on over sensitivity in the topic of genders. It's not a question of woman and men being equal, but in such environments as, there is an occurrence of a particular disproportion shown by the need to accent being different/better/one of a kind. Parities are on one hand an effect of that but it also creates easier access to some commodities, it has its roots in such a culture. More and more often we see female characters which are not over-sexualized but not all games chose this trajectory.

Many characters from, for example, *MOBA* type games¹ remain quite stereotypical, but they make up for it with their character, spoken sentences, behavior or mannerism (for example in *League of legends* or *Overwatch*).

The issue does not begin with designing such characters or even choosing as who we want to dress up as. Both games and cosplay are occurrences which exhibit both good and bad sides, ones which we can become addicted to, misinterpret them for reality or develop pathological reactions and fantasies, which can lead to paraphilia. It's not necessarily though automatic and we do not have to consider it a necessary evil. In this case, the problems lie with lack of control of ones urges, seeking unfairness and attaching false ideologies to something, which in reality doesn't mean anything. Thus *Gamergate* brings the danger of bending the facts. It's understandable that women do not desire to be objectified and perceived solely by their body, sexual relations, taking care of the household and bearing children, however attaching parities and sexism to where it does not belong is a wrong way to address the subject. *Gamergate* is important here in the context that it's originated directly from the feministic movement and is an effort to combat inequalities and rape culture, however this connection might not be that obvious. Instead of helping or trying to make people understand the issues it mainly is a catalyst for the problem, it festers the wounds—many followers and people who oppose this ideology have surfaced and they postulate not necessarily ideas, but demands on how the video game world should look like. What does that lead to? More and more games being created in such a way, that they try to avoid hurting anyone's feelings. Thankfully, many of them remain ambitious and not detrimental to established series.

How does that impact cosplay? Often we come across people opposed to showing too much of the body and as an effect, costumes are made, which deter from the apparition of original characters; it's due to the fact, that not everyone has the means necessary to create complicated costumes and the end effect is subpar. This rarely has an effect on cosplayers as general, which do their job well and allow people to meet their favorite characters. As mentioned, much depends on putting down clear lines but also the awareness of people, who meet them.

¹ MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena)—a variation of a Real Time Strategy game, which is angled towards multiplayer battles on the Internet; its emphasis is on dynamic battles with exclusion of elements like base building.

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