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"Tell Me, Where am I From?": A Study of the Performance of Geek Identity at Comic Book Conventions

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"Tell Me, Where am I From?":

A Study of the Performance of Geek Identity at Comic Book Conventions

by

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Abstract

The performance of identity is an often studied subject matter. One identity, Geek, and the larger subculture to which it is attached (Geek culture) has become a growing field of study in since the turn of the millennium, mirroring the growth of the subculture itself. The question then is how do Geek's perform this identity and create an idea of what a Geek is? If there is a place to examine this performance then it is the growing event of comic book conventions. At these events thousands of individuals gather to celebrate, interact with, purchase and play with the commodities of Geek; comic books, video games, anime, manga and film. In this space, as I will discuss, the spectrum of performance as outline by Richard Schechner in *Performance Theory* occurs in simultaneous forms inside the convention. While there is ritual, there is also play, and theater, and all three may be occurring at any one time through any one individual. This is partially brought on by the presence of cosplayers, convention attendees who dress up as fictional characters, and perform a separate role that also speaks to their own identity. Furthermore, the presence of what Victor Turner terms social dramas in the space of the panel discussion complicate and re-form not only individual identities, but also Geek culture identity as well.

Underlying the interaction of identity with space/place is the, as Marc Agé terms it, non-place nature of the convention center itself. That the convention center does not bear the trappings of a typical anthropological place (such as history or tradition) influences the impact of the performance and the identity created therein. Consequently, the identity held will be

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challenged by the temporary nature, not just of the event, but also the place which contains it. I attended two comic book conventions in the state of Florida to examine this phenomena using my own experience as part of the study, as well as interviewing other convention attendees and people within my group. I will move through the space of the conventions exploring my personal relation to the identity of Geek and how others perform the identity while trying to explore what does it mean to be Geek.

Introduction

As this new millennium has progressed fueled by the innovations of computer technology and the internet the Geek, or Nerd, has emerged from the cavernous confines of the comic book shop, online chat rooms, and their parent's basements to become popular. What was once an ostracized sub-group whose moniker is an appropriation of a term defining a sideshow freak act, there is now a fashionable dress style, the go-to hero of romantic comedies, and a canon of shared texts that are being turned into Hollywood blockbuster dollars. At least this is how the narrative is being formed and discussed amongst Geeks and other critics. The question still remains what does it mean to be a Geek? At comic book conventions around the United States there are gatherings of geeks/nerds to share, consume, critique, and, in the end, perform the identity they ascribe to, that of Geek. This performance is not relegated to merely a ritual or theater but moves between ends of the performance spectrum of ritual and play, pushing the boundaries of liminality in a post-modern space, or non-place, the convention center. To approach this performance I have attended two separate comic book conventions, Florida Super-Con and the Tampa Bay Comic-Con, to examine this performed expression of Geek culture in the multi-layered space of comic book conventions and the performance of the identity of Geek through an auto-ethnographic study.

The ability to determine what it means to be a Geek or, even, whom, may claim to be a Geek presents difficulty due to a rising conflict of identity. As stated previously, pieces of Geek culture from texts to personal style are moving into the mainstream as part of "normal" culture.

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A popular television show like *The Big Bang Theory* presents safe and approachable presentations of identified Geeks that bring increased ratings for the network while inversely setting visual trends of identifying a geek. Hollywood studios continue to profit immensely from the use of comic book heroes and storylines for their films, even ones that are less well known outside of comic book fans. Video games have moved from a niche industry of middle class entertainment, to a multibillion dollar industry that straddles the line between popular entertainment and Art.

There then exists an effort to maintain Geek's otherness. While Geek culture may be growing in exposure it still maintains it apartness from the general culture. This resistance is a necessity of subcultures trying to maintain the authenticity of their alternative presence to the mainstream and other larger subcultures. There becomes a paradox of presenting open acceptance (anyone can be a geek) while maintaining some presence of exclusivity (They are not a *true* geek, they are an imposter.) This paradox elevates the importance of the performance of being geek in not just society at large, but within the subculture. Not only *how* one performs being a Geek but for *whom* and *where* becomes question that, I believe, can be approached by studying the performance of peoples within comic book conventions.

For clarity on terms used in this essay; the capital term Geek will represent the culture writ large while geek will stand for the self-identifier that stands in conflict with other Geek subgroups such as nerds, trekkies, L.A.R.P.ers, cosplayers, bronies, gamers, and other fan culture that present themselves at the comic book conventions. Some of these groups have their own conventions and each presents a deep history and identity that becomes subjective under the larger umbrella moniker of Geek or Nerd. Because the terms geek or nerd are often used interchangeably and are added to terms to represent a connection to a larger identity such as

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being a sports-geek or sports-nerd, I have chosen to select Geek, because of negative connotations associated with the term nerd through mainstream cultural texts such as the movie *Revenge of the Nerds* and the television show *King of the Nerds*. Even this is difficult because characters on these programs, for example, still identify as both nerds and geeks. But, whereas nerd is typically a marker given to a subject from an outside party as an insult, geek is usually used as a term of self-identification to connect with a larger group (be it geeks, nerds, or a specific subgroup.) Even with these reasoning I could have just as easily swapped Geek culture with Nerd culture, but because of these reasoning's I have decided to use the term Geek.

A large group of actors that are integral in understanding the convention are cosplayers. Cosplay the word is a combination of the terms "costume" and "play" and cosplayers are people who dress and perform, both to varying degrees of excellence, as fictional characters from comic books, manga, anime, video games and movies. It is a subgroup of Geek separated by the choice to appear in public in costume and presents a nexus of performance as a structure and in the achievement of identity, and will be examined throughout the essay.

The focus of this essay is based on the issue of performance and an interaction with a space. In regards to performance there is a need to understand the layers and complexities to what actions can be defined as performance and the contextual relationships held therein. I find no better starting point than in Richard Schechner's foundational work *Performance Theory*. Schechner offers his own defense into the use of performance to find truth when he states "Performance is an illusion of an illusion and, as such, might be considered more "truthful," more "real," than ordinary experience."(Schechner, Introduction) This experience is always hedged in by rules but these rules can either be placed by the individual (play) or by an authority (ritual).(13) For Schechner all performance can be identified in relationship to play and ritual, or,

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performance can be defined as "*ritualized behavior condition/permeated by play*."[emphasis Schechner's] where the balance between the spontaneity of play can influence and interrupt the rigid actions ritual.(95) The relationship between the serious and the silly, ritual and play, provides insight into the comic convention where the "serious" interest of the geek into the articles of "play"(comics, toys, video games) creates a space where the serious becomes the contrite and the silly becomes integral to the experience.

To complement Schechner, I will also be using Victor Turner's book *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play,* adding to the dimension of performance the inclusion of the structure of social dramas. When Turner posits social dramas he is looking towards larger breaks in the social norms between large subgroups of people based on gender, ethnicity or some other defining characteristic that separates them form the norm. For my purposes these social dramas can be seen at play in the convention space through the action of panel discussions where divides amongst fellow Geeks occur over ideology, gender, and fan genre appreciation. This structure is contingent on conflict and can lead to a permanent change, an irreconcilable split between groups, or a continual reenactment of events that prevents any change from occurring.

The space of a performance is important to the construct as the text or actors there-in. To understand the convention space I turn to the French anthropologist Marc Augé and his work *Non-places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*. Augé tries to define the new "supermodern" world that faces an ever increasing presence of global non-places and an influx of information. As Augé states non-places are "spaces of circulation, consumption and communication" which are in opposition to anthropological places that bear "inscriptions of the social bond…or collective history."(Intro VIII) There does not exist a purely non-place, but there are iterations in the forms of airports, highways, and metro stations or, in my opinion, convention centers. Yet,

places create an identity as group identity may be constructed through spatial arrangements. To examine this relationship of place-space I will supplement Augé with Michel de Certeau's work *The Performance of Everyday*, using de Certeau's examination of the creation of individual spaces through predefined places. The conventions hold a positon as an area of creation for both the individual and collective Geek identity through the shared reality of the convention space. This is temporary however, as the space is only a temporary position in transit that does not allow for the continued practiced or performance of the identity. It then becomes possible that it is only within the space of the convention center that the geek or nerd fully realizes their self-identity.

Field work was conducted in order to observe the on-site performances and interactions with the space of the comic book convention. There is always difficulty when conducting such research in maintaining an unbiased or subjective point of view, but there is some truth to be found in examining our own interactions within the community. When at the conventions I could also be seen as performing my identity as a Geek and conducting a ritualistic journey to a space identified for the expression of being a Geek. While I was both observing and performing, participation could become an issue, too much and I am lost to my passions, too little and I miss the ability to experience the event. Luckily I was able to bring two separate colleagues (one for each convention) to provide another view point. One represented a person completely uninterested in Geek culture but has experienced it through the more popular texts that have existed in mainstream culture. The other was one who was interested in comic books but was still a novice compared to the average convention attendee. Their lack of cultural immersion helped to temper and present a mainstream viewpoint of an event that is slowly becoming a mainstream meeting place.

The choice of attending two separate conventions, Florida Super-Con in Miami and Tampa Bay Comic-Con, was a choice to see if there were similarities or differences in the community, event presentation and general spatial presence between conventions. A larger convention may present different dynamics and relationships then a smaller one, and the performances there in maybe vastly different. I had intended to view the conventions as opposite representations, but upon study found their similarities so overwhelming that trying to put them in opposition would be unjustified. Despite the separation of time and space the conventions became almost one event in which the names and characters may have changed, but the drama remained the same. This essay will examine how these spaces allow multiple levels of performance and how these performances create an individual and collective Geek identity.

In chapter one I will move through the immediate areas around the convention center and enter the convention site. The transience of the event, and the effect this presents on the experience and performance by convention attendees, is explored through sociologist Marc Augé's non-place theory. Without this burden of tradition, the convention center becomes a space where new relationships and definitions can be and are constantly created, though, within the constraints of a self-aware impending finality. Also, there is the outside resistance faced in the approach to the convention by the populace living around the convention center, a reminder of the separation form mainstream culture a Geek identity creates.

Once inside the convention center in chapter two, the main floor presents the space where multiple performances of identity interact within a space built around consumption. Booths lining the space filled with professional actors and artists interact directly with the fans of their creations. There is an element of the fantasy with the actualization of fictional characters by the presence of cosplayers walking around performing to varying degrees. While the main focus of

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the space is the buying and selling of Geek material, from comic books, to toys, to t-shirts. But, there is also the monetization of the experience where photographs with and autographs from celebrities and amateurs have a price.

Chapter three will examine the interactions held in the surrounding auxiliary rooms of the convention. In these smaller spaces Victor Turner's theory of social dramas will be applied to examine the formation or reaffirmation of Geek identity in relation to panel discussions. In these events, conflicts arise amongst sub-groups of Geeks and create an examination of and contestation over what it means to be Geek. The rooms not devoted to these panels, but towards the action of entertainment through video and board games, recreate in the convention space recreational areas and experiences of community. They allow social interactions between Geeks in friendly competitions and allow memory to be shared amongst generations of Geeks.

Chapter 1

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the "pre-event" moments of comic book conventions, specifically analyzing the acts of preparation performed by convention attendees. The act of preparation is the beginning of ritualized identity performance, in this case, the performance of Geek. "Geek" references not just an individual identity characteristic, but also a larger sub-culture of comic book fans, sci-fi fans, video gamers, and live-action role players. The organization of my analysis of the relationships between the convention space and attendee identity performances mirrors the organization of the entrance to the convention space; I move from the exterior spaces of the convention, through the front doors, and end in the entryway of the main hall. I begin to explore the creation of a Geek identity and the beginning of a multi-tiered performance by the convention attendees. More importantly, I explore the importance of non-place status of the convention centers and how the transient nature of these events creates an unstable identity performance, an identity that is re-enforced by its othering by the mainstream culture, which surrounds the event.

Outside the Convention

Tampa Bay Comic-con and Miami's Florida Super-con have become annual events in their respective cities and draw crowds in the thousands each year. The two conventions took

place in the summer months (August and July respectively), a time when tourism is slow in the state of Florida allowing the conventions to provide a small economic boost to their respective areas. The summer months also present a conflict for convention attendees: whether or not to go in costume and face the sweltering summer heat and humidity of South Florida.

While I chose not to go in costume, there was no lack of courage or discomfort for the many cosplayers who attended the event in full regalia. The convention centers were air conditioned, which is rendered inconsequential by the large moving masses of people in the confined spaces of the convention, but there was still ample time between parking lot and front gate for make-up to run and costumes to be ruined by sweat. Yet, as I observed, there was no significant decline in cosplayers or layered costumes between conventions.

The convention centers, as spaces of identity performance, are at once limited temporally and able to restructure to fit varied and, even at odds, conceptions. Convention centers are usually located by transportation hubs like airports, major highway intersections, or harbors because conventions are transient in nature. French sociologist Marc Augé labels these "spaces of circulation, consumption and communication" as "empirical non-places" (VIII). Convention centers, and other non-places, are not permanent spaces of performance. Traditional theaters or political arenas such as town halls can be used as an example of permanent spaces of performance. Through their anthropological, sociological, and historical backgrounds theaters and town halls have come to possess a historical agency. Instead, convention centers lack this historical agency because of their open and sociologically undefined space. For Augé this lack of agency comes partially from the destruction of the ideal of progress, "the end of the grand narratives, the great systems of interpretation…in sum, a doubt as to whether history carries any meaning" (20). Whatever history or narrative has been created for a city's identity the

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convention center, as an open space, defies bearing the city's narrative and by this presence carries doubt as to whether the city may even claim a separate identity. Convention centers provide a space for attendees without providing a direct influence conceptually as to how the space will be used by the group. The only limitations imposed are spatial in nature relating to individual convention center's building structure and architecture.

The area around the conventions provided an interesting dynamic between Geeks and mainstream culture, where the Geeks were seen by locals as invading the space of the mainstream through the convention. The lack of conceptual limitations coupled with the temporary nature of the event creates an image of conventions as enabling "deviant lifestyles" such as cosplay(Thomas, 31-32). This was most evident in Miami, where the convention center was located on Miami Beach. When checking into my hotel, only a few blocks from the convention center, I was politely asked why I was in town by the concierge. When I responded, "For the convention," her smile disappeared and she commented, "Oh, you are one of those *interesting* people" (original emphasis). Had I not told her I was there for the Comic-book convention, I would have been treated as another anonymous tourist, especially since I dressed the part. But, she had seen, as I had, the large groups of people moving toward the convention center dressed in cosplay; men dressed in leather skirts carrying shields and spears, and women in Wonder Woman costumes with legs, arms, and breasts exposed. The public performances by cosplayers challenge norms governing public exposure/ decency. In addition, crossplayers challenged norms of gender performance by performing and dressing as the opposite sex. As Catherine Thomas addresses in her study *Love to Mess with Minds: En(gendering) Identities through Crossplay*, the act of crossplaying creates a fluidity of sexualities that "become[s] problematic as attempts are made to inscribe the body with gendered codes" (36). This conflict

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of gendered identity is not restricted to the observing party, but also the crossplay performer who must reconcile their own gendered identity with that of the character they are representing. While I was not participating in cosplay or crossplay, by attending the same event as these "deviant" people my association placed me with the "*inertesting* people" the concierge was confused by.

The peripheral convention space plays a significant role in the performance of Geek identity, specifically offering participants the challenge of disrupting the social distinctions between public and private, and requiring participants to publicly negotiate mainstream perceptions/reactions regarding their performed identities. Even if one such as myself was not one of these easily identifiable costumed actors, there were large groups of Geeks sporting bright neon hair, comic book logoed shirts, and Pikachu backpacks. I realized the reason the concierge, as well as other people on the streets who stared at the convention attendees, was curious was because seeing people in such costuming tends to be something relegated to private events (a costume party) or Halloween. With the historical Art Deco district a block away, and the beach just a little further still, it was more common to see people dressed in beach clothing or, at night, in "proper" nightclub attire with men in dress shirts and slacks and woman in dresses, "properly" gendered and "age appropriate" in style. Our group or individual performance of Geek then becomes an activist identity and an act of social resistance through this public spectacle.

Before the convention, as with most public performances, there is an act of preparation. For me, since I chose not to attend in costume, my preparation consisted of collecting my tickets, readying my digital recorder, and psychologically prepping myself and my non-geek colleague, Colby, for the possible sights that lay ahead. Specifically, I felt that we needed to be respectful of our fellow convention attendees' choices. We needed to prepare ourselves to control potential strong or negative reactions to new and subjectively shocking sights, whether it was the sights of

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a man cross-dressing as a Japanese school-girl character, or the female warrior whose battle armor actually metallic lingerie. We were also preparing ourselves for possible changes in our own characters when entering the space of the convention.

Cosplayers more than other convention attendees, participate in the liminality of identity performance. Kane Anderson, in using his personal experience cosplaying at San Diego Comic-con, states that the performance of cosplayers is to achieve an "actualized fantasy" (17). This assertion is analogous to Richard Schechner's assertion in *Performance Theory* that in the act of performance "the boundaries between 'life' and 'art'…are blurry and permeable" (38). For Schechner, it is in the act of ritual that this blurring of experience becomes noticeable (38). Cosplayers prepare for their roles in much the same way as participants in tribal rituals. Schechner observes that participants in tribal rituals apply event-specific make-up, masks, and wield props necessary for the moment of efficacy (or transformation)(122). In the parking lots and hotel rooms surrounding the convention centers, cosplayers prepare for the ritual of comic book convention by applying event-specific make-up, practicing accents, adjusting costumes, and beginning to enter the mindset of their characters. Schechner notes "no performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment" thus creating a decision for the actor in relation to how much do they commit to achieve the moment of transformation (120). Some cosplayers wish to completely inhabit and embody their chosen characters: for others, the costume is simply a fashion choice acceptable for socializing at the convention (Winge 67). Because participants can dress as Batman or a Space Marine, they will: not necessarily to enact a performance for a crowd, but to enact a personal change for themselves and reach a personal truth through an "actualized fantasy" (Kane 17). The character is not only an expression of the creative forces around it and its history, but a personal expression for the individual allowing personal character

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traits to be expressed for the crowd. It may express a nostalgic connection to childhood, (I'm dressed as Mario because Super Mario Bro's was the first game I ever played) or, it may express a personal principle (I'm Superman because, what's more American than that,?) etc. The reasoning behind, and personal expressions held, are as varied as the characters and people playing the characters at these conventions.

The preparation of character and the entrance into a liminal space is not restricted to those attendees who participate in costume. At the Tampa Bay convention, my colleague Colby prepared in his own way to become Geek. Colby does not conform to the stereotype of the convention attendee, which can conjure up images of the Comic Book Guy from *The Simpsons*. This would be a person who is physically out of shape, mildly asthmatic, who wears sweatpants in public, and possesses an anti-social attitude due to a lifelong obsession with video games and comic books. Colby, in contrast, is a former high school linebacker who participates in marathons: he does not own a single comic book and only plays video games sparingly. Yet, before the convention, he donned his only Spiderman t-shirt and his eyeglasses, which were usually confined to at-home use. When he asked "Do I look like a geek?" he was asking if he had sufficiently prepared himself to look the part of the character he was about to play: Geek. Colby's actions underscore the importance of the preparatory experience: convention attendees are preparing to enter a performance space where they play a leading role. In this public arena participants are performing characteristics that vary in prominence, but are part of their self that is connected most clearly to Geek culture. If the cosplayer can be understood as an actor, so too can the other attendees. It depends on being able to define the type of performance (ritual or play) by answering the questions "where is it performed, by whom, and under what circumstances" (Schechner 120). For these other attendees this is the beginning of a temporary

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transformational ritual that occurs for them inside the convention space in relation to their fellow Geeks.

The use of the convention center as a performance space that lacks the historical and sociological agencies of traditional theater disrupts the traditional divides between actor and audience. As Schechner asserts, traditional theater "comes into existence when a separation occurs between spectators and performers" (126). The act of purchasing a ticket is traditionally where this divide first occurs as actors do not purchase tickets for the plays in which they perform. However, this audience-actor division is challenged by participatory plays and theater where the audience does have an interaction with the actors and are equally purchasing an ability to participate in the performance. When approaching the convention's front gate there are numerous people who stand outside engaging in various forms of preparation and, also, resting from the performance occurring inside. While many people have already purchased their tickets, there are outside windows for pick-up and at-the-gate purchases. Similar to purchasing a movie theater ticket from a ticket booth, the convention audience is purchasing their entrance to the performance space. Whether in cosplay costume or not, the convention attendee is purchasing the ability to view the spectacle and ritual, *while also* buying their ability to perform alongside others. The ticket allows a convention attendee to be a spectator to the spectacle already unfolding around them outside the convention center, while allowing the individual to enter what will be the main stage of the performance, the convention proper. There, not only does the convention attendee take in, but they also participate and add to the overall experience of the ritual.

When standing outside the convention center it is possible to see the performance space as existing outside of the physical boundaries of the convention center proper. Cosplayers

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already in costume can be stopped and approached for an interaction between fan and character (more on this relationship in chapter two). When they are approached, cosplayers are not greeted by the social conventions of the everyday, bearing polite titles such as "Mr., Miss, ma'am, sir, etc., but are immediately addressed as their character "Batman!", "Master Chief!", "Darth!", "Pikachu!", "Spidey!"(short for Spiderman). While this recognition inside the convention space is interpreted as a social cue to begin the performance and as recognition of identity, outside the space proper it is viewed more ambiguously. Some performers have not yet entered their mindset as actors to perform to character, while others, taking a break outside, are too exhausted to reply. Some performers have already entered the performance of their character, and for them, the gate is as far as they will go inside the convention. For these performers the sidewalk is an equal extension of the convention interior space and serves as their own public stage. Whether or not they eventually enter the convention site, they have found their own audience and are bolstered by the recognition of the crowds moving into and out of the convention space.

In Tampa, just in front of the stairs that lead up to the ticket booth, a young woman dressed as Batman-villain Poison Ivy posed outside for pedestrians to watch and occasionally snap photographs. Her costume was eye-catching not only because of her bright red hair, but also due to its lack of physical coverage. Her physical exposure has to do, in general, with comic book representations and treatment of the female form, a topic that was discussed at the conventions in special panels and will be addressed later in chapter three of this manuscript. For this Poison Ivy her ability to "accurately" represent the character meant covering only her breasts, buttocks, and genitals in leaf shaped coverings while wearing green body paint. This generated many stares and averted gazes from parents, children, and others "intrigued" by the display. The police, in attendance due to the large crowd, never strayed far from her side,

knowing her costume could bring ire and attention from people overly curious of her costume, or more likely, those upset with her public display of "near nudity." Had she chosen to perform her character inside the convention she would not have necessarily been safe from the social distress to her exposed sexuality and flesh (Janelle Asselin, *How Big a Problem is Harassment at Comic Conventions? Very Big.*). However, it would not be to the level observed in the open space outside of the convention center. Because of the boundary of public space is still in effect, this space cannot be a performance space, and actions to the contrary, like Poison Ivy, may be viewed as deviant.

The outside of the convention center still being within the public space of the mainstream that views the Geek as deviant is re-enforced by the lack of agency of the convention center. This lack of agency creates a facade for the convention, one where its position as a non-place is strengthened through advertisement. The placement of the advertisement create in relation to the convention attendees creates the issue of the "supermodern excess", as Augé phrases it, the impact of this excess to an individual's relationship to time. For Augé the era of the supermodern (the latter end of the twentieth century now bleeding into the twenty-first) is an era of excess including an overabundance of events (23). This overabundance of events is relatable to "our overabundant information" and leads to a need to place meaning to events of the present and the past (23-24). Augé is clear to state that this does not mean that the world "lacks meaning, or has little meaning or less than it used to have" but that it is "our need to understand the whole of the present that makes it difficult for us to give meaning to the recent past" (25). Because there are banners and signs for the convention of the day, but also signs left-over from, and advertising future events, the convention center and its events are never in the present but somewhere in between the past and future. Until the convention attendee can enter the interior space, and thus

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remove themselves from this spatial presence of transient time, there is an inability to attach meaning not only to the event but the identity that they have created through the event.

Events outside of the convention can intrude upon the space of the event and bring the mainstream into the temporary Geek space of the convention center. When this occurs, the frailty of the fantasy space created inside the convention is exposed in conjunction with the temporality of the event. The mainstream issues, such as gender equality, are presented in relation to the Geek culture, but are a part of a larger issue that becomes an expanded social drama. I will expand on what social dramas are and their presence in panel discussions in chapter three. One event of conflict that appeared at the conventions was Gamergate. Gamergate centered on the issue of the treatment of women in the video game industry, and expanded to include the culture writ large. Gamergate involved a female independent video game creator accused in an ex-boyfriends blog of trading sexual favors with gaming journalist for favorable reviews. Anonymous male gamers proceeded to inundate the game developer with calls for her termination form work, continued taunts of "whore", "slut," and other disparaging remarks, escalating to threats of rape and murder. Other female programmers remarked the incident showed the continuing issue of the male dominant culture of video games (and to a further degree Geek culture), while the actions of male gamers were construed as protests for better ethics in gaming journalism. However, those who defended the original target would also face similar insults and threats of violence and, for female voices, the degree of abuse was always elevated. The events of Gamergate had only occurred a few months before the conventions, and would continue to develop after the conventions themselves (the events even being covered on the *Stephen Colbert Report.*) This was an event, and issue of the mainstream world (gender equality), that penetrated into the interior space of the convention.

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Though, as with Gamergate, there may be larger social issues encountered in the convention space, the façade of the convention must be stronger then the influence of outside events. The transformation of the interior of the convention center possesses greater potential of achieving the illusion of the permanent Geek space than the exterior. At Miami one could see posters for next week's vintage car rally, and the following week, a boat show posted around the front door. I would like to make clear that this is not similar to a theater presenting a new marquee for a switch from a drama to a musical, this would be more like if the theater advertised a move from a drama play to a shooting range. A person who attends one may still wish to attend the other, but it will be for completely different and unrelated reasons. Identities are performed and there are superficial similarities, but the space itself then lacks solidity. From the beginning the Geek is aware, this is not a permanent space, I cannot come here again for another year to re-experience this event; this is temporary.

This façade is important because it also constantly undermines the fantasy that the convention space, and people, are trying to create. As I will discuss in following chapters, the interior convention space becomes a place where the fantastic can be made real, where the characters and peoples that exist only as images the fan can conjure become flesh and blood. This includes actors, writers, directors, and other creative personnel who shape and create the texts that Geeks hold so dear, the comic book, the film, the anime, and the video game. From the exterior, the attendee cannot yet know that this world truly awaits them inside, instead, they are faced with the uneasy meshing of real and make believe. The exterior of the convention, despite being the entrance to the fantasy, remains the "real world" devoid of and antithetical to the fantasy and dreams contained by the texts celebrated and, to some degree, attempted to be duplicated inside the convention space.

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The convention is not a mandatory ritual enacting a public transformation, but a private event for those who are willing to participate in the identity performance. The ticket purchase becomes the first commodification of the ritual by the comic book convention. In order to participate you must have the capital to join: there is no other superficial restriction. Outside the convention you can witness how this requirement both makes available and restricts the experience. There are no age limits to attend the convention: children as young as infants and adults old enough to collect social security attend the convention. This is not a ritual in the anthropological sense, one that marks the passage of time and progresses the individual through social life stages (i.e. marriage, a Bar Mitzvah). This is an individual identity ritual that shapes the character of the participant in opposition to the mainstream culture and, even, in opposition to other subcultures of Geeks, as I will later explore in chapters two and three. A one-day adult pass for the Tampa bay convention was twenty-five dollars, for the slightly larger Miami convention it was thirty dollars, and for the largest convention, San Diego Comic-con, is forty-five dollars (the same price as a two day pass to Miami's Supercon).The Florida conventions do not fully highlight the economic divide between Geeks, because, as large conventions go, they are reasonably priced, including ticket packages such as two or three-day passes. But, when moving to the more prestigious conventions (Comic-con in San Diego and Dragon-Con in Georgia) the ticket price, in combination with travel costs, limits the number and socioeconomic class of people able to participate in the event.

Even past the front doors, there is still the presence of the real world expressed in the bureaucracy of "entrance". In Tampa, as in Miami having purchased my ticket in advance, I was able to skip the ticket booth, but not the check-in line. In Miami the check-in process had been facilitated by tables of volunteers set aside to the left of the main courtyard who scanned your

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ticket, handed you your complimentary bag for collection (complete with advertisements and guides) and the wrist band that signifies your status as an attendee (general admission, VIP, Presenter, Guest, Volunteer). None of these volunteers were in any costume outside of a plain work uniform, a red polo and khaki's, which was in a way disappointing to me. My interactions with them were no different than if I was entering an academic conference, checking in to a hotel, or entering an amusement park. With Tampa, the amusement park analogy was stressed by the long cordoned-off lines to get wristbands and tickets scanned. It was a maze constantly in motion (if you were as lucky as I was not to pick the slowest line) followed by the same red-shirt khaki-volunteers awaiting at the end to hand you the same goodie bag and wristband. Whether in Tampa or Miami the bureaucracy was in place, and it was efficient, and it resisted the inclusion of any intrusion from the fantasy into its space through its efficiency, speed, and polite conversation.

Past the ticket lines the first significant difference between the Miami and Tampa convention spaces was made apparent. In Miami, the main floor was on the ground floor just in front of the entrance. There was a hallway that cut in front and ran parallel to the main room where the smaller rooms that would contained other events apart from the main floor (see chapter three,) as well as a second floor that contained nothing but these periphery spaces. Tampa, however, started from the second floor, with the smaller periphery rooms contained on the *actual* ground floor below. The noise from those periphery rooms and people resting in the outer spaces from the main floor rose up to those in the top floor creating a cacophony of mindless chatter. This noise constantly made me aware there was another part of the convention's action that I could not be a part of without leaving the ability to access the main floor. Miami's layout prevented this and kept the focus of the attendee upon entrance squarely on

the doors that led to the main floor, making the pathway set much more linear. Michel de Certeau understood walking as an act of rhetoric where styles and uses "intersect to form a style of use, a way of being and a way of operating" (100). The act of walking creates a purpose to the movement. This purpose is related to the experience gained from the action, where the conscious act of movement, guided by outside forces or otherwise. By being restricted in Miami to approach the main floor I was manipulating the spatial organization because walking "creates shadows and ambiguities within them [spatial organizations]" (de Certeau 101). My understanding of the space around me, what I perceived, was altered by this regulated movement creating a new space (the line) from the larger space of entrance hall. Miami also benefited from being the larger convention center, avoiding the claustrophobic and sweltering atmosphere, that even at the entrance, could be overwhelming in Tampa. In Miami, the entrance was still a space apart, which was not yet the chaos of commercialism and Geek that was the main convention space.

At both conventions there was only one way in to the main floor, the nerve center to which the convention revolved around. The single entrance to the main floor consistently resulted in participants confronting a large, singular mass of people, but when exiting, attendees merged into smaller groups that departed through numerous scattered exit points. Before the beginning of the line to enter the main hall there was, off to the side, yet another table, but this time for weapons checks of cosplayers. For authenticity, some knights carried real steel swords, but any sword that entered-- be it broadsword or katana-- needed to be dull so as not to pose a threat to others. There was also the need to check firearms, again part of the authenticity for characters from video games like Call of Duty or even Star Wars (some try to pass a revolver as a blaster), to make sure they are unloaded, decommissioned, or properly marked as a toy so as

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not to frighten anyone. While there may be real weapons at the convention, either in the hands of cosplayers or merchants (never firearms), the level of play and safety needs to be maintained by these desks. It serves as a way to let those who have never attended a convention (a position I was in at Miami) or to remind convention veterans that while weapons may look very real (and can be) you are safe, nothing anyone is carrying should actually hurt you. This is a necessity because while in a traditional theater where there are props weapons, such as stage knifes that simulate violence, the violence is understood as a simulation because it is within the space of a theater. The convention center does not possess this history and must assert its safety while not interfering with the fantasy that will occur inside. The weapons check also served as one more costume check for the cosplay actors, one more check-up of the costume before they finally take the main stage.

As you get ready to enter the main room you begin to feel as if you are about to enter an arena. Everyone around you is excited, talking about hoping to see this character inside (be it an actual actor, creator, or just someone in cosplay) or being able to find a vendor so they may complete their comic collection. The multitudes contained in the main floor (discussed in the following chapter) are a mystery even if you have been to a similar event before as I was when I went to Tampa. Still in Tampa I felt the same anxious excitement I had when I had been in Miami. What was I going to see past those doors? What treasures and experiences awaited? The setting was the same, the general construct similar, but waiting there on the outside you are still excited and anticipatory. Aiding to this excitement is the curtain, or door, in this case, because you cannot see what is behind, you conjure up images of the fantastic, be it what costumes you will, to the artwork, to the possible celebrities (even though you are given a list at the door of

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those in attendance.) The line becomes a mass of nervous excited energy waited to be unleashed and to, as I joked to my companion in Miami, "let the show begin."

Slowly the line will move forward and you have to raise your arm in the air so they may see you wristband. It is a slight act of submission, but more so, it becomes an act of identity. I, we, belong here and this is our space. As the journey to this moment has shown us, the outside does not belong to us, it does not necessarily like us, now let us make our own space, and let us join our community. It is a temporary elation, a temporary moment of solidarity, but one that is practiced over and over again by every person willing to cross the threshold, move past the façade, and enter the Geek space. But, crossing the door does not necessarily end one illusion, instead it creates an entirely new multitude of illusions.

Chapter 2

Introduction

Moving past the entrance of the comic book convention, I then entered the center of the event, the main floor. The main floor possesses multiple areas of interest for geeks from the social, to the theatrical, to the collectible. Booths spread out in a maze that draws in the Geek and tries, above all else, to sell him or her something. The product sold is not always a physical commodity, but can include experiences like social interactions such as meeting and speaking to one's favorite comic book artist about their works. These commoditized interactions present a performance for both the attendees and the artists. Surrounding these personal exchanges there is a larger and less physically defined performance between attendees and cosplayers. Reliant on the action of improvisation, these performances change from moment to moment, and hinge on the shared interests of actor and audience. Cosplayers wander around the floor space performing for an audience on the move that can join the performance at any time. The boundaries of the stage are challenged, but the rule of cost is never in doubt, to gain the full experience you must be willing to pay.

The Floor

Having passed through the main doors into the main hall of the convention the first thing I noticed was the bright lights of the hall. The bright fluorescent lighting reflecting off the blank

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white walls of the giant box-like main floor created a disorienting flash when crossing the threshold. Aiding in my own feeling of stupor was the roar of the people occupying the space. Sound did not die in the hall as voices were raised in a vain attempt of intimate communication. The voices of people swirled around in what was a crashing wave compared to the muffled conversation of the outer area (the Tampa Convention being an exception due to its layout as discussed in chapter one.) I felt that first step into the main hall overwhelming and wished I could have stopped for a moment and taken in the experience, but a gentle, though still aggressive, push from behind kept me moving forward. There was no time to stand still; the only direction to move was forward. If you were not moving forward, you were waiting in a line and any other desirable option was quickly removed by the strange choreography of the moving people.

In both Miami and Tampa, the main floor followed a general flow pattern and sectioned layout. After coming through the front door, I looked to the right to see a large stage with chairs arranged in front. This was the "main" stage of the event, where large panel discussions would occur, celebrities would be introduced, and film and media advertised. The stage was slightly elevated from the chairs below. It was a flat stage with little décor besides a large projector screen creating the desired graphic backdrop. Framing the stage and screen was the scaffold of colored stage lights, primed for certain extravagant displays. The chairs were open to public seating with a few, however, reserved for VIP ticket holders, located closest to the stage. When I walked by this section the chairs were empty save few people attempting to rest. However, if there was a major film reveal or celebrity, convention volunteers would block off the entrance with plastic railings, creating a new line to fill for the potential audience.

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The act of queuing up in a line was more prevalent just past the stage area near the back walls where the celebrity meet-and-greet booths were set up. Here there was a noticeable divide not only between celebrities of certain media, but also immediate cultural relevance. First, in Miami, there was a divide between media types. Film, television and musical celebrities where placed together on one wall, while in a separate location there were cosplay celebrities and only the most well-known graphic artists and writers. Tampa, being slightly smaller in space with a shorter celebrity list, had these multiple sectioned booths turned into one wall of star power. Still the secondary divide, that of crowd appeal or cultural relevance, was created by the actions of the convention attendees themselves. For some of the individually marked booths advertising a celebrity, attendees would begin to queue up over an hour in advance of the scheduled appearance in order to be first in line for pictures and autographs. When I looked to see who these devotees where lining up so early to see, it was clear that it was not always the most accomplished actor, rather the most contemporary. For example, at Miami Jason Mamoa who plays Khal Drogo on the HBO show *Game of Thrones*, a character who lasted only ten episodes, made an appearance to much fanfare. His appearance was scheduled for 1:30 p.m. yet the line for his booth began forming around 11 a.m. For other celebrities the reaction was not quite as dramatic as with Mamoa's, possibly due to their audience size. *Game of Thrones* is one of the highest rated shows on television (13.6 million viewers in 2013). However, I noticed that even with equally popular shows, such as the *Power Rangers*, the difference in time from their popularity (the original *Power Rangers* was a hit in the 1990s for children,) hindered their relevance to the Geek audience.

Nevertheless, these booths and the lines they create, represent one aspect in creating the fantasy space of the convention center. The intimate nature of the booths-being able to shake the

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actor's hands, takes photographs, and have a personal interview-allows the fans to interact with the actors who portray their beloved characters. This interaction allows for a minor collapse between the world of the character and of the fan, in a way, a collapse of the theatrical fourth wall. For some fans this collapse is an actuality, they are meeting the character rather than the actor who portrays the character. This is not a universal experience as some fans were overheard getting ready to meet "Khal Drago" others waited to meet "Jason Mamoa, you know, the guy who plays Khal Drago." The removal of the fourth wall relies not just on the spatial relationship, being able to talk to and touch the actors, but also on how the fan wished to perceive the actor. This perception relies on the devotion of the fan, as the actors are not in character acting as the characters they portray would, nor do they come dressed in costume. While the fan may say hello to and address Mr. "Khal Drogo" she is still in actuality addressing Mr. Jason Mamoa, dressed as and being Jason Mamoa. Some actors may help with the appearance of illusion by "getting into character" for brief exchanges allowing a fantasy to be realized on two separate levels: 1) "I got to meet the character!" and 2) "I got to meet a popular celebrity!" For the former, it is an act of the fantasy world they enjoy becoming physically manifested into their reality, while for the latter, the fantasy realized is based on the entrance into a social hierarchy. Outside the convention, their friends and colleagues may not care if you met Khal Drogo, but they may be jealous that they met Jason Mamoa.

The main floor, and all the performances contained there-in, operate under the umbrella of consumerism. The intent of the convention is for Geeks to purchase articles of Geekdom, from comics to complete their collection, artwork, t-shirts, costumes, all the way down to minor trinkets like Dr. Who key chains. Everything is for sale in the convention including social interactions. Being able to take a photograph or have an autograph signed by a celebrity or even

with some of the amateur cosplayers, introduces commerce to social interactions. In the process of discussing a cosplayer's costume (they were dressed as Monkey D. Luffy from the anime/manga *One Piece*) they asked if I wanted to take a picture with them. I politely said no, they answered "Oh, okay" and walked away. Now, I originally I thought I had been slighted for not being willing to partake in the social world of the cosplayer, after all people were stopping all around us taking photos with other actors. But, only a few feet from me, Monkey was again stopped by a curious pedestrian who was willing to take a picture with Monkey for what was an agreed sum of "Five bucks." I had been unwilling to purchase the picture because not only did I not have five dollars on me in cash, but for me the picture would be with a person who had created a convincing, though not spectacular, costume of a character I was not wholly familiar with. My rejection could have been implicated as a rejection of the effort put in by Monkey to realize their character's potential, I was the critic in the audience judging the actor's portrayal as passable, but not convincing. Of course this is not the case as many cosplayers, whether their costume is outstanding in design and material or something cobbled together in what is best classified as "elementary school pageant" quality, would be stopped and their pictures taken. Monkey had made the movement away from the playfulness of cosplaying into a transaction process. To talk was all well and good, but (oddly like the pirate character he portrayed) Monkey was focused on making money.

I should have been aware of the importance of purchasing when in the Tampa convention I was a handed a "goody" bag at the entrance. The bag contained a quick overview of panel events and some free advertisements for local comic stores, but the true intention was to provide a handy space for me to place any items I purchased. Due to a lack in forethought and a small budget I was never able to purchase anything at the convention outside of lunch at a nearby food

vendor. But I did not go home empty-bagged as vendors were eager to hand out company cards and artists would give away sample comics advertising their future work. Walking through the maze of booths selling all of the items based on the creations of the artists who make the characters and stories of Geek culture, it is the artists who are lost in the convention space. In both Tampa and Miami the artist booths, where one could meet graphic artists and writers usually of independent comics, were always at the furthest point form the main entrance. In Miami the artist booths lined the back wall and formed an upside down L shape around the main floors commercial booths. In Tampa the artists were placed in what I saw as an exile in the back wall furthest from the main stage. Victims of the ironic hierarchy, the artists who created the material disseminated through print, film and television were ranked below the actors who portrayed their second-hand iterations and even the merchandise which spawned from their work.

Not all artists were confined to the exile of the back wall of course, those who had taken over flagship superhero's canons (Spiderman, Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman) or worked in newer but equally influential work (Spawn, the Punisher, the Walking Dead) would have their own larger booths closer to the film and television stars. The divide was still present while walking amongst the numerous t-shirt booths and advertisements for new video games, there could be hidden amongst the commerce a lone writer or artist sitting in their booth waiting to sign autographs. These artists sold their skills as well, not just selling autographs of previous artworks and prints, but also charging for custom works. It was, to me, disheartening to see the creative forces who had made the stories and characters the Geeks knew and loved, characters they loved so much they were willing to dress up and imitate them, relegated to such mediocrity. In the physical space these artists inhabited reflected a future of regulation to obscurity that had

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befallen Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the original creators of Superman. After having created one of the largest Pop icons of American culture Shuster and Siegel eventually fell into obscurity and were living in poverty, despite their character having spawned multiple television shows, movies, and other merchandise. Their rightful place as creators of Superman was restored only prior to the release of 1978's *Superman*.

Professional cosplayers attending the convention represent a divide between the performance of character and Geek identity within this monetary hierarchy. Some of these professional cosplayers, such as the Supergirls of Super-con, are invited as guests by the convention and are given meeting booths near the television and film stars. Many of these professional cosplayers are paid actors or models who best occupy the demanding physical porportions of the comic book character/costume but are not necessarily self-identified Geeks. When the convention attendee meets these celebrity cosplayers they are serving, in a much more apparent way then the film or television actors, the fantasy of meeting a character and the actor. There is a different dynamic because of the appearance in costume as opposed to the film and television actors, however it must be remembered that some of these Geeks are paid models, not cosplay enthusiasts or comic book fans. Schechner states that in acting there is room for the personality of the actor to come through in their role. For example, stand-up comics who use personal stories for their jokes, and display a part of their personal character through a stage persona (44-45). Through a lie, some truth may still be revealed. For the cosplayers the lie is the performance and the costume, but does this not also reveal some truth of their own character? As with star actors who are "groomed for one limited set of traits" that influences all roles, these cosplayers are not just wearing the mask of a character but what is a "stereotyped mask" of how they should behave publicly and privately (Schechner 45). This does not just include the

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character they most often perform as, or were performing at the event, but also the identity of being a Geek. Questions of their Geek capital outside of the convention may be challenged: do they own comic books, do they play video games, do they even identify themselves as a Geek? The professional cosplayer must navigate their public persona (Geek) and the persona of the character to achieve a position of personal authenticity that does not rely on the input of an audience. For the convention attendees the costume allows them to fully meet their favorite fictional character and also celebrity to whom they have a deeper connection, be it as an admirer or as an aspiring cosplayer, or, simply, a fellow Geek. Fairly or not, the act of cosplaying places further emphasis on a connection to the Geek identity that the actor may not subscribe to and their connection is more intimately critiqued than a film or television star. But, more so than with other celebrities, the divide between identities is less apparent in the immediacy of the booth space. I was wont to identify a professional cosplayer as their character, not as the real person who was performing the character, and unlike the amatuers roaming the convention space, questions of Geek identity lingered within the divide.

It was the amateur cosplayers who had the most direct connection to the convention attendees and their realization of their fantasies due to the removal of any physical boundry. To this realization of the fantasy Schechner would argue that theater must maintain its "*here-and-now performance of there-and-then* events"(190). For Schechner, theatrical acts do not diminish because they are not performing actual events. For example, in *Othello*, Othello does not *actually* have to murder Desdemona on stage, they act out the action without fully participating in it and they audience emotionally reacts in a similar manner (if performed convincingly enough) as if the action did occur. Even when reality intrudes itself into the theater space (Schechner uses the example of sacrificing live chickens on stage for a play), the theater is instead substituting "small

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real actions" for "big fictional semblances"(190). These actions are still "emblems or symbols" recognized by everyone, including the performers as "playing with" rather than a "real doing"(Schechner 190). This "playing with," however, is not "weak or false" and can still cause "changes to both performers and spectators"(Schechner 190). Even without physical danger (or dead chickens) a theatrical performance may still create a visceral emotional response from actor and audience, and a separate reality is created within the theatrical space. There are no physical theatrical boundaries placed around the cosplayers who are walking around unimpeded by a traditional stage space. This non-defined performance opens up an allowance for more intimate and social interactions between performer and audience (amateur cosplayer and Geek). These social interactions included documenting through pictures (such as with the previously mentioned Monkey D. Luffy), as well as intimate conversations that would go from fantasy realization (I'm talking to *the* Batman!) to a representation of the still present boundary to full immersion into the world (I'm talking to a person *pretending* to be Batman.) As the weapons check table in chapter one showed, the attendees are aware that all of these characters and their accoutrements, no matter how real in appearance, are fake. This does not hinder the power of the performance nor would the presence of real weapons, or actual combat between antagonistic characters, make the event more "real".

Whether or not a person was fully immersed into the fantasy of the cosplayers performance there was, as I observed, not only a challenge to the cospalyers representation of the character, but their Geek knowledge. I will address the latter first, as this interaction, that of challenging character knowledge, would occur between cosplayers, especially those wearing the same costume. One such interaction between two Spiderman cosplayers began in a cordial way that made reference to a character narrative as a sort of testing phase. One Spiderman began

"Wait, two spidies? This cannot be real!" To which the other Spiderman responded, "Well, I'm the Peter Parker Spiderman, who are you?" If the first Spiderman did not recognize that Peter Parker had recently been replaced by Miles Morales, or fallen back to the Marvel mutli-verse theory and responded in kind, he or she would have lost the comic knowledge battle and thus credibility to their Geek status (Wertley *"You are not a true geek I am": The Role of Communicative Aggression in Geek Culture* 108). This battle of comic knowledge is more prevalent in the interaction of the panel discussions, upon which I will expand in chapter 3. In the current exchange, however, if the first Spiderman responded successfully to the challenge (he did but was flustered when citing comic book issue numbers later on) the two would continue referencing until their social exchange had created a completely new narrative for them to occupy than the one they had previously been acting. This performance, becoming an act of improvisation, only minimally changed their exterior costumed character. Once they separated and moved along, they revert back to their original identity. One performance was successfully created and concluded. I propose, however, that another identity, their Geek identity, is re-enforced by this exchange. Not only have they shown their acting ability, but have also proven themselves knowledgeable in the minutia of their characters' worlds, be it from film, comic books, anime, or video games, and thus proven themselves an authentic Geek (Wertley).

The question of authenticity is not only aimed at an attendee's true "geekiness" but also, for a cosplayer their representation of the character. When I approached cosplayers, if I knew the character they were representing, I would ask them why they chose certain color schemes or props to carry with them. One such cosplayer was a young, rotund African-American whose costume turned out to be that of "Steampunk Joker." I had recognized the clothing hints to the original Joker character from Batman comics: the green hair, purple clothing, the painted

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permanent grin. I introduced myself by asking "Hey, that's a nice outfit, I just can't gather if you are supposed to be the Joker or not?" I asked this question, not just to give recognition to what was a well put-together outfit, but also, as a way of slightly challenging his interpretation. In a gracious manner, recognizing I was asking out of curiosity he responded "I am, I just decided to add a Victorian flair." This alteration was completed by carrying a Victorian walking stick coupled with a silver pocket watch emblazoned with one of the Joker's catch-phrase, "Why so serious?" I asked him then, why he had decided to go with a steampunk route, to which he responded "Because I like it. And I like the Joker." For this Victorian Joker, or Steampunk Joker, his costume was a combination of two interests, Batman comic villainy and the Steampunk Sci-fi/Fantasy genre. He had tried to effortless blend (rather successfully in my opinion) the two to unleash his own creative talents and create a form of self-expression. "I enjoy dressing like its 19th century England," he said, "I wish I had lived then. And to be the Joker, wouldn't that be so cool?"

The same line of questioning would also accompany those cosplayers to whom I had no idea the character they were portraying, but always with the lead in of "That's a cool (or great, or interesting, or, even, badass) costume, who are you representing?" This would give them the opportunity to share not only the character, but the history of the story/series/game from where the character came from. One such case was a women dressed as a futuristic police officer, who turned out to be representing Major Motoko Kusanagi from the manga *Ghost in the Shell*. My own grasp of the series was light at best (I had heard of it but never read it) but, this cosplayer was more than willing to share with me not just her characters history but also major plotlines and stories form the series (spoilers included). If they were attempting to be fully immersed in their role the cosplayer (like the good Major was) would say "I am…" showing a direct

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connection and immersion to the role, a becoming of the role. Others would say "I'm playing…" maintaining a separation of character and self. The most detached answer was stating just the character's name, and these were the cosplayers who would avoid subtler actions to flesh out their characters (voice alteration, reacting 'in character'). For me, when I asked these questions, it was a question of understanding the *actor's* choice in representation, not an issue of challenging that representation. For me, whether they fully represented the character or not was not an issue because I was too immersed in the creativity and imagination exhibited by the cosplayers. It was a moment to share and learn about other people and their interests, even if it was through the mask of comic book characters.

For other convention attendees the cosplayer's choice in representation could become a very serious offense. My interaction with the cosplayers was always in the nature of curious observer, even when challenging the cosplayers representation. Most of the interactions between fans and cosplayers I observed followed along this line of gentle curiosity. However, there are elements of the devout fan that find offense in the slightest deviation from canon. This offense mirrors the challenge of character knowledge, though this challenge takes on a more personal attack as it challenges the act of play the cosplayer is partaking in. This can be as minor as a challenge to their ability to create or afford a proper costume, "That sword is *so* fake" to the ability of the performer to accurately portray the character. In this vein the challenge can be based on the performer's gender, ethnicity, and, even, age discrepancy. The two biggest discrepancies are focused on gender and race, rather than age. If a woman chooses to portray the Joker (a male character) her challenge of the gender code is not just an affront to societal norms, but *accuracy* of portrayal (Thomas 33). The same is true of race, which in its own way ignores the limitations placed on non-white Geek's in character selection, as there are very few ethnic

superheroes, though this trend is *very slowly* being reversed (Roberts *How Marvel is opening up its universe to women and minorities*).

The judgment of cosplayers, and even other Geeks in relation to knowledge challenges, is formalized in the acts of costume contests and trivia competitions centered on the mythology and lore of the items being celebrated at the convention. These contests, when not performed in the residual rooms surrounding the main floor, present a formalized theatrical performance. There is a set stage, the main stage of the hall, with formal rules of etiquette in place. Here the divide between audience and actor is more structurally defined, removing the intimacy previously felt when wandering in the more social floor space. The loss of intimacy merely shifts the style of performance but not the intent of identity. Those performing in the trivia contests are proving their knowledge and their status as authentic Geeks. Where a physical proof such as the size of comic books owned, or number of video games possessed, cannot be physically presented to show status, the ability to prove ownership of *culture* capital, in this case knowledge, does (Wertley 109-110). For the cosplayers it is not only a continuation of their performance as character but a continuation of their performance as a Geek, with the more immediate and visceral reaction of having an audience show approval or disapproval through applause.

Whether in the intimate spontaneous conversations or up on the large stage, there is a reaffirmation not just of the performance of and work put into creating a believable character, but also an affirmation of their identity of Geek. In every round of applause, every squeal of joy at their sight, every high-five in passing, the cosplayer is congratulated on a job well done, and the person under the make-up is reminded that they not only belong here, but are welcomed as a valid member of the group. The interaction is reciprocal. When I congratulated the Steampunk Joker, I had assumed a position of minor authority and, in my own way, confirmed his position

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in the convention. While with Major Motoko I lost my position of authority, Major Motoko graciously welcomed me into the fabric by sharing with me the intimate details of knowledge she possessed. I was confirmed as a Geek, even if I did not know *everything*. Unfortunately, when the interactions are hostile, identity can be shaken and the inevitable question arises, do I belong here? The convention works around these social conflicts by providing the alternative of consumption. You may feel unwanted, but your money will always be welcomed here.

After leaving the Tampa convention I asked my colleague Colby what he thought about the convention, to which he responded, "I don't know, I thought I was going to learn more about the history of comic books. This felt like a flea market." When looking back at the main floor I can understand this analogy. Removing the A-list celebrities, the colorful costumes and the stage, the convention becomes a Geek flea market. Artwork, t-shirts, video games, comic books, toys, new and used, are displayed for the throngs of convention attendees to spend money on. If you focus on this aspect the convention becomes a shopping mall, a box store whose market consists of Geeks, nerds and children. However, this ignores those other aspects that are created in the reality of the space. Without the cosplayers walking around the convention, without the possibility of Khal Drogo, or the actor who actually portrays him on television, and without those artists who may be ignored, the convention serves no purpose for the attendees to come. While the specter of consumerism penetrates all things, it is the social interactions and the performances created that draw the convention attendees in to celebrate, participate and inhabit the identity of Geek.

Chapter 3

Introduction

In this chapter, I move from the congested main hall of the convention into the specialized side rooms that cater to more specific activities such as playing games, debating social issues, and more intimate Q&As with the creators of the Geek texts. Because of the more intimate space provided, I argue that these rooms further demarcate a specific identity for the convention performer. The rooms, through their recognizable stage layout, create a familiar space through which identity may be created or reaffirmed. By choosing which events to attend within time constrictions, the convention attendee specifies to which subgroup of Geeks they belong, while maintaining the overall identity of Geek intact. Using Turner's theory of social dramas, I will examine how a conflict of what it means to be Geek is presented and certain divides either resolved or irreparably left open. These divides include between artists and fans, fans and other fans, genders and individual identities.

The Rooms

For a brief respite from the saturated main hall I escaped through the side door exits and rested. In Tampa, my colleague Colby asked as we walked to a convenient food truck nearby for lunch, "Is that all there is?" I responded, no, there is more, and proceeded to read from the convention brochure. Listing off the events about to occur, in between drinks from a Coke bottle,

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the inflections present in my own voice gave away my own interest in the names and descriptions of the varied events. *There is a Sci-fi movie screening at 12:15, also a panel on Dr. Who canon, something on wrestling I don't know, ooooh, a panel with independent comic creators from the Tampa Bay area*. No, no, no and hell no was the response after each description (the movie choices were all college projects with lower budgets but greater creative potential than *Sharknado* in my opinion.) We needed to be there soon as the events were restricted within a timeframe and were quickly replaced with sometimes more, sometimes less, appealing options.

If we could decide on a timed event there was the option of going to one of the recreation rooms set aside. The number of recreation rooms was similar between Tampa and Miami (four in Miami, three in Tampa). One room was devoted to board and card games, or if more space was available, one for each. In the board game room in Miami, there was a table set up for rental of the games with a time limit for playing. The board games available were not the type found in family game night (no Monopoly!) but those made for more avid fans of table games such as Dungeon and Dragons or Traveller, though Risk (Lord of the Rings Issue) did make an appearance. If you did not want to play a board game there were also tables set aside to play various card games from *Pokémon* to *Magic*. Decks could be provided, or purchased, and a table set aside for the card game. If they were alone some people would wait and play impromptu matches with other convention attendees, thus helping create new relationships. If they could not find an opponent, or were a more serious gamer, there were scheduled tournaments in place to display their skill and win prizes like cash, or another comic book.

The other game room was focused on the virtual world of video games. Lining the walls were banks of PlayStation, X-boxes, and Nintendo's hooked up to projector screens and old

televisions. There was an aura of nostalgia to the room as there were little modern iteration of the games but more "classic" games such as *007 Goldeneye* and *Mario Kart* for N64. These games were played in multiplayer mode and recreated in the convention, much like the boardroom game, the living room space that had nurtured the interests of the attendees. The screen may have been larger (and almost certainly flatter) than when last played and for two of the four televisions there was a cheap couch where the old elbow jostling of when you were twelve happened now with twenty-six year olds. Watching a group playing *Goldeneye* I was reminded of many nights spent in the late 90s with my friends playing all night into the early morning, bonding over video games and competition. For those couch-less stations there were folding chairs, close to the cheap setups I sometimes played in my friend's college dorm room. Even with the florescent lighting of the convention and the ambient noise of passing people, some even standing behind creating an audience, once you were on the couch or in the chair your senses would narrow down the space around you into that area between you, your co-players, and the screen. There was a connection to every other place you had once played this game, or that system, but the illusion could never be complete. You could not play as long as you wanted, you did not own the system or games, and, if you weren't in a group, you were playing with strangers not intimate friends.

For the older gamer Geeks (here old meaning 30 and above) gaming rooms allowed them to share a part of their past with their children and introduce them to video game history and the gaming community. In Tampa, there was one room completely dedicated to arcade games. For the older generation of video game Geeks, here was the space in which they had spent hours, and so many quarters, on *PacMan* and *Donkey Kong*, recreated for them in a different space long after the arcade's demise. Victor Turner in his work *The Ritual of Play* asserts that there is a paradox between the "experience of communitas" and "the memory of communitas" (Turner 47).

In these arcade rooms one generation is passing on its memory of experience down to another as opposed to the relationships that had formed through a collective experience of living through the era of arcade gaming. Turner explains this transference as what was "initially free and innovative relationship between individuals" becomes "norm governed relationships" of "social personae" (47). The space was different than the arcades of old. Instead of a maze of game terminals to navigate there was the four walls lined with a select number of the most memorable, or surprisingly working, games. But, you could still find the enjoyment of being side by side with another gamer, overhearing every move of their personal challenge. Then there was the ritual of waiting-for-a-turn integral in the communal area of the arcade but diminished in the age of personal home consoles. Where in the past you placed your quarter on the machine as a claim to being next to play, there was an honor system in place instead at the convention because the machines were free. Instead of the younger generation being able to influence how they play arcade games and forming their own experience from the space provided them at the convention, they are instead corralled by the rules set by the previous generation. The exclamations of wonder and excitement, the squeals of victory and sighs of defeat echoing across generations in these rooms connect memory to machine, Geek to other Geek, and perpetuates a gaming culture within geek culture, but one that moved from an act of play to a codified ritual.

While the presence of gaming rooms and their spatial definition was consistent from comic book convention to comic book convention, the other rooms lacked so permanent a purpose. As with the convention space itself, these rooms could, and would, change to fit the needs of the event held within its walls. Changes to the rooms' structures were always aesthetic in nature. If there was a film screening, there was a large retractable screen present, with an audience pool created with foldable chairs. Sometimes there was an elevated stage present to

allow a platform for the directors, actors, and other creative personnel to speak down towards the audience. For panel discussions, there could be a screen present (if a graphic or video presentation was to be shown), a raised stage with a table set on top for the panel to sit at, and the same uncomfortable folding chairs. In each case there were minor changes to the aesthetics, but the basic structure was the same: a fixed, seated audience facing a stage that represents the focus of the activities. The room itself was the same square, or rectangle, with four walls that recede from memory. If not for the numbers and letters on the door, and my own repeated checking of the map, it could be easy to lose one's self in the maze of rooms. In each event, after the announcement of the room's purpose, a few attendees who had mistaken the room for another would slowly shuffle out muttering in embarrassment and checking the map to figure out where they intended to have actually been. Sometimes you would stay, not because this was the event you wished to witness, but, as occurred to me at a meeting of Dr. Who fans, your curiosity at learning more about a subject matter kept you eagerly seated. Sometimes, you just wanted to sit down and stop walking around for a moment. Once the event began and you were sufficiently rested, or turned away by the subject matter you could walk out without any comment from the crowd, it almost seemed expected.

Whether intentionally attending an event in the ancillary rooms or participating in the awkward shuffle out the convention, the attendee is articulating an identity through the act of choice. With multiple events happening simultaneously in rooms that are sometimes only separated by a thin hallway, the rooms, and their inclusive titles, further label a Geek's identity. The choice to sit in on a panel discussion of *Dr. Who* timelines or on the importance of female comic book characters creates a secondary identifier for the Geek in ways that can manifest themselves in events outside the convention space. By coming to the convention, the attendee

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has already performed the identity of Geek (to whatever degree they accept it,) and attendance to the ancillary rooms and events add further depth to this identity. A Geek can thus become additionally labelled a fantasy Geek, or Sci-fi Geek, or professional wrestling Geek by attending a fantasy character workshop, a science fiction film screening, or an amateur wrestling match. Equally they may also perform the identity of feminist, entrepreneur, wrestler, graphic-artist, or LGBTQ Geek. Furthermore, these events allow them to explore and actively pursue the interests to which they identify by. More importantly, these identities could not be so affirmed if they were not equally challenged by the actions held within the rooms that create, what Victor Tunrner calls a social drama, to the convention.

Turner outlines a social drama as involving four phases: a breach, crisis, redress and either reintegration or recognition of a permanent schism (69). Turner defines a breach as the "breach of a norm, the infraction of a role of morality, law, custom or etiquette in some public arena" (70). The breach does not necessarily need to occur at the convention itself, but in the process of the breach there must be an exposure of a "pattern of current factional struggle within the relevant social group" (Turner 70). One of the events that appeared at both the Tampa convention and Miami convention that I attended was a panel on women in comic books. The focus of both panels was not just the representation of women in comic books, but also in comic book based media. This issue of the treatment of gender in comic book imagery, and the culture writ large, has been a recurring point of contention most recently inflamed through the Gamergate scandal and its subsequent backlash as discussed in chapter one. This was an issue that the panels wished to address and the convention rooms provided a stage for the events to be addressed in a "social drama." While the panels in question were ostensibly on the treatment and presentation of women in comic books, they were also addressing the treatment and presentation

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of women in the larger Geek culture, from cosplayers to gamer girls presenting, a crisis present both within and outside the convention space. As mentioned in chapter one a female cospalyer portraying Poison Ivy outside the front gate of the Tampa Bay convention faced scrutiny for her sexually revealing clothing. This scrutiny was not just by non-Geeks who found her attire inappropriate for a public space, but even fellow cosplayers and Geeks, who in some instance found her costume to be inappropriate, not because of its revealing nature, but because she did not respect to understand the character's mythology and thus was not a "true" Geek. Assumptions such could reside in the prejudice that 1) no woman that attractive could be a Geek or 2) women are never "true" Geeks. This prejudice reappears inside the convention space as well and the panels attempt to resolve a divide between opposing factions of Geeks. The factions involved range differed on the topic presented, but towards the end of the event it was a clear breach between feminists and anti-feminists within Geek culture.

With the breach having occurred outside the convention, in this case gender presentation in Geek media, the convention, and the rooms, serve as a place of redress. Turner believed that once a breach had occurred it could be sealed through a "public ritual" (70). The panels with their theatrical layout present an easily recognizable arena for discussion of the issue. When I took my seat a few rows form the front and halfway from the main alley, I felt as if I was at a press conference or academic lecture. I have never been to a press conference, but after years of watching ESPN post-game shows the format was not completely foreign to me. The panel in Tampa began with an opening statement outlining the general format of the panel, what the main topic was, and the identities of the participants. The panel consisted of several people assuming the positions of experts: a female Youtube blogger, a fellow female blogger who was also a "television" expert, and a male blogger who was a "comic" and "movie" expert. All three were

younger (maybe in their late twenties) and outlined that the point of the panel was to create a dialogue amongst us, the fans. As the female blogger (and apparent leader of the panel) stated "We won't probably fix the problem of how women are treated in comic books here. [pause for laughter] But, we are at least starting the conversation." As an added incentive, if we asked a question, thus spurring or continuing the dialogue, we would receive a piece of candy.

The open structure of the panel would supposedly lead to an atmosphere that moved from the trivial to the deeply serious, in regards to the issue of gender. The process of participation included signifying that you wished to speak (which started by raising your hand, but later included people standing up until recognized), being called upon by the panel and, receiving your candy, and then asking your question. From the beginning, more vocal members of the audience began to talk over others, or out of turn during the discussion in order to have their opinion heard, while the panel tried (sometimes in vain) to maintain order. I felt as if I was at a town hall meeting in which the political setting and nature of topics often fuels elevated emotions for the attendees that can devolve into shouting matches and even violence. There was no apparent threat of violence during our panel discussion, but as Turner states for the redress process, "new, unprecedented roles, relationships and classes may emerge disturbing the process" (71). When some members spoke, even when in agreement with the majority, how they spoke or what they spoke of could lead to their own separation from the group. What was initially a divide between audience and panel, turned into a divide between individual members removing the original binary divide.

The presence of a new schism was best surmised in the persona of an audience member dressed as Queen Maeb. Self-identified as a transgendered woman, Queen Maeb was also a "former student of woman studies and a current social activist in gender relations," as well as a

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cosplayer. Queen Maeb's question was as to the relation of how, after Wonder Woman, most female characters with "powers" were femme fatales like Catwoman. The male panelist responded by saying "Yes, that is mostly true, but you also have gotten other female heroes like Ms. Marvel and Hawkgirl." To this Queen Maeb responded "Yes, but they are *so* oversexualized. I mean they don't have any clothes on!" Before the other panelists could respond she began to list other female characters whose dress was often too revealing, including characters from anime and manga. What I assumed at the moment was her friend sitting next to her (their rapport was too easy) began to also recite characters. There would then be other more daring member of the audience who would either join in the dialogue or try to steer the conversation back to the panel. For example, after the long list following Hawkgirl, one attendee dressed as Elsa from *Frozen* asked "But do you (gesturing towards the panel) think that these outfits are part of the femme fatale mystique?" Queen Maeb was about to respond but a panelist using the microphone was able to talk over her until she settled down. Order was temporarily restored and authority positioned back with the panel leaders.

Queen Maeb's questions were not completely irrelevant, but acted more as tests for the panel's expertise rather than addressing the larger issue of gender in comic books. For example, when framing a question on the representation of black female characters (Queen Maeb was also African-American) the question was a recitation of comic historical facts: who was the first black female hero, what issue did she appear in, specific storylines she was involved in and the ending superlative "she kicked so much ass!" This style creating a monologue through the formatting of a question was not consigned to just Queen Maeb: other audience members would use the chance to speak as an opportunity to monologue as well. As Chad Wertley and Brian Swafford noticed in their own ethnographic studies of panel discussions at San Diego Comic Con, this is not an act

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of maliciousness, but a testing of the panel's expertise (do they *deserve* to call themselves experts?) as well as an opportunity to express the individuals own mastery of the texts. Queen Maeb, with others who acted as she did, however, created a new smaller conflict amongst audience members. There were those who wished for them to be quiet for a moment and allow others to speak, lest they truly hijack the proceedings from the panel that they came to see, and equally there were those alienated by not having experienced the reference material. I straddled the fence in both camps, as I wanted to hear others opinions, but could not understand what others were referencing in their respective genres. I was separated by genre indifference, the same way Queen Maeb was separated from a Dr. Who fan in attendance (both recognized they knew nothing of the other's source material.) My own fear of appearing as an unworthy Geek, an imposter without the necessary knowledge of "basic" material and canon, remained silent so as not to expose myself.

The intimacy of the rooms and the actions of the panel discussions allow not just for a redress of social and political issues, but identity issues as well. While the convention, as a whole, presents a place to perform the identity of Geek, nowhere else was I myself more made self-aware of this fragile identity than in the panel discussions. Leaving the dynamic of the gender topic panels aside, other panels, such as ones in which comic writers and artists or actors and directors faced fans, there was also panels devoted to specific genres through trivia competitions. My ability to enjoy these panels, and more importantly actively participate in their action, was hindered by my own lack of Geek cultural capital. I was adrift in discussions searching for an entry point of understanding to be able to feel the welcome of the social group. I felt this in Miami when I attended an open trivia competition on Marvel comic books. While I had no intention of participating due to stage fright, I thought I would at least be able to

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participate in the audience, answering questions on my own for some reassurance. After the first two easy questions, "Who is Spiderman's girlfriend? What is Thor's hammer's name?" the questions became progressively more difficult and delved into canon not covered in the movies (my true relation to the material.) I was dumbfounded by not just the answers, but the very questions, I had no context from which to approach them. My colleague (who viewed me as the expert) would ask me repeatedly "What are they talking about?" and all I could do was sheepishly shrug and shake my head. This was my crisis, as is the crisis of other convention attendees who can feel lost or underrepresented in the space itself. But, the space allows for the final stage of social dramas, reintegration into the group or the recognition of a permanent schism. Perhaps the next panel, the next screening, the next chance encounter with a fan will lead to a welcoming back into the culture and a reaffirmation of ones Geek identity. There are so many, surely you can find a niche? If not, perhaps this will be the last convention I will attend, as my companions emphatically told me upon our travels back home, because they were "lost." For my Tampa companion Colby the feeling of being lost was best surmised when eating lunch just outside the convention "You recognized at least three or four of the things they [the panel] were talking about. I was lost from the word go." This was supposed to be an experience for him of getting further immersed in comic book history and lore, he didn't realize "You have to already be a fucking expert just to get half this-shit." For him he would just "stick to the movies."

There is a third option that Turner proposes in social dramas. Instead of a clear conclusion to the redress process the "procedures may break down with a reversion to crisis" and thus a cycle created (Turner 71). For Turner this cycle can be more easily identified in larger social issues such as violence. The redress process allows for "social or plural reflexivity" or a possible "native way of manifesting ourselves to ourselves" (Turner 71-78). The action becomes

a performance without conclusion. The panel on gender in Miami did not resolve the crisis before the same issue was to be addressed in Tampa. It is not impossible to believe that future conventions will also have panels addressing diversity issues on comic books and media. The act of discussing the issues and debating them becomes part of the performance just as integral to the identity as the collecting of comic books or playing of video games. While I may have remained silent in the panels, my silence was still an act of participation. It was my own way of saying, perhaps I don't belong here, perhaps I do not fit, maybe I need to move on to another panel or area, or perhaps, I just need to read more comic books.

The option of choice to find a welcoming area was also an option of performance. Referring back to Queen Maeb, as with any cosplayer at a panel discussion, there was a choice in what identity to perform. Do they continue to perform their character and phrase their questions as their character? Do they use their cosplaying as the main identifier in their actions? With Queen Maeb, she threw off her character as soon as she spoke, much in the same way a professional cosplayer leading a panel does not continue the role of the costume they are wearing but speaks as their professional persona. Even if an attendee is not in costume there is a dilemma with the more socially relevant discussions. Where the majority of panels are easily defined as fans and creators, the social-political panels create further identity divides. In relations to gender or race, the same crisis that is discussed in the convention occurs outside the convention in non-Geek spaces.

Had I spoken at the panel would I have been speaking as a hetero white male Geek, or alternatively, as a just a hetero white male? The barriers are not clearly marked as my attendance at the convention places me under the umbrella of Geek, but once I step outside the convention center doors, other aspects of my personal identity (graduate student, American, middle-class)

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may then supersede my Geek identity but not the social drama to which I am involved. While he was speaking of pre-industrial society, Turners statement that the difference between ritual and ordinary life was "mainly a matter of framing and quantity not of quality" relates to this paradox (115). The identity to which I perform is changed in the convention because of how it is framed by the rituals held therein, but my role as an actor in the relevant social dramas does not change, only the superficial mask. As the role may change, so too does the stage, only to highlight a specific aspect of the multitudes contained by any single person or culture.

Conclusion

After the Tampa Bay Convention my friend Colby and I decided to go to see a movie that night. The theaters were still filled with the summer stock of blockbuster films, including what would become the most profitable film that summer *Guardians of the Galaxy*. The film's success appeared an anomaly, after all, this was not a movie based on well-known characters (Groot? Rocket Raccoon?) or a well-known series. Yet Colby and I wanted to see this film filled with so much hype, and advertisement saturation. It was a comic book movie, it was Marvel, and "Dude, it looks awesome." When we went to the film, myself expecting that many of the people who went to the convention that day would also go see the film, the convention seemed to have been extended.

The movie theater space was not the convention space. Nobody was cosplaying in the theater. You could not know that any one person was a Geek, after all, they may be here to see the latest *Fast and Furious*, not *Guardians of the Galaxy*. There was no memorabilia to share, no celebrities or artists to approach. When the film began you did not talk, and if you did add your own commentary/insight as one theater goer over my shoulder decided to do, you would be well and vigorously told to be quiet. There were rules of decorum set by tradition, whether in a movie theater in Spokane, Washington or Paris, Texas.

The comic book convention does not bear these same constrictions, even when going such as short distance from Miami to Tampa, Florida. The convention center does not bear the same anthropological history as a movie theater. A movie theater will always show movies, a

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convention center may not always be a place for Geek's to gather. The convention center is a place of transience, not solidity, and the events created to occupy the space must conform to it.

Whether a comic book convention or not, the participants in the event must act within a space that is designed to include the largest amount of groups possible. By not being a space designed to amplify the experience of a particular group of actors, the way a sports stadium is designed for a particular sport and fan, the actions of the actors to create an identity become amplified. If Augé is correct, and the progress and speed of modernity has led to the withering away of historical narratives and the increasing alienation of individuals through the collapse of space through speed, the convention may then be seen as one of the epicenters of this collapse. However, further study should be conducted in the influence of the internet on this development of supermodernity. The creation of a space of information, that allows for social interaction and creates communities through media present a new challenge for identity created through place.

The comic book convention and its relationship to Geek culture and identity, represents a possible model of the creation of identity form a non-place space. For the brief time period that the convention was in session every area of the convention space was formed to fit the performance of Geek. Stages were erected, rooms transformed for play, the area saturated with Geek artifacts and characters. Cosplayers, through their participation help to create a fantasy experience and allow a direct interaction between fictional characters and their fans. In a similar way the presence of professional actors and artists allow for the same interaction but with the forces behind the existence of the text. However, there are layers to the performance. Cosplayers are not just actors, but fans as well, creating a nexus of identities. They are not just performing a role, but also participating in the expression of a personal identity connecting them to the larger culture of Geek.

Complications and conflict of identity arise in the convention. Who is a Geek, what a Geek is, and what qualifies a person to be a Geek are debated and contested within the space. In the panel discussion rooms aspects of the identity are debated. Conflict arises and divisions are made apparent between peoples, while there is still the possibility for resolution of grievances. The dramas that unfold in these spaces, issues of gender, race, sexuality, questions of power and justice, may present a lens into the larger divides of the society around the conventions. This connection may not always be clear but further study is needed to see the relationship between Geek culture and mainstream culture.

The performances held within the conventions shift constantly. There is not any one main performances occurring, but a synchroneity of performances. The events of the convention contain aspects of ritual, theater, and play. There is the structure of ritual present in the act of attending the event annually, in the creation of and performances of cosplay. Simultaneously there are the traditional theatrical acts where audience and actors are clearly marked off, be it by a stage, film screen or panel table. Play becomes involved in the acts of entertainment through video games and board games. But, it must also be recognized in the act of cosplayers, in the performance of make-believe between two actors; the cosplayer and the attendee. Schechner's permeable spectrum of performance is crossed and re-crossed multiple times in any single interaction of the convention. A cosplayer sitting in on a panel discussion at the convention is participating in the ritual act of the convention, the theater of the panel discussion and the play of being in costume. From this an identity can be formed for the individual, not necessarily as a rejection of an other, but as a reinforcement of their self-assumed identity.

My own experience was one of a realization of a new aspect to my own assumed identity as a Geek. Before the convention I had always self-identified as a Geek. I played video games,

enjoyed comic books, watched some anime cartoons and had read Tolkien's entire *Lord of The*
Rings series (The *Silmarillion* not included.) My friends were Geeks, I was a Geek, some people
called me a Geek. The convention space and my own ability to perform and interact cohesively
with others challenged this identity. While I enjoyed my time at the convention and was able to
form a connection to some of the texts present, I also realized how much I really did not know.
While I was more attuned then my companions, I was lost in the references more than I could
find a base of understanding. However, with so many texts and series to grasp it seems an
impossible task to be able to competently speak on every subject. I am a self-identified Geek but,
the convention challenged that identity by showing how little connection I had to the texts and
people presented as essential knowledge. Perhaps I was not a Geek after all. At the same time,
the ability to interact with and participate with the event and people of the event affirmed in
some way the identity I ascribed to. I could still participate even if I was a level below everyone
else. More importantly, that I chose to attend the conventions at all showed my and other
attendees connection to the identity of Geek.

The convention, in sheer attendance creates an idea of a growing acceptance of Geek
culture. But this was an illusion quickly removed by the resistance constantly by individual
actors and the larger ritual of the convention. Outside the convention the surrounding area could
still find the participants of the event as invaders of their space, deviant at worse and out of place
at best. The convention center is not a permanent space, and yet its ability to create a place for
the diverse Geek crowd leads to the question of whether or not Geeks, as a subculture, need a
permanent space defined by social or historical agency. If the religious have the temple or the
sports fan the stadium, does the Geek need a permanent space for the ritual of identity to occur in
a place of acceptance? I would say no. Even if the space of the ritual lacks a complete agency an

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act of identity ritual may be performed and challenged. What becomes important then, is the willingness to participate in the event and, once the event has passed, does the individual retain the presence of the identity created therein. It may be compartmentalized yet it remains integral to their persona.

The convention serves as one area of the study of Geek culture. The culture presents difficulty of study because of its varied subgroups. Each on its own rights deserves further study. Yet, the convention provides a space for these different groups to collectively meet and perform the identity of Geek and change what that identity is. What a Geek is is debated and may be reformed in each recreation of the event. Who is a Geek is is then created and formed by the individuals who participate in and perform their identities at these comic book conventions.

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