"Its'a Me, Mario!": Costumed Gaming's Effects on Character Identification

Theresa Jean Tanenbaum
UC, Irvine
Irvine, CA 92697 USA
ttanen@uci.edu

Nicole Crenshaw
UC Irvine
Irvine, CA 92697 USA
crenshan@uci.edu

Karen Tanenbaum
UC Irvine
Irvine, CA 92697 USA
karen.tanenbaum@uci.edu

Whether we are aware of it or not, clothing is fundamental to how we construct, enact, and experience social identities. Our clothes play a significant role in how others perceive us (Goffman 1959). Clothing can convey socio-economic status, cultural background, gender identity, political and religious affiliation, media preferences, and personality traits. Beyond self-expression and social signaling, clothing plays a role in how we construct and understand our own identities. Adam and Galinsky use the term *enclothed cognition* to describe how different clothing can modulate our own self-perception and identity performance, often at unconscious levels (Adam and Galinsky 2012). Studies on enclothed cognition have shown that "wearing clothes triggers associated abstract concepts and their symbolic meanings" (Adam and Galinsky 2012). For example, one study found that participants who were wearing lab coats were half as likely to make mistakes on a selective attention task as those wearing street clothes; this difference was attributed to the lab coat wearers enacting a more focused, "scientific" identity. In this talk we present the results of our exploratory research on what we call *costumed gaming*. Our prior work (Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum 2015)has examined how techniques from theater practice can be applied to game design to help understand processes of character identification. Across our research into acting theory, a consistent theme emerged: many actors report that a role really comes into focus only after the actor puts on the costumes of their character during dress rehearsal. Similarly, in the theatrical tradition of Mask Work (Johnstone 1992), characters are "accessed" through the use of masks and mirrors: when an actor sees herself wearing a mask she is transformed or *possessed* by the character that it represents. In theater practice, costumes operate according to a logic known as "outside→in" transformation (Daw 2004). Outside→in transformation works by emphasizing the contexts and activities of the actor (such as setting, props, costumes, make-up, dialogue, body movement, and social interactions) to elicit a mental transformation into the character. Theater and acting theories are not the only place that we have looked for inspiration. Within games culture and fandom, the phenomenon of *cosplay* is of particular interest when considering the impact of costumes on players. Nicolle Lamerichs argues that cosplay transforms the relationship between the fictional world of the character and the world of the player from *implicit* to *explicit,* stating that "cosplay does not just fictionalize everyday life and give it an aesthetic dimension; it also shows how the fictional shapes the actual. Ultimately, cosplay is a vital example of how identity is constructed" (Lamerichs 2010).

In our research on costumed gaming we are asking the following questions: 1) How does the act of wearing a costume affect how players articulate their relationship to a game character? 2) How does the act of wearing a costume influence players' self-perception? 3) How do players in costume engage with each other?

To explore these questions we created four costumes for four popular Nintendo characters – Mario, Princess Peach, Link, and Princess Zelda – and invited players to play current generation Wii U games (i.e., *Hyrule Warriors* and *Super Mario 3D World*) while dressed as the characters they played. For the study, we recruited 10 pairs of players from the student population of the University of California, Irvine campus. Participants were randomly assigned to either the Super Mario condition, (i.e., the dyad dressed as Mario and Princess Peach and played *Super Mario 3D World*) or the Legend of Zelda condition (i.e., the dyad dressed as Link and Princess Zelda and played *Hyrule Warriors*). Participants played 30-60 minutes of their condition's game out of costume (session 1) and in costume (session 2). After completing both gameplay sessions, we performed an interview with the dyad to discuss their gaming experiences. Preliminary results indicate that participants' pronoun usage differed between the costumed and non-costumed sessions, with greater use of "I" and "we" to refer to the game characters while playing in costume, participants reported consciously shifting their verbal- and body-languages to match the character they were dressed as (e.g., "It'sa me, Mario!" as Mario, sitting up straighter as Princess Peach and Princess Zelda, or speaking less as Link). These findings suggest a stronger identification with the character and avatar. Participant dyads included same- and cross-gendered players. We designed the study to include instances of male players playing male characters, female players playing female characters, male players playing female characters, and female players playing male characters. As a result, some of our participants dressed as characters with different gender identities during their costumed gaming sessions. Much of the literature around cosplay looks at crossdressing (or "crossplay") as a particularly interesting aspect of the fan practice (Gn 2011). Many of our male participants commented on this aspect of the study. For example, male participants who were assigned to play a female character frequently mentioned, "I knew I was going to be playing Peach!" Conversely, male players who were assigned to play a male character often said, "Coming in, I assumed I was going to be Zelda, and [the female participant] was going to be Link." Playing as female characters appears to have an important effect on the ways that players view these characters. Preliminary results of our study show that players of all genders are more likely to notice how strong a female character is after playing her, admire her dexterity and versatility given the outfit she wears, and lament that more games in these long-standing series do not offer the opportunity to play as the female counterpart to the male protagonist. In the talk, we will present more detailed analysis of the participants' language use, interactions, and reactions to the costumes.

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