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# The Monstrous Transformation of the Self: Translating Japanese Cyberpunk and the Posthuman into the Living World

Orion Mavridou

This essay offers an extended, tangential reading of the cyberpunk videogame, *Final Fantasy VII*. I will examine its literary and visual motifs, patterns and codes, putting these in dialogue with a participant study on cosplay and transformative fandom related to the game. The central philosophical questions that permeate the game will be examined in relation to one of the game's characters, *Vincent Valentine*. I will then outline the processes involved in reproducing and embodying this character in the context of cosplay. The essay is structured to partially mimic a line of thought commonly observed within creative fandom, where the dissection of the media text serves to inform artistic practice. The textual analysis of *Final Fantasy's VII's* mythos, plot and Vincent Valentine's character represent an integral part of the process involved in the conception, creation and construction of my cosplay performance.

Both the game and the character were chosen on the merit of their relevance to the cyberpunk genre and the cosplay community, as well as their narrative and artistic potential. At the time of its release, in 1997, *Final Fantasy VII* presented gamers with a unique entry point into the insular realms of both East Asian RPGs and Japanese cyberpunk. It is still considered the quintessential example of the *Final Fantasy* series and the archetypal cinematic videogame. Vincent Valentine is a player avatar who exemplifies the ontological problems and existential anxieties associated with the posthuman.

One of the most striking features of *Final Fantasy VII* is how far removed it is from the thematic roots of its predecessors. Inspired by the success of high fantasy contemporaries – games such as *Dragon Quest* (Enix), *Ultima* (Origin Systems) and *Wizardry* (Sir-Tech Software Inc.) – the world of *Final Fantasy* was originally conceived as a light interpretation of the Tolkienist tradition. Dwarves, elves and pseudo-medieval settings were a characteristic presence in early iterations. *Final Fantasy VII*, however, delves into the world of futuristic cyberpunk. Against a backdrop of claustrophobic neon-lit streets and cultural decay, its multi-layered media text engages a series of fundamental philosophical questions: life, evolution and the limits of the human.

World building in Final Fantasy has always operated under certain constraints. Characters and references are carried from setting to setting, providing a sense of coherence and continuity between otherwise unrelated narratives. For example, any person who has played more than one entry in the series will recognize “Chocobo” as a benevolent species or “Ifrit” as a deity which can assist the players in battle. In a similar manner, until the advent of *Final Fantasy VI* (Square Enix) and *Final Fantasy VII*, the employment of clear moral boundaries between “good” and “evil” and the absence of technology in favour of magic usage, remained at the centre of the series’ narrative core.

As a critical media text, *Final Fantasy VII* specifically problematizes the philosophical position of humanism through a vast network of parallel plots, characters and arcs that repeatedly challenge the idea of humanity as the centre of all existence. As a piece of fiction, it resists a single metanarrative, instead lending itself to a number of interpretations and rhizomatic analyses. A metanarrative (or “grand narrative”), in this context, would be defined as the unifying theory behind the game’s storytelling aspects; aiming to create meaning by synthesizing individual discursive formations into a comprehensive, totalizing schema. Instead, *Final Fantasy VII* presents itself within a non-teleological model of thought, offering an array of horizontally arranged “petits récits” (or smaller, localized narratives) in archetypical postmodernist fashion (Lyotard 71). I argue that this flexibility, interpreted through tangential connections between different artistic and narrative threads is one of *Final Fantasy VII*’s most unique qualities, uncharacteristic in other games of the time. This transition into nuance and non-linearity sets the game apart from its contemporary peers, and makes it particularly appropriate for the type of rhizomatic, personal reading that can be observed in the foundations of the cosplay practice.

“Cosplay” is itself a Japanese neologism, a portmanteau of the words “costume” and “play”. An umbrella term, it is used to describe multiple types of a crossmedia fan practice which involves adapting the clothes and appearance of a fictional character into costumed performance. It is characterised by a distinct subcultural ethos and primarily associated with pulp and pop culture, including comics, films and videogames. In academic terms, cosplay has been described as an internalisation of the media text and an embodiment of the fan’s personal reading in creative form (Lamerichs). Utilizing a wide range of skills, the successful performer is not only tasked with replicating the aesthetic, but with inhabiting the mental and physical space of the character. Pure craftsmanship is valued very highly, but cultural capital amongst cosplayers is primarily derived from notions of *authenticity* –the ability to bring a character to life and translate the essence of *Fantastika* into a tangible reality.

Postmodernist lines of sight understand identity as fragmented, complex and fluid. Cosplay, with its playful deconstruction of social (bodily and engendered) norms and constant negotiation between temporal identities, can be examined in the context of the cyberpunk ethos as a fundamentally postmodernist, posthuman practice. Posthumanism, a philosophical concept integral to the cyberpunk genre, is about transcendence and the utilization of technological means to overcome the natural boundaries of the body (Badmington, "Posthumanism" 9; "Theorising Posthumanism" 10). Within this thought movement, human nature is neither irrevocable nor sacrosanct. Instead, the human condition is seen as malleable and its current mode as transitional –a metaphorical larval stage, indicative of what humanity has the potential to evolve into, in terms of longevity and ability (Bostrom). Through technoscientific enhancement, the *transhuman* being is expected to continuously challenge the boundaries of the flesh, until all perceived notions of restriction have been lifted and the label *posthuman* can be applied. As Bainbridge and Norris assert ("Posthuman Drag"), the cosplayer's desire to (temporarily) redefine their physical identity –to exaggerate their presence into larger than life dimensions and assign to the self features which extend beyond race, gender, age and reality–elevates the simple act of dressing up into a form of posthuman drag. Situated between the postmodern theory of identity and the posthuman philosophy of embodiment, cyberpunk emerges as the unifying fictive space –and cosplay as a practical application of all the above.

### **The Japanese cyberpunk genre**

Technological addiction, social isolation and erotomechanical body horrors; "cyberpunk" is the repeat tale of humanity's struggle to maintain a semblance of itself, in a near-future where the size of its hubris threatens to swallow it whole (Brown, "Machinic Desires" 222). Building on the literary tradition of new wave science fiction, the term was first coined by Bruce Bethke in 1983, while the origins of the genre itself can be traced back to the works of Harlan Ellison, J. G. Ballard and Phillip K. Dick. The latter's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* served as the basis and inspiration (Kerman 69) for Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (Warner Brothers), almost fifteen years later. *Blade Runner's* brand of neon-lit noir managed to garner a sizeable cult following over time, establishing the film as culturally and aesthetically significant despite its initial lukewarm reception. Alongside the filmmaking works of William Gibson ("Neuromancer") and David Lynch ("Eraserhead"), *Blade Runner* formed the foundations of the cinematic movement that came to be known as "cyberpunk".

A portmanteau of *cybernetics* and *punk* – the science of electronic control systems and the ideology of disruption, cyberpunk comes pre-equipped with a cynical view of the future and a call for resistance, as well as a pessimism not traditionally found in the wider science fiction genre.

Based on a broad survey of texts, it could be generalised around the thematic concept of “low life, high tech” and society’s struggle with the anxieties that emerged from the end of modernism: privacy, security, integrity, and the status of the human subject in a posthuman world. Ambition, civilization and progress – all traditionally celebrated concepts – are filtered through the fear of *hubris*, the idea that certain things should remain out of reach and that the sinful act of pursuing them will only result in karmic destruction and punishment (Seaman 246; Thacker 72). Against a backdrop of unapologetic violence -physical, emotional and social- the cyberpunk dystopia serves as a ground of reflection on both the present and future. Brutal urbanization, social decay, the commodification of human bodies, capitalist oppression, and the consuming power of technology are all problems commonly engaged by the genre. The central arguments of its discourse tend to operate in dualities -human vs. machine, individual vs. system, culture vs. nature, change vs. status quo, self vs. other. Finding a place within this continuum is often the protagonist’s main source of conflict (Graham 1).

Japanese posthumanism having evolved under the influence of Confucian philosophy, comes with a historical emphasis on depersonalized harmony and productivity -the same values that drive cyberpunk’s characteristic obsession with technology, scientific progress and voluntary dehumanization (Napier, “The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature” 223; “Anime from Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle” 103). Unlike its Western counterparts, the Japanese branch of cyberpunk is particularly raw in its treatment of the human subject, emotionally and physically. It shows a fascination with the painful and the uncanny (Brown, “Machinic Desires” 222). Body horror, psychosexual oppression, automation and teratology are common narrative patterns. Dehumanization, whether voluntary or forced, is a major recurring theme and the archetypal Japanese protagonist is often subjected to a torturous, monstrous metamorphosis which is unique to this cultural branch of the genre.

In Shinya Tsukamoto’s *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (Kaijyu Theatres), the nameless protagonist -a humble office worker- wakes up to find a metal fragment embedded into his cheek. What follows next is a savage and surreal series of events, culminating in his monstrous fusion with another character known only as the “metal fetishist.” The two merge into a grotesque biomechanical being set on destroying the world, in a symbolic rejection of heteronormativity and conservative societal values (Brown, “Tokyo Cyberpunk” 105; Conrich 95). Similarly, in Mamoru Oshii’s *Ghost in the Shell* and *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (Mamoru Oshii), Major Motoko Kusanagi sees her consciousness transplanted from her biological body into a series of artificial ones -all built to serve different purposes. Troubled by questions of embodiment, the validity of memory and her own cultural status as a transhuman subject, she completes her character arc by combining the essence of her being - her “ghost” - with a rogue AI to form an entirely new entity. The cultural

and artistic influence of these examples is traceable in the narrative of *Final Fantasy VII* and Vincent Valentine's character.

### **An overview of *Final Fantasy VII***

In contrast to earlier parts of the series, whose introductory sequences were typically arranged around narrative exposition, *Final Fantasy VII* opens with a view of the cosmos, privileging mood over information. The proverbial camera slowly guides the eye through a sea of stars, before fading out and into the image of a young woman bathed in an eerie green glow. An equally eerie sound effect, vaguely resembling a chorus of whispering voices and celestial white noise, fades in and out of focus before disappearing entirely. For a few seconds, the unknown woman appears to be looking directly at the viewer, a disembodied presence, floating in the middle of a green-tinted current that could be made out of constellations, water or both. Eventually the angle shifts and she is revealed to be examining a source of light in an otherwise unremarkable alley. She walks away, and the sound of her echoing steps builds up alongside the music. Her brightly-coloured dress and basket of flowers immediately stand out against the decaying urban surroundings, further establishing her as a figure of importance: an Other.

Once the main street comes into view, the camera immediately begins to zoom out, revealing to the audience a scene of rampant, neon-lit consumerism. The woman comes to a standstill under an endless array of posters, bright signs and billboards, while cars and pedestrians hurry past her. The people in the street are portrayed as faceless and unimportant – just a collection of moving parts and shadowy outlines, circulating through the veins and bowels of the city. The camera does not linger on them for long, instead zooming further out to present a majestic view of the megalopolis itself: Midgar, the mythological centre of the world. Around the monumental industrial complex, nothing else can be seen. Midgar simply dominates the horizon. Contrary to the initial cosmic sequence, no stars are visible either, only the artificial lights and the towering reactors setting the night sky aflame. The city comes into full view and the game logo appears before it in a dramatic fashion, while the music reaches a climax. The majestic panorama is only interrupted by the screeching sound of a train coming to a stop, as the main hero arrives to the scene and the interactive part of the game begins.



*Figure 1. The city of Midgar. Published under Fair Use. The original game is property of Square Enix.*

Due to its complex storytelling and numerous subplots, *Final Fantasy VII* has several memorable and poignant narrative peaks. Unlike its predecessors, however, the game's cinematic intro eschews exposition for aesthetic ambience. Using a series of abstractions and a visual vocabulary directly lifted from filmic tradition, it establishes the setting and tone while directly referencing the plot's most climactic moments, as well as its main argument against the philosophical centrality of the human. Within the anthropocentric Cartesian system, "man naturally stands at the centre of things; is entirely distinct from animals, machines and other nonhuman entities; is absolutely known and knowable to 'himself'; is the origin of meaning and history; and shares with all other human beings a universal essence" (Badmington, "Mapping Posthumanism" 1345). What *Final Fantasy VII* does, is problematize and question each of these notions in sequence.

Buried deep within the monstrous womb of the megalopolis (Creed 214), people are shown to be of very little value; compared to the vastness of the cosmic universe, they matter even less. Additionally, in the game's introduction, Aerith (the mysterious Other and an important religious figure in the story) is deceptively framed as a representative of the human aspect. In an ironic twist, Aerith -the only figure in the introduction to possess any distinguishable features – is later revealed to be a nonhuman entity. Overall, the game invests a considerable amount of time into cultivating empathy for its human protagonists and their individual quests for deliverance, discovery and redemption. The human race in its entirety, however, is portrayed as ignorant and parasitic; inflated in its own sense of importance even as it hangs on the edge between survival and extinction.

Midgar's "abstract machines" (Deleuze 177) of control - social, political, economic, scientific - keep the population docile and divided, stratified into a strict and inescapable hierarchy, and dependent upon the megalopolis for survival. In that vein, it is not by accident that Shinra Inc. - the financial conglomerate which asserts autocratic control over Midgar was conceived as an electric power company. Electricity is, after all, the lifeblood of the cybersociety. In *Final Fantasy VII's* dystopian future, it is also the literal lifeblood of the nameless planet everything resides on and which Shinra's reactors are running dry. Built on the exploitation of natural resources, Midgar acts as both a symbol of social oppression and a manifestation of the human ego. Despite the brutality it inflicts on the individual, it sits in the middle of the game map as an allegorical representation of the Cartesian man's achievements - a machinic meat grinder and a miracle of engineering in equal measures. Like the tower of Babel, it is portrayed as liminal and transcendent, free of any particular culture and described by a very eclectic mix of aesthetic references. The city is a symbolic extension of humanity's worst aspects, and is thus elevated into having its own personality in a way that no other game location is. The development of the city mirrors the same development cyberpunk protagonists undergo. Midgar's emergent character eventually undergoes its own painful transformation and it begins to collapse under its own weight.

A third of the way into the game, mankind takes a hit to its collective sense of control. From that point onwards, the city of Midgar is shown to change and evolve alongside the human animals that inhabit it. Forced to abandon any pretences of grandeur and power over nature, mankind can either adapt or accept itself as a liability for the survival of the planet. If this posthumanist message was not explicit enough, the ending's vision for the future ensures it is hammered into place: several hundred years after the events of the game, Midgar is shown consumed by foliage. In the radically changed landscape, all traces of humanity are ubiquitously absent and the only sentient creatures still there to observe the ruins are quadruped and decidedly non-human.

Throughout the game, the central narrative maintains refrains from overtly preaching about the morality of the situation unfolding. While it could be argued that the story eventually negotiates some space between the binary oppositions of its main argument - nature vs. culture, wild vs. tame, progress vs. conservation, hope vs. despair, human vs. inhuman (Badmington, "Posthumanism" 9; "Theorising Posthumanism" 10) - it is never really clear who the audience is meant to be cheering for and whether the fall of civilization is something to be celebrated or feared. Even in its state of ruin, however, the fallen megalopolis never ceases to function as the proverbial centre of the world. Throughout the original game and its direct sequels, the main characters revisit it again and again, and while its future - and the subsequent disappearance of mankind - is not directly foreseen, the shadow of extinction continues to hang on the horizon.

In this atmosphere of doubt and instability, the individual protagonists often wrestle with their sense of identity and purpose. Not all of them can be described as post or even transhuman, but the cyberpunk triptych of futuristic hybrids coined by Frenchy Lunning (“Mechademia 3” xi) – the “machine”, the “creature” and the “network” - is represented in its entirety. In that vein, what makes the character of Vincent Valentine particularly interesting as an object of posthuman criticism is that he exemplifies all three archetypes. He is forced to examine the contours of his own humanity against three different types of corruptive force: mechanization, animalization and disembodiment.

### **Becoming less human - the tragedy of Mr Valentine**

Like the archetypical cyberpunk hero, Vincent is trapped in a cycle of monstrous transformations and an ongoing struggle with the liminal nature of his existence. In theory, the average player could go through the entirety of *Final Fantasy VII* without ever meeting Vincent, since originally he was included as a secret character, unlockable only under very specific conditions. However, he became popular enough to warrant his own spin-off title, *Dirge of Cerberus* (Square Enix), which was incorporated into the wider compendium of *Final Fantasy VII* works. Eventually, what became known as the *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII* grew to encompass a number of sequels, prequels, films, novels and related media, effectively making the game into its own series. As a result of this transition, every named protagonist has undergone changes in both visual design and characterization. Some of them are meant to indicate a sense of progress and personal development, while others simply function as revisions (or “retroactive continuities”) and might directly contradict the original source material. After seventeen years and numerous rewrites, Vincent’s fictive persona is an amalgamation of different interpretations, both canonical and fan related. The resulting narrative can, at times, appear convoluted and inconsistent, but the storytelling core is maintained between adaptations. Vincent embraces isolation and resists social conformity, and the problem of identity in relation to his own posthuman status remains central to his character.

Vincent is portrayed as a tragic figure. Originally an employee of Shinra Inc. in one of the company’s most questionable departments, Vincent’s past suggests ambiguous morality. The concepts of “sin” and “repentance” have a strong presence throughout the entirety of his character arc, which is commonly interpreted as a quest for redemption. Interestingly, though, guilt never appears to be related to his former line of work, despite the fact that the latter would

routinely involve violence, kidnappings, torture and murder. Instead, Vincent's sense of moral failure revolves almost exclusively around his inability to protect a scientist named Lucrecia, who was determined to use her body for a highly unethical and dangerous project. During a heated argument, Lucrecia's husband Hojo shoots Vincent through the heart. The entire incident is kept a secret and Vincent is imprisoned in a basement for an unidentifiable amount of time. He is subjected to a series of torturous procedures by both Hojo and Lucrecia, and resurrected as a bioscientific abomination. No longer able to age or die, he chooses to stay in that basement for over thirty years, until the party of heroes find him and convince him to leave his self-imposed purgatory to help save the world.



*Figure 2. Artwork of Vincent Valentine, illustrated by Tetsuya Nomura. Published under Fair Use. The original is property of Square Enix.*

Due to industry standards and graphical limitations, as well as deliberate aesthetic choice, the full extent of Vincent's torture is never described in detail. In that sense, despite the distant echo of cinematic influences such as *Death Powder*(Shigeru Izumiya) and *Rubber's Lover* (Shozin Fukui), which pioneered themes of scientific body horror in Japanese cyberpunk, *Final Fantasy*

*VII* represents an unusually sanitised example of the genre (Player, midnighteye.com). Even so, the game's brand of fiction does not shy away from teratology motifs, that is narratives which pertain to the concept of the "monster". The monstrous aspect of Vincent's character is depicted in a very straightforward manner, as a series of literal demons that take over his body when he is pushed to his limits. The transformations are portrayed as bloodless and instantaneous, skipping most of the unsavoury details for the sake of content moderation. The act of transformation, however, places him firmly onto the opposing side of the ontological divide, as the archetypal nonhuman Other. Even within the context of his own fictional universe – with its myriad examples of brutality and violence – he is isolated as a monstrosity, something which other characters use to antagonise or taunt him.

Amongst the mixture of gamers and academics analysing the plot of the game, there is continuous debate about whether or not Vincent's monsters are meant to represent an inverted interiority – a physical manifestation of the metaphorical "demons" residing within each and every one of us. Considering the character's demonstrated moral ambiguity, it would not be out of line to assume so. Regardless of the overall pessimistic tone, however, *Final Fantasy VII's* narrative aesthetic is accentuated with a level of humour and self-awareness. From the very beginning, Vincent has a hyperbolic, almost parodic, element to him that balances and compliments the weight of his tragedy. When the heroes first meet him, he is found sleeping in a coffin, in what can be construed as both a heart-breaking portrayal of self-punishment and a playful allusion to vampire mythology. His name itself is a combined reference to the Roman Catholic Saint Valentine (patron of courtly love) and serio-comic actor, Vincent Price who attained legendary status for his roles in films such as *House of Wax* (André De Toth), *Tales of Terror* (Roger Corman) and *The Mad Magician* (John Brahm). Further adding to the horror theme, each of Vincent's demons was conceived as an allegorical representation of fear of nature ("Galian Beast"), science ("Death Gigas"), society ("Hellmasker") and the spiritual world ("Chaos"). Where visual design is concerned, they are illustrated as a pastiche of horror cinema clichés with inspiration drawn directly from iconic figures such as *Friday the 13th's* Jason Voorhees (Sean S. Cunningham) and Boris Karloff's classic rendition of Frankenstein's monster (James Whale). This penchant for homage and self-satire is commonly observed in Japanese cyberpunk, but noticeably absent in later revisions of Vincent's character which drew more influence from contemporary manga and anime aesthetics.

While other characters struggle with the authenticity of their own thoughts and intentions, Vincent is forced to bear the entire weight of his perceived "sin", in a perpetual quest for redemption that is never fully concluded. As the story progresses and evolves, Vincent, Hojo and Lucrecia come to represent a triptych of posthuman martyrs, each of them sacrificed in turn to as

an example of the cyberpunk dystopia's failing sense of morality. The triangular dynamic between these three characters lends itself to a number of cyberpunk readings, from issues of body ownership, to oppressed sexuality, mental fragmentation and disembodiment. The typical dichotomy of the posthuman argument is represented between Hojo and Lucrecia's contrasting ideologies and ethical positions: where the latter craves death, the former strives for immortality; while Lucrecia is eager to shed her human shell and dissolve into the collective spiritual consciousness, Hojo seeks to create a bodily vessel free of biological constraints; when the female love interest rejects the hero's feelings, the male villain proceeds to capture him and violate his bodily integrity in a manner that is often interpreted as rooted in latent homosexual attraction. Despite their differences, however, Hojo and Lucrecia never cease to function like two sides of the same coin. Both of them exemplify technoscientific hubris and self-abuse; both of them are eventually crushed by their bad karma and denied salvation. Most importantly, both are equally instrumental in stripping Vincent of his humanity.

Vincent's systematic dehumanisation manifests in ways which are characteristic to Japanese cyberpunk, and reference philosophical concepts on the nature of life and humanity frequently explored in the genre: in *Ghost in the Shell*, the essence of being alive is portrayed as ideologically connected to one's ability to die, as well as produce offspring. In *Final Fantasy VII*, Lucrecia and Hojo's combined work non-consensually removes Vincent's potential for death. Additionally, his left arm, which is encased in a golden gauntlet and heavily implied to be a biomechanical prosthesis, becomes another flesh offering in Vincent's continuous line of torture. While not directly affecting his reproductive capability, the needless amputation can still be read as a symbolic act of castration, very much in line with the erotomechanical horrors of *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*.

Where other characters are shown to visually evolve, in both design and thematic presentation, Vincent never changes out of his torn red cloak. Dramatic and perpetually fluttering, it comes to represent his inner turmoil, his wounded psyche, his physical torment, as well as the untamed beast(s) still residing inside him. Without the option of death, his condition remains stagnant and unresolved until the very end. "I was frozen in time, but I feel as if my time is just beginning," he muses at the end of the original game. While his crisis of subjectivity is ultimately unsettled, for this posthuman being - who continues to exist in the liminal space between mechanization, animalization and disembodiment - hope takes the form of a personal affirmation that the world continues to move forward and a new cycle of repentance is about to begin.

## **Cosplay: fandom participation, ownership and the narrative of the self**

As referenced in the introduction, the textual analysis of *Final Fantasy's VII's* mythos and Vincent Valentine's character represent an integral part of the process involved in the conception, creation and construction of my cosplay performance. In academic terms, the same analysis helps formulate and frame the essay's argument, by clarifying the fundamental relationship between the source material and the cyberpunk genre, alongside the posthumanist and postmodernist theoretical and philosophical extensions the latter encompasses.

Methodologically, my textual analysis intended to partially mimic a common form of fandom participation, where the fans (individually or in groups) examine the source text in depth, carefully dissecting it for information that can later be appropriated into fan art, fan fiction, costume making and other creative endeavours. Common observations show this social act to be neither rare nor atypical. Usually encountered under the term "theorising," it can be found on specialised discussion platforms, messaging boards and blogs, where ideas surrounding the fans' personal readings are shared for both the sheer pleasure of it and the desire to fuel creative output. This behaviour is not exclusive to cosplayers, and in itself functions as a form of meaning-making.

Active reading of the source text has been isolated as an essential component to the practice of cosplay. In her academic discourse, Nicolle Lamerichs ("Stranger than Fiction") identifies four essential aspects of cosplay: a narrative, a set of clothing, a play or performance before spectators and a subject or player. The "narrative" mentioned here refers to both the canonical media text, produced by the original authors, and the smaller narratives emerging from the various readers' relationship with said text. The existence of the latter forms the basis of interpretation upon which the entire creative process resides. Earlier in this essay, I mentioned that one of the game's most prominent narrative qualities is the fluidity with which the text lends itself to a number of tangential readings. While not all fans will engage with their source of inspiration to an equal extent, the creation of a cosplay costume (and indeed, every kind of derivative artwork) is a very involved process. As my own practical research into this project has shown, the investment in time and effort required to bring a character to life is significant enough that a measure of dedication and affective attachment to the source material is expected.

For the purposes of this project, Vincent Valentine served as the subject of my personal cosplay performance. The character is one I have explored in a number of different media, both canonical

and fan-driven. The set of clothes was produced entirely from scratch, without any previous experience in sewing or crafting, and took a total of twelve weeks to complete. It was modelled at Dee Con 2k14, the local Dundee games and anime convention and photographed professionally. The construction process itself was documented in detail, generating a separate set of data to be used in later research. The costume has since been the subject of a number of small exhibitions and talks around Dundee and Edinburgh, with the most recent one being part of the Game Masters Exhibition in the National Museum of Scotland.

The methodological approach for this project is in line with a growing trend in academic discourse where fandom is examined not only as a narrative of culture, but also as a narrative of the self (Peirson-Smith 77; Hills 122). Contemporary scholarship has already pointed out that fan participation can be interpreted as a way of internalizing and owning the source material. In this case, by deconstructing and embodying the fictional persona, and capitalising on existing emotional connections, I observed that “costume play” exhibited a more literal ludic aspect and the performance of character became a platform for introspection on matters of identity, creative expression and socialization.

While it is practically impossible to package the entirety of the character’s aesthetic and narrative into a single wearable outfit or series of photographs, the textual reading helped prioritize the available visual information: the subtle eroticism of Vincent’s cinematography; the emphasis on the red eyes as an intentional evocation of the uncanny; the symbolic value of the red cloak; the golden claw as an allusion to emasculation, offset by the extremely phallic image of his weapons; and his liminal nature as both *beauty* and *beast*, formed the basis of my portrayal (Square Enix; Softbank 48).

Since I deemed realism important, I altered the costume to look more natural in the context of the real world. Imperfections, such as scratches and tears, I incorporated into the aesthetic, and I made the cloak to look dirty and worn, more so than it appears to be in the game. Instead of wearing a wig, I chose to cut and style my actual hair, while beauty lighting was kept to a minimum during photo-shoots. The project’s creative objectives gradually evolved into an attempt to bring the character as close to life as possible, which involved taking artistic licence with minor details that I deemed to exist too far into the realm of fiction to translate realistically.



*Figure 3. The completed costume, modelled by the author. Photographed by Drew Cunningham.*

Posing, posture and speech align with craftsmanship to complete this artificial image of personhood. In cosplay, lighting and creative post-processing (or even minor body modifications) are considered viable and fair means for achieving the final effect within cosplay practice. And while there are limits to how far a performer is expected to go, the entire process is comprised out of layers and layers of playful deceit – multiple sets of smoke and mirrors, there to create an illusion of humanity and embodied identity.

One thing my own practical engagement pointed out was the depth of investment required to participate in this practice, in terms of devotion, time and commitment. While different results, different artistic techniques and different levels of skill can all be encountered within the cosplay community, authenticity is measured on a social level and the demands of the fandom collective can put a lot of pressure on the individual. In the absence of a theatrical stage, improvised interaction with the cosplayer's peers is essential for confirming the value of the performance and craftsmanship. It is through the approval of the audience that the illusion is completed, and without the former, the fictive persona arguably does not exist.

In the case of Vincent, the design of the character – such as the mix of racial features, the ageless appearance, the unstable gender marking and equivocal bodily proportions - serves to emphasise his status as an ambiguous, temporal being. Amongst other things, my cosplay performance emerged as an exercise in practical androgyny, and achieving that level of transcendence in regards to presentation (especially engendered presentation) was identified early as one of the project's biggest challenges. In order to achieve a form similar to the character's, my body contours had to be concealed in layers of padding and binding to create the impression of a small waist, wide shoulders and wide hips. Aspects of my own presentation which I deemed too indicative of my birth sex or too reminiscent of the gender binary (for example, the shape of my jaw) were similarly disguised through aspects of the costume, creative lighting and makeup.

I found that the internalised meaning derived from the source text needs to be constantly negotiated with the emotional and embodied aspects of the costumed subject, as well as the expectations of the audience. Success and authenticity are often similarly determined against the performer's ability to balance the familiar with the uncanny. This redefinition of physical identity -and deconstruction of social identity into performative components – is very deeply ingrained into the practice of cosplay, and central to both postmodernist and posthumanist thinking (Lotecki 2012). From this perspective, cosplay can be identified as a safe space for ontological exploration, where the performer is allowed to challenge societal norms and the limits of the human. Within this frame of reference, the body is just another set of contours that can be retraced and blurred at will on a spectrum of expression that includes multiple forms of morphological play. The monstrous transformation of the self is, in the end, a form of playful meditation on ontological anxieties and physical boundaries (Lunning, "Cosplay and the Performance of Identity"; Gn 583).

In the critical discourse of *Ghost in the Shell* and *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*, as well as *Final Fantasy VII*, the transcendence of physical boundaries (whether forced or intentional) is positioned as a fundamental component of the posthuman subject. In the context of costume and ludus, the decentralisation of embodiment and materiality takes on an inherently posthuman - inherently cyberpunk- dimension. And as would be expected, negotiating a space between the fictive and the real; the Self and the Other; the human and the nonhuman, and finding a place in this continuum of systematic dualities remains the cyberpunk protagonist's main source of conflict.

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