

Matthew Bluhm isn't famous. He doesn't star in any movies, he hasn't written a book and he doesn't have a YouTube channel with a million subscribers. He's just an average 20-year-old living in Des Moines. But as he stepped out onto the balcony at an anime expo in Los Angeles, he was greeted by a wave of screams from the thousands of people, all shouting his name. Although it wasn't his name, exactly. With a bright blue wig and a long, white trench coat, Bluhm wasn't himself. He was Kaito, a popular Japanese anime character easily recognized by the throngs of anime fans below.

"This is why I love cosplay and why I keep doing it. Some people get so excited about it as they see someone or a character that they really love. It's just a fantastic experience to see it in real life," Bluhm says.

Cosplay, short for costume playing, is the hobby of dressing up as a favorite character, usually from science fiction, video games, comic books, manga or anime, as in Bluhm's case. It became popular in the 1960s with people dressing up as characters from science fiction television shows such as *Star Trek*. Large conventions, like the San Diego Comic Con that's held yearly since 1970, helped propel cosplaying into a phenomenon.

Cosplay is mostly done at conventions, where fans of comic books and popular books, movies and TV shows gather to celebrate what they love and enjoy the company of other fans. San Diego Comic Con and New York Comic Con are two of the biggest conventions, but this atmosphere isn't restricted to the coasts. Indianapolis hosts Gen Con, the longest-running and most-attended gaming convention in the world, drawing over 60,000 people in 2015. Des Moines is home to Wizard World Des Moines and Midwest Comicon, both of which were held for the first time in 2015.

"Overall, the atmosphere is a bunch of really geeky people really enjoying what they're doing and sharing with other really geeky people," costume designer and regular cosplayer Samantha Maher says.

According to Srividya Ramasubramanian and Sarah Kornfield in an article in the *Journal of International & Intercultural Communication*, when audience members identify and empathize with a character based on similar age, sex and social class, they start to relate to the character like a friend. This relationship can cause interactions such as experiencing emotion as a result of the character, mimicking gestures or talking to a character. This is what draws people to cosplay as a way to show that bond.

Community

Unlike football or gardening, cosplay isn't a very common hobby. It can be hard to find others that share the same enjoyment, so many cosplayers head to the Internet instead.

For most cosplayers in Des Moines, the Facebook page Iowa Cosplay, with over 1,000 members, is their main place of community. There, they are free to show off costumes they're working on, advertise upcoming events or ask for advice on anything cosplay related. Posts such as "Does anyone here know of a leatherworker that could make a pair of boots?" "Posting up a great shot of my Jack Skellington outfit for Halloween!" and "Can red Plasti Dip spray paint stay on any black leather vest?" flood the page's feed.

Iowa Cosplay also hosts events like costume workshops, dinners, convention meet ups and a Drink and Draw event, where cosplayers pose for local artists to draw or paint them. It doesn't matter if you're new to Des Moines or a regular poster on the Facebook page, these events are for anyone interested in cosplay.

"The cosplay community here in Des Moines is one of the most accepting communities that I've ever been a part of," cosplayer Sarah Strege says. "There are people from all walks of life from all statuses in society. It's very open, very welcoming."

Iowa Cosplay is the most popular cosplay group across the state, but not the only one. Iowa League of Heroes and Justice Corps of Iowa are both groups of cosplayers that attend events such as birthday parties or athletic games in costume. Midwest Cosplay Connection is a Facebook group similar to Iowa Cosplay but spanning across multiple Midwest states.

Not all interaction is limited to the digital world, though. Strege met some of her closest friends through a photo day Iowa Cosplay arranged and continued the relationship both online and in person. And Bluhm heard about a group of anime fans from an online forum and met up with some of them. He doesn't see those people in person very often, but talks with them online frequently.

"Online is sort of the status quo and how people connect. At conventions and events, those are the highlights where people get together and show off their stuff and interact with other cosplayers or the crowd at conventions," Bluhm says.

Conventions

The highlights of the year for most cosplayers occur at conventions. It's where they're free to dress up as the character they've been working on for weeks. If cosplaying is a theater performance, then conventions are the opening night.

Wizard World, one of the Midwest's biggest conventions, was held this past summer in Des Moines. The event drew thousands of visitors and allowed for cosplayers from around Iowa and Des Moines to meet up after having interacted online and to see the progression of costumes.

At conventions, dressing up as a character can turn a cosplayer from average convention goer to minor celebrity. When someone in costume walks into a room, it's not uncommon for everyone to turn and stare. Attendees will frequently stop cosplayers around the venue to ask for pictures or to talk about their costumes. It's a unique opportunity to share and spread interests with other fans.

"I enjoy the thought right before I'm going to walk into a convention of making people's days. It sounds so Santa Claus-y, but it's so true," Bluhm says. "I just really love that feeling."

One thing both Maher and Strege appreciate about conventions is the experience of being someone they are not. Behind a mask or a wig, they are free to lose themselves and become the character they're portraying.

"I really like being in costume, mostly because when I'm in costume it allows me to be a little less me and a little more that character," Strege says.

Despite sometimes having over 50,000 people in attendance, conventions offer a unique familial atmosphere where screaming and running up to someone for a picture is completely normal. Everyone is there for the same reason—to enjoy the vendors, the celebrities, and their fellow attendees.

"There's this weird camaraderie at conventions where you don't know anybody that's around you, yet you feel like this is a family. These people know each other even though they don't," Maher says.

While conventions attract many cosplayers, they also attract families and children for the safe environment and extravagant costumes.

"I do it for kids. I love being able to have fun with them and be a character that they can interact with," Strege says. "It's getting to have that interaction and see other people happy because of what you do."

After a convention packs up, a sort of “post-con depression” sets in. Cosplayers have to take off their costumes and return to the real world. But in the days and weeks following, the joys of the con head to Facebook, where members post photos and stories from their weekend. Online, the convention never has to end.

Creating the Character

Many cosplayers see conventions as the culmination of their sewing and crafting efforts. Long hours spent gluing on sequins or sewing fabric are finally rewarded when they put on the costume for a convention and become the character they’ve worked so hard to create.

Not everyone creates their own costume, however. Some don’t have the time or the skill. In that case, cosplayers will commission someone to create a costume for them.

One such person is Maher, who owns Shade’s Findings, a costuming business operated out of her own home. The business is limited to only a Facebook page and booths at conventions for now, but creating costumes is Maher’s full-time job.

Her love of costuming started young when her mom taught her how to sew and the two created Halloween costumes together. Since then, Maher has created over 40 intricate costumes for herself and for others, from Wonder Woman to My Little Pony characters to her personal favorite, the anime character Fai. Creating costumes has also allowed Maher to meet other cosplayers and build friendships that stem from her business.

The whole process starts with clients contacting Maher requesting a costume and providing as many pictures as possible. From there, she works to create a pattern for the piece and gives a rough approximation of timeframe and price, which can be anywhere from \$200 to over \$1,000. Once the client gives a deposit, the sewing can begin. Maher heads to the fabric store, which she frequents once or twice a week and where the employees know her by name. Picking out fabrics, especially for animated characters, can be one of the more challenging parts of the process, but Maher has developed a knack for this skill.

“I kind of go by an instinct depending on how the client seems to talk about their character,” Maher says. If a client wants a character to be screen accurate, Maher will go with more plain fabrics because the character’s costume is not usually very detailed in the anime or video game. When the client allows her to take creative license, Maher is able to have fun with the fabrics she chooses.

Next comes cutting out the pieces, sewing it together, and lastly, applying the details. The entire process can take 12 to 15 hours of work, but some costumes have taken around 40 or 50.

“I don’t like to disappoint my clients, so I will take a lot of time on my own if I go over the timeframe I have given them,” Maher says. “I would rather them have a really good end product than be disappointed in me.”

Even when the sewing goes late into the night or she has to do some of the work for free, Maher loves being able to help someone turn a fictional character into a real-life embodiment. Her favorite part is when she hands off the costume and the client tries it on for the first time.

“Their face just lights up, like ‘This is it,’” Maher says. “It makes it all worthwhile.”

For Maher, it doesn’t matter if a costume is hand-made or commissioned, borrowed from a friend or bought in a store. All that matters is the love of what you’re doing. Any type of costume counts in cosplay.

“To me, that’s what cosplay is. Dressing up like a character that you really enjoy and having a blast while doing it,” Maher says.

From student to superhero

During the day, the fictional comic book character Bruce Wayne is just billionaire philanthropist Bruce. But at night, when he’s done being Bruce, he transforms into the cape-wearing, Batmobile-driving hero of Gotham City—Batman. As he runs his business the next day, no one knows that he’s the same person that saved the city the night before.

A lot of cosplayers have the same kind of feeling. Many hold regular day jobs where coworkers have no idea about the elaborate costumes they put on and the roles they hold on the weekends. They have two lives—one behind a desk and one behind a costume.

“It kind of makes you giddy because there’s this big secret that you get to have,” Bluhm says.

Most people that don’t know Bluhm very well don’t know about his hobby. If you look him up on Facebook, it’s not hard to find photos of him as Kaito, but to the student sitting next to him in an accounting, it’s a mystery.

“I tease people that it’s kind of like my Batman life,” Bluhm says. “During weekdays I’m an actuarial financial student and then on the weekends I’m this blue-haired cosplayer.”