

Virtual Soapbox



Why I Do What I Do *Judy Grivich*

An award-winning costumer explains what drives her to create some of the most spectacular costumes from cosplay fandom, and why she keeps doing it.

Everyone has a different reasoning behind why they engage in fandom-related crafting. Some enjoy the camaraderie. Some want to show off their obsession with an IP. Some revel in the attention. Some are secretly sated with the knowledge of getting it exactly right. Some want to become famous. Some want to display how fit they are. Some want to show off their creative skills. Every single choice you could possibly make is a completely valid choice. For myself, however, the attention, the fandom, the communities, are honestly rather unimportant for my ongoing obsession with cosplay¹.

¹ For this article, “cosplay” will be used to describe making and wearing of fandom-related costumes for your own use. I know the use of this word has been fraught with emotion and misunderstandings, however, it’s the term I’ve been using since about 2001 and the one I use to describe myself. I am a cosplayer.



The author as Ursula from Disney's *Little Mermaid*. Photo: [D-23 Expo 2015](#).

First, a little about myself. I started cosplaying in 1999 at the local sci-fi con based solely on the fact a friend told me there would be costumes. As a former theatre major with a brain-deadening “real job,” I was struggling with finding an outlet for my theatre skills. Years of community theatre now bored me and Bay Area housing prices ensured that theatre was unavailable as a full-time profession. That one convention experience sparked an obsession.

I quickly started attending every local con, and then ranged up and down California. I joined the Greater Bay Area Costumers Guild. I attended Costume College. I competed in convention masquerades. I found like-minded friends and still cosplay with them to this day. We won Best in Show at San Diego Comic Con and Worldcon. As I became more skilled, I started teaching. We took costumes on vacations abroad solely for photoshoot opportunities.

So, why did that Jedi costume from 1999 spark such an obsession for me? Why do I spend hundreds of hours (and sometimes, thousands of dollars) on a “hobby?” How did



On vacation in Beijing at the Summer Palace Photo: Marcus Wei.

a rather simple beginning in a glorified bathrobe, quickly become working on a “Gimli” costume from the *Lord of the Rings* movies for two years by 2002?

It was sheer chance that the first convention I attended was right before the release of *Star Wars: Episode 1*, and made fulfilling my childhood dreams of being a Jedi even possible. Since I already knew how to sew, from my grandmother and working in the university theatre costume shop, the initial challenge for me was figuring out how to make the best possible Jedi costume I could.

It was also the beginning of the explosion of the internet. While working on the Jedi costume, I had found an internet forum that disclosed that the Jedi “food capsules,” from Episode 1 were actually pen caps and buttons. The forum listed the exact

pen and button type the movie studio used. All you needed was an Office Max, super glue, and paint, and you had something that was *completely* screen accurate. What? This is possible? You can actually make things that are screen accurate and not look like a child’s Halloween costume? What was this wizardry?

Obviously, that oh-so-helpful *Star Wars* forum page did not exist for 99.9% of costumes. However, it was enough to spark the thought that it was possible to be completely accurate to the original source. And then I went down the rabbit hole.

It was completely coincidental that my first costume was a media re-creation costume, rather than an original design. However, in design attempts since then, I’ve proven that my creative skills lie in problem solving rather than visual design skills. In fact, those problems to solve have become my main reason for cosplaying. I now deliberately seek out challenges to tackle. I’ve discovered that I enjoy the thrill of learning a new technique, or figuring out how to solve an impossible-in-reality idea. I enjoy this challenge far more than I enjoy wearing the costume, or receiving attention at conventions. This is why I do what I do.

The first “serious” costume I attempted was “Gimli” from the *Lord of the Rings* movies for a masquerade entry at Baycon 2003 (a local sci-fi con). My friends and I were planning a large *Lord of the Rings* group for the masquerade, and I chose my character last. I had a choice between “Gimli,” “Boromir,” and “Gandalf,” and I decided to choose what I felt was the “hardest” because I wanted a “challenge.” This decision-making process has been repeated many, many times over the last 17 years, to the dismay of my stress levels.



The author recreated Gimli the dwarf from the *Lord of the Rings* Movies. Photo: Paul Savage

I decided early on that I wanted to make the costume as “accurate” as possible to the movie costume. While I knew how to sew, my knowledge of prosthetics, wig making, casting, chain mail and leatherwork was either theoretical, only watched someone do it once for a college class, or from scout camp. This was going to be a “challenge” all right!

The Usual Stages of Costume Construction

AKA What Works For Me. Your Mileage May Vary.

Deciding What to Make

I essentially have two lists in my brain at all times. One, a list of future potential costumes; things I’ve seen in passing and decided I want to do at some point. It could be as simple as, “oh this is cool looking / pretty / I’ve always wanted to learn how to fiberglass” to a more fleshed out, solid plan. I also have a list of upcoming events, and possible appropriate costumes for each. This isn’t to say that every single costume has been on the drawing board for years, since frequently an idea catapults to the top, but I’ve often gone back to an idea years later. I had the fabric for my “Vivi” costume from *Final Fantasy IX* for at least five years before I ended up making it!

For myself, I am completely unable to work on a project unless there is a firm event deadline. “I’d like to make the new *Ghostbusters* jumpsuit sometime this year” is utterly insufficient. “There is a *Game of*

Thrones Greater Bay Area Costumers Guild event in March” is the ONLY way I can get anything done. I need to have a firm plan and a firm date to even start.

The single characteristic that draws me to attempt a costume is if it represents a challenge. Is there some element about the costume that I’ve never done before? Do I need to learn a new technique? Has no one done this costume successfully yet? Is it completely ridiculous to consider as an actual object rather than a drawn image? Do I want to make some over-the-top version of it? SIGN ME UP!



Stumpwork embroidery.

For example, I was uninterested in the costumes from *Game of Thrones* until I saw the stumpwork (3D embroidery style) on them, which I had never done before. Suddenly the costumes became an exciting challenge for me!

Opposition Research

After deciding that yes, I’m going to make this costume, the next step is internet research. Now that it’s an option, I usually spend quite a bit of time on Google Image Search looking how other people constructed the same costume. Some of it is inspirational, some of it’s a lesson in what not to do. Looking at how other people

solved the same problems you are about to tackle is extremely helpful in how you design your problem solving. If they have a tutorial, it can give you a great springboard. I don’t think I’ve ever outright copied someone else’s construction, but I’ve definitely been inspired by their work. It could be as simple as, “oh, I think this needs to be a double circle skirt to match the fullness in the art,” after looking at others’ versions with single circle skirts.

A personal example is Amatarsu sleeve from *Five Star Stories*. Most cosplayers follow the overall shape of the sleeve, but I



Above: Original reference art - *Five Star Stories* by Mamoru Nagam, Lucius Akechi on DeviantArt.com.

Below: Photo of author in the costume by Ed Pingol.



noticed that the art had a distinct outside curve to the shape, or thickness to the sleeve itself. After playing a bit with flat-lining (insufficient for the size) or padding and ruffles (lumpy), I created a diamond shaped understructure “bustle” out of hoopwire for the sleeve.

MATH

Sadly, yes, you still need math. One of the most important elements of media recreation costuming, in my opinion, is getting the proportions right. If everything is in proportion to the original image, you visually become “Hellboy,” rather than Judy wearing a “Hellboy” costume.

One of the first elements I go through is comparing every element in the original art to a static measurement, such as my own height (or the height I want to be when the costume is complete). This comparison will enable to come up with an approximation of how big each of the costume elements needs

	A	B	C
1		Design Renderings	Finished piece
2	Total Height	8	84
3	front to back at nose	4.75	49.875
4	shoulder to shoulder	3.5	36.75
5	top to crotch	4.5	47.25
6	dome	2.25	23.625
7	full drill arm	6	63
8	drill	3.75	39.375
9	legs	3	31.5
10	foot width	1.33	13.965
11	foot length	2.45	25.725
12	foot height	0.85	8.925
13	thigh ring diameter	1.75	18.375
14			

Spreadsheet for scaling drawing to full size.



Character Model Sheet for “Big Daddy” from *Bioshock* by 2k Games.

to be in proportion to the rest. An example is from my *Bioshock* “Big Daddy” costume.

The costume in the design sketch was 8 inches tall. I wanted to be seven feet tall (84 inches) in the costume. Using that ratio, I could compare the design measurements to how big all the rest of pieces of the costume should be. (below left)

Of course, sometimes Math leads you places you are probably better off not going...



“Big Daddy” framework. Photo by Cheryll Del Rosario.

However, I ended up being pretty happy (if also very uncomfortable) with the results! (below)

Breaking Down The “Challenges”

Okay, I’ve decided what to do. I have a deadline. I have an idea of what doesn’t work. I know how big everything needs to be. Now what?

As it is the most “fun” part to me, and frankly, the part that will cause a costume to



Completed “Big Daddy” costume from *Bioshock*. Photo by Cheryll Del Rosario

fail if unsuccessful, I look to the “challenges” of the costume first. What on the costume is not straight sewing? What don’t I already know how to do? For example, we decided to do the Easterlings from the *Lord of the Rings*. We loved the design and I “always wanted to learn how to resin cast and vacuform.” Of course, as always, I may have overshot in my costume choice as it was a costume that 90% of it



Some of 843 cast resin plates we made for Easterlings costumes. Photo by Daanish Khan.

depended on learning those techniques and executing them well. I had done a small amount of resin casting on my Gimli costume, but I had never even touched vacuforming. Now was the time to go out and figure out how to make it.

Getting Started and “Still Naked”

So, that’s what we worked on first. Luckily, with the age of the internet, there are a large amount of tutorials online. A local plastics store, Tap Plastics, had a small booklet that walked us through how to build our own vacuform table. To our great surprise, it worked! This was a matter of some concern,



Photo by A.J. Wu



Author and friends in full Easterling costume on location. Photo by Daanish Khan.

as we had no idea how we could construct the helmet without using the technique, and without the helmet, the costume was unwearable.

Using my math, and DVD image captures, I created a basic shape of the entire helmet out of tinfoil. I then covered the entire thing in Sculpy for strength as the vacuform process has a lot of pressure. I repaired any voids in the Sculpy with Bondo. Since the helmet was mushroom shaped, it was necessary to cut it in half as trying to vacuform something with undercuts would have trapped my original helmet inside the plastic. I decided it would be easier to make the center edge line up if it was originally one piece. Hopefully, the helmets from the movie

have decorations all down the center line to cover the seam!

Even though it's fraught with many challenges and potential disaster, this part is the fun part! (for me).

Of course, since this is the "fun" part, and most important to do first anyway, I frequently have a deadline problem in which I've only worked on the interesting parts, and neglected anything that brings me to the "not naked" stage. For example, those red and black cloth suits we are wearing underneath the armor? We didn't even start them until about two weeks before the convention. Still Naked vs. Not Naked is a pretty important step in meeting deadlines!

Dipped in Ugly Sauce with in Haste and Carelessness

AKA The Trial Run/First Event.



Fast-Cheap-Great Venn diagram by [Collin Harman](#).



First try at tentacles. Photo by Judy Grivich

Of course, that last description sounds like it is the work of a moment to quickly learn something completely new and execute it flawlessly. Finished just in time for a major event you are being judged on, no less. Not everything goes as planned. Not everything works the way your head or a few you tube tutorials tells you it should. I've reworked my Ursula Costume three times now trying to get my monster tentacle idea to work. It's on try number four.

I had an idea to make "Monster Ursula" with giant tentacles. I wanted to bring something different to the Ursula party. There has been "Sexy Ursula" and "Gorgeous Ursula," but usually her tentacles are an afterthought. Since I know I am a more – ahem – screen-accurate Ursula-sized, I knew that attempting a Sexy version would be a tough row to hoe. How can I make this costume distinctive, and solve my desire for a challenge at the same time? I know! CRAZY TENTACLES! I decided early on that the way to go would be HVAC ducting supported by a wheeled PVC frame, which would be attached to a rock-climbing harness so I could drag it with me. The theory started out great!

However, the weight of the tentacles caused the PVC glue on the frame to give way, and all the tentacles collapsed. Still



Weight caused tentacles to collapse. Photo by Judy Grivich

looks great, but totally unusable as an actual costume. A costume the length of a two car garage is not a wearable costume. Especially since now everything was lying on the ground, so I would have to drag the whole thing across the floor.

I fixed that by bolting the entire frame together, which did solve the collapsing problem. However, the weight of the tentacles still caused the PVC bones to bend outward, leaving me WAY wider than any double-doorway I had to go through. It looked great in photos, but impossible to move around. If we tried shifting the PVC to move through said doorways, the PVC bones snapped. Plus the fabric from the tentacles caught in the wheels. Still looks good in photos though!



Photo by Charlene Ingram.

So, back to the drawing board. After an aborted attempt to make the entire costume inflatable, for the next event, I replaced the bones of the PVC with pool noodles and wooden dowels. This change made the tentacles sturdy and flexible enough to be able to be shifted through doorways. However, I had to give up the cool twists to the tentacles and now looked rather sea anemone-ish. And the fabric still caught in the wheels.



So, on to try #4 (which still in progress). Photo: D-23 Expo 2015.

Conclusion

Nothing ever works the way you originally intend. And always takes longer than you estimate. This can lead to a lot of long hours. I've found that having fun with challenges becomes a lot less stressful if you approach every costume in stages. Wearing it for the first event won't be perfect, but if you consider it a trial run, you'll be a lot happier. Anything that didn't work as you expected the first time, can always be reworked later. If you

paralyze yourself expecting every new technique to be perfect before you let yourself walk out the door, you'll be a lot less likely to try new things. Get out of that comfort zone! Go big or go home!

Judy Grivich has been costuming since her grandmother first brainwashed her into a love of sewing. She is currently the secretary for the Greater Bay Area Costumers Guild. Her interests range all over the board, including historical, fantasy, science fiction, media recreation, millinery, and anime costuming. However, Judy's true love is creating armor and working with metals, resins and plastics. Her philosophy is that which does not kill you, might make you a bit more safety conscious. Visit her [website](#) to see more of her costuming.