

Imagining and performing “the kingdom of Elfia”: cosplay at a heritage site.

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Abstract:

This paper explores the cosplay practices and performances during a two-day fantasy event, taking place at the castle grounds of a 17th century castle in Arcen, the Netherlands. The event attracts around 25,000 international visitors to the small village of Arcen (2900 inhabitants). During the event, the castle grounds are called “the Kingdom of Elfia”, including a king and queen of Elfia, and a border post, which has to be crossed in order to enter the kingdom. The event attendees embody a wide variety of fictional characters ranging from elves and trolls to characters from films such as Harry Potter and Star Wars. However, for the duration of the event, they all refer to themselves as “inhabitant of the kingdom of Elfia”.

Using the performance metaphor (Goffman, 1959; Larsen and Urry, 2011) and a practice approach (Shove, Pantzar & Watson, 2012) as the starting point, the practices of the event were studied by means of participant observation and interviews during three editions of the event. Although Goffman’s dramaturgical approach has been applied to cosplay by several scholars (Peirson-Smith, 2013; Crawford & Hancock, 2019), this has not included analysing cosplay as a form of event tourism, including a tourist attraction (a 17th century castle), and the local community as actors in the study.

The findings show how the castle grounds play a role in enabling imaginative performances, not only as a suitable decor for cosplay, but also as a trigger for imagination and creativity. The embodiment of different characters leads to role play and a variety of interactions with other cosplayers as well as with locals. Members of the local community are also welcome at the event, where they watch and photograph the cosplayers. This demonstrates an entanglement of different visitors, including reversed roles during the event, where locals act like tourists and tourists call themselves inhabitants.

The study draws conclusions about the complexity of imagined and performed roles in tourism spaces as well as different forms of performing, from very explicit to more implicit. Moreover, the study illustrates how a heritage site can trigger the imagination which can lead to improvised and creative performances by the visitors.

References

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