You’re listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief, I’m Eric Molinsky.

At the beginning of my last episode, we heard from Sam Lai and his friend Mamatha Challa about the challenge of dressing up for Halloween when you’re not white. Here’s Mamatha:

MAMATHA: Like I literally cannot imagine myself as a character in Lord of the Rings. Even if I tried. Which is hilarious because there are so many ridiculous characters in Lord of the Rings but I can’t imagine a person of color!

That got me thinking about Cosplay.

In case you’re not familiar with Cosplay – it’s the term for when fans dress up as their favorite characters at conventions. Cosplay has gotten really big in the age of social media. Every year during San Diego ComicCon or New York ComicCon, lots of websites will post slideshows of their favorite costumes. One thing I’ve noticed – those slide shows never reflect the actual diversity of people that I see on the convention floor. In fact, what I see at ComicCons all the time – and almost never in slideshows – are black Cosplayers dressed as characters that are not traditionally black.

So a few years ago, I was really intrigued to discover this hashtag on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook: 28 Days of Black Cosplay. The movement was started by a Cosplayer who calls herself Princess Mentality. She declined to do an interview, but she sent a quote, which I asked Cosplayer Brittney Williams to read:

BRITTNEY: And she said, 2015 I rallied group of friends, which is month-long celebration during every month, positive uplifting in the past pushed for more representation told stop whining create my own space if I wanted it, so I did, I wanted something we as black nerds, it makes me happier than words can ever express to see it explode the way it has.

So I talked with Brittney Williams and a bunch of other Cosplayers about that hashtag and why it’s so important to them. As you can imagine, the conversation went way beyond Cosplay. That is just ahead, after the break.

BREAK
The first thing you need to know about Cosplayers is that they’re not just nerds when it comes to fantasy worlds. They’re huge design nerds as well. They love talking about the craft of making costumes.

In fact, Brittney was in the studio with another Cosplayer, who goes by the name Suqui – and they kept breaking into shoptalk. Like there they are about making a costume Suqui’s making of an anime character.

BRITTNEY: (FADE UP) But that wand is so much more difficult to make.
SUQUI: If you have bendable foam or you use instamorph, you can make the star and the circular part, and you have a good amount of warpler, or a piece of PVC pipe.

I literally have no idea what she just said. But I do know, they’re talking about the challenge of taking two-dimensional cartoon characters, or video game characters, and figuring out how to depict them in real life. And they’re on a budget, they’re not Hollywood costume designers. The materials have to be affordable, but look fantastic.

And the problem is they have to maneuver through the real world in these costumes. Here’s Harry and Gina Crossland. They’re a couple from Maryland that Cosplays together.

GINA: Just the Assassin’s Creed costume for Harry, three or four layers, shirt, vest, jacket, arm pieces, boots, you got leg coverings and weapons you got to carry, you can’t in this stuff half the time. When I’m creating these things we have to worry about at these conventions we need to use facilities, (laughs) so you got to find a way so it’s easy to get on and off with someone being there, on top of everything else, carry phone, make some kind of sleeve or pocket book to put this stuff in.

Okay, so those are practical challenges that every Cosplayer faces. But black Cosplayers have to deal with a lot more than that. Again, here’s Brittney and Suqui.

BRITTNEY: My first dumb annoying comment was said out of love that made it worse.
SUQUI: So much worse, they mean well by it
BRITTNEY: The first time I was prepping to do Cosplay and I made my list, I could be this and this, my friend who was white you can’t be those characters, I
was like why? You’re not black, you could be these characters, three characters on shows I don’t watch, you can be Antony, I don’t watch that show, I’m Sailor Moon and if I’m going to be character from Lieutenant I’m going to be Lieutenant, I had to argue her down, I can Cosplay whoever I want, that’s what I do.

**Assuming you’re only going to identify with—**

SUQUI: That one minority character that’s not how it works.

BRITTNEY: Especially background, tertiary

SUQUI: Sidekick.

BRITTNEY: no, I’m the lead, that’s not what we do where.

SUQUI: I Coplay Raven from Teen Titans, why not be Bumblebee? As much butt as BB kicks, Raven is white. She’s not. She’s not even human, she’s Azerathean and half-demon and her skin is grey so your argument is invalid.

Harry Crossland had a similar experience – but he took the advice in a different direction. He was talking with his friends Trent and Mike at Baltimore ComicCon when one of them said; you should totally dress up as Bishop, who is one of the X-Men that’s black.

HARRY: I like is to do different characters not traditionally seen by black person but he and two of my friends, mixed guys, people we run with, Trent white, Mike is black, other person was but Trent was hung up, you got height, size, you should do it, I don’t know, so I thought about it and maybe 2-3 weeks later showed Gina the idea, Gina liked it, let’s run with it, either big hit or nobody will care because Bishop is a character you rarely see in comics books.

Although he did make a brief appearance in the movie X-Men: Days of Future Past.

So when Harry finally debuted his Bishop costume, it was a big hit. Because overall, fans like seeing Cosplayers who look exactly like real life versions of these fictional characters. And Bishop has become his calling card – online, he’s often known as Bishop Cosplay.

HARRY: And the funny thing Gina did her version this past year.

GINA: I felt left out, I need something to match him, not Bishop but similar. So I said let me put a spin on it, I had this afro I wanted to use, make ’70s Bishop but Harry wasn’t happy about that! (Laughs)

HARRY: And that actually, same reaction – people are like woah!
But Harry is more excited about his Superman costume, which has Kryptonian armor, like in the movie Man of Steel. Gina has a similar Wonder Woman costume, with Amazonian armor.

HARRY: The problem is -- and this happens among my own folk as well -- when it’s somebody else and this has happened, when they see us doing different spins they’ve asked us are you universe 24 version or are you black version? People have asked Gina, you Nubia, which is one of the black Amazons? No, I’m just Superman. And there have been times gotten into debate, they don’t want to come out and say do you know Superman is white, you add this you could be that version I’m the version that you see in front of you!

Talking with these Cosplayers, I noticed a few themes coming up over and over. First -- a desire to come up with your own spin on a classic character that stands out and maybe says something. Second: a pride in their craftsmanship, and wanting to be recognized for that.

And third: a deep yearning for community. That’s why Brittney writes for the website, Black Nerd Problems.

BRITTNEY: So – ha, ha! Black nerd problems is a culture website and I like to say we report on the convergence on nerd culture and black culture.

Growing up in Coney Island in Brooklyn, Suqi often wondered where those cultures overlapped.

SUQUI: Not for nothing, when people think of Coney Island, they think of Mermaid Parade, hot dog, beach --- don’t ever go in the water – but out of all the people I’ve met there, I’ve met probably three or four that were into nerd culture and into Cosplay, and it’s like when I’m walking around in Cosplay, for NYC pride I Cosplayed as Rainbow dash.

*What’s Rainbow Dash.*
SUQUI: From My Little Pony.

*Ah!*
SUQUI: Friendship is magic.

*You’re like, by the way, friendship is magic.*
SUQUI: Yeah, I’m waling through neighborhood staring at me, neighbor what the hell does she have on? They look at people like me and they look at, I got this all the time, yo you’re black, why are you doing this quote on quote white people stuff.
BRITTNEY: I've never, I've never ran into black people this isn’t what black people do, I'm not in that into that.
SUQUI: Lucky you!
BRITTNEY: I know for me the scariest or most nerve wracking part getting from home to your destination from home to convention or party. Right now living in Crown Heights did casual Coplay of Stephanie Brown Batgirl, I'm walking to train, people staring who is this black girl in bad blonde wig? But as soon as you see other Cosplayers, on your way there, on the train, shoulders up near ears, one more person, sometimes you feel like show up at convention only person, I'm going to go there only jerk in a costume. As soon as you off in the distance someone with long staff, shoulders drop, it’s fine!.

But as I mentioned earlier, websites often don’t feature a variety of people when they do ComicCon slide shows and videos. Click bait usually means scantily clad, skinny white girls. Sometimes Harry and Gina Crossland will ask the photographers why they keep ignoring them.

HARRY: It’s amazing how photographers come up with excuses – because the thing is, when you have other people never Cosplay, and they want to go, when there are people nervous about body type they see video and all they see are young skinny people and that’s all you see, then that’s going to make you less want to go out and Cosplay.

So what did you think of the hashtag 28 Days of Black Cosplay?
HARRY: Oh I was all on it! I thought it was the best thing ever.

Suqui’s felt the same way.

SUQUI: She started a revolution, she started one of the nerdiest, geekiest revolutions in black community and it’s gone so far off the grid, it’s worldwide and there are Cosplays not just in the States, there are black Cosplay in the US, Canada, UK, Netherlands. And it’s so beautiful to look at.
BRITTNEY: It’s like a Bat signal, find each other, say you’re in the middle of Wisconsin, I want to do, do black people do this? Hit hashtag. And most of these Cosplayers love what you did, do you have advice, style wig, what fabric, where do you buy your fabric? They’re ready to give tips.
SUQUI: I never met a Cosplayer who didn’t give advice on how they do Cosplay. The other thing is, it’s great networking.
BRITTNEY: Yes.
SUQUI: Like if you do Cosplay hair or make up on point, oh my god your make-up looks good, or your wig is on point, it’s like, girl, let me tell who did my make-up, or my wig, I will give you her name now, honey.

So the hashtag created this instant sense of community. But it also sparked a very predictable backlash. Harry says the ugly comments are usually reserved for anonymous bulletin boards. But he’s been asked questions like:

HARRY: Well, why you guys do 28 days? What if we took a month! You got the rest of the year! We’re taking the shortest month!

They’ve had to fight larger battles too. A shocking number of white Cosplayers have taken to wearing blackface when dressing as characters that are traditionally black. And those Cosplayers fiercely defend what they’re doing, without knowing much about the history of blackface.

HARRY: But when you decide I’m going to do Storm or Michon from Walking Dead and I got everything else, I got the wig, I’m going to color my skin.
GINA: And widen my nose.
HARRY: Oh yeah, the lady in Germany get prosthetic for nose. My skin is not your costume! Because for as many people want to die on that hill and defend blackface, I tell them well I do Superman who would you feel if I painted my skin to appear white and got spit curl? People would lose their mind.

The most common argument they get from blackface Cosplayers is that a lot of Cosplayers will put on green or red make-up to play Hellboy or Gamorra from Guardians of the Galaxy.

BRITTNEY: You can put on green make up is that weird?
SUQUI: I need you to go on FB see which friends have green skin brown on this planet, which one of your FB friends has green skin, I’d like to meet them right now and ask them if they think it’s racist, find one person, I need you to shut all the way up!

But they are impressed when they see non-black Cosplayers play black characters without blackface.
HARRY: Like for instance, I saw this Asian lady do Michon at Baltimore ComicCon. And she didn’t have to do anything else, the only thing she did was the wig. Great! I pulled her aside, ma’am thank you so much!

Suqui saw a white Cosplayer dress as Mike Tyson.

SUQUI: He was bald and has he was not in black face and tattoo and everything, and did a great job. Someone said that’s a great Mike Tyson he said, yeah, I don’t know why people have to blackface in order for it to be accurate.

Having to constantly referee these issue is exhausting. That’s not why they went into Cosplay. They got into Cosplay because it’s fun!

Personally, I have great admiration for anyone who Cosplay because I am way too self-conscious to even dress up for Halloween. But I love going to ComicCons and seeing Cosplayers because it makes me feel like a mere mortal in ancient Greece walking among the gods and demi-gods of Mount Olympus. And for Cosplayers who walk down the halls and see the faces of people like me – who ask to take their picture – it can be exhilarating.

Gina and Harry Crossland had a few stories that sum that up pretty nicely.

GINA: I feel like I can be another person for a day, I love doing it because I’m out of my own element, and you build confidence by doing that, and that’s why I do it, because you want to be someone else. It also helps us with celebrities. People have called us in front of lines, take pictures, I feel like a celebrity for a day. My father came to Baltimore, y’all like celebrity, take picture? Yeah, it feels good, don’t it? (Laughs) Tell him about Stan Lee.

HARRY: Oh! Okay! That was first year I did Bishop. We were at New York ComicCon, this was our second year at New York ComicCon, I looked to my right and Stan Lee, done signing and entourage and taking to room, and they’re walking on along side of wall, didn’t want to attract too much attention, so whoever his handler wasn’t paying attention because a bunch of bags thrown on the floor, so Mr. Lee almost falls, I catch him, and are you okay. Great costume! That’s a good Stan Lee impersonation!

HARRY: LAUGH! And he kept on going and I’m like, wow! Thank you!

As Stan Lee would say, ‘nuff said!
That’s it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Harry and Gina Crossland.

HARRY: Sometimes we don’t go to the movies to see the movies; we go to get Cosplay ideas. That movie sucked but the costume was awesome!

And thanks to Brittney Williams and Suqui, and Monica Hunasikatti, who writes for Black Nerd Problems and arranged my interview with them. You might have heard her laughing in the background.

_I always wonder pose, can I take your picture – sure._
BRITTNEY: You have to know it, if you don’t know your pose, I feel like that’s the worst thing is not have a signature pose. There’s at least 2 or 3 if you don’t do that, why are you even here? What are you even doing?

Imaginary Worlds is part of the Panoply network. I tweet at emolinsky. You can like the show on Facebook. And I’ll post images of Harry, Gina, Suqui and Brittney in their various costumes on my site, imaginary worlds podcast dot org.