

# Feature



## Photography with Fantasy Backgrounds **Scott Johnson**

*A professional photographer has found a way to show off the work of costumers by adding fantasy backgrounds to place their creations in novel and exotic settings.*

Costuming involves great dedication, consumes large quantities of time and challenges ones' skills. It's not surprising that many costumers want to capture the results of their work with a professional portrait. I am a professional photographer who specializes in creatively capturing images that are appropriate to the costume and to the overall context for the outfit.

The images that I create are not the typical static portrait, made either in the studio or on location – although I am certainly capable of creating those images. The main vehicle I use is “green screen” photography. I photograph a costumer in front of a green screen. Later, I digitally remove the green screen background and add the image of the costumer to a background of their choice.

I offer more than a thousand backgrounds that the costumer can choose from to showcase their costume in a setting that

matches the style of their costume and their intent for the final piece. A Victorian costume, for instance, could be placed on a Victorian themed background that takes the costumer to a foggy London street or a stately English home. Costumes based on science fiction or pop culture, can also be transported to an alien world or to a setting that is appropriate to the culture.

The right background not only conveys believability, but also draws the audience in

by adding a timeframe, period authenticity, and a realism that greatly enhances what the costumer put into the costume itself. In addition to background, I also work with costumers to add special effects: a magic spell, underwater air bubbles, explosions, flames from an aircraft engine, muzzle flashes for weapons or flowing mist for a moody piece. I can also add other elements to enhance the image, such as floating airships, robots (killer or otherwise),



Green screen photo (left) and completed image with forest background added (right).

zombies and even rockets. The possibilities are limited only by ones' imagination. All of these elements add expression, dynamism and interest to the costume.

My own path in photography using this approach began when I began attending pop culture and anime conventions. I'm not quite sure where I first heard it, but an interest in various TV shows led me to discover that there is a whole subculture of people who dress as characters from shows that I watched. My eyes were soon opened to a fantastic display of talented people putting together amazing costumes. I bought a camera to record the best costumes that I was seeing. Whether it was the *Ghostbusters*, Marvel superheroes or Japanese kaiju, I wanted to record it all.

"Your outfit is amazing," I said hesitantly.

I saw a woman, standing by herself from the crowd of attendees and I immediately noticed the fine details of her outfit. I could tell there was an attention to detail in her costume that was different from other outfits. She was cosplaying Sakura, from *Cardcaptor Sakura*, one of the early magical girl genre anime series.

I didn't know who this woman was, and I felt awkward approaching her. She wasn't in a crowd, like others. She standing awkwardly to one side as if hesitant to join



Background plus multiple elements and effects add expression, dynamism and interest to this steampunk pilot costume.

in, and she was clearly uneasy. But I could tell instantly that it took skill to put together the outfit she was wearing. I wanted her to know that I was aware of the amount of time I could only image went into what she was wearing. She truly looked like Sakura. And with nothing but complete respect, I approached and complimented her outfit. She lit up immediately.

I asked her how she created her costume and she beamed as she told me how she created the pattern herself, how she carefully chose the type of fabric for each part and sewed each part by hand. I had no idea just how much effort and time went into her outfit. Certainly I could tell there was

quite a bit, but when she began explaining all the nuances that went into picking a type of weave so that it caught the light just right, I was clearly only scratching the surface of costuming with my knowledge at the time. I asked if I could take her picture and she agreed.

The convention we both attended at the time was filled with individuals who wore fantastic outfits, where the costumer spent hours on the design and creation. But what I observed was costumers getting their pictures taken against windows, with backlighting that obscured their costume, or photos made in stairwells. To me, that only seemed to diminish the outfit and all the work put in by the costumer.

Poor lighting, environments that don't add anything to the portrait, and hallways filled with people in the backgrounds all caused me to think that there must be a better way.

During one particular completely unrelated search for software to assist with my photographs, I came across a new version of *chromakey* software that filters out the background color, leaving behind a cutout image of the subject. It struck me that this was the answer I was searching for to help me lift the costumer out of those hallways, those stairwells and those dimly lit areas and place them into a background that would showcase the costume appropriately.

I decided to create a business around offering costumers professional portraits with customizable and unique backgrounds. My first photography session was at a *Harry Potter* convention. With all of eight backgrounds, I took photos of attendees in wizard garb while I posed them to create portraits of them flying on broomsticks and casting spells. I was swamped with lines of people patiently waiting their turn to get their photo. In fact, the organizer of the convention stopped her own convention activities in order to allow people time to



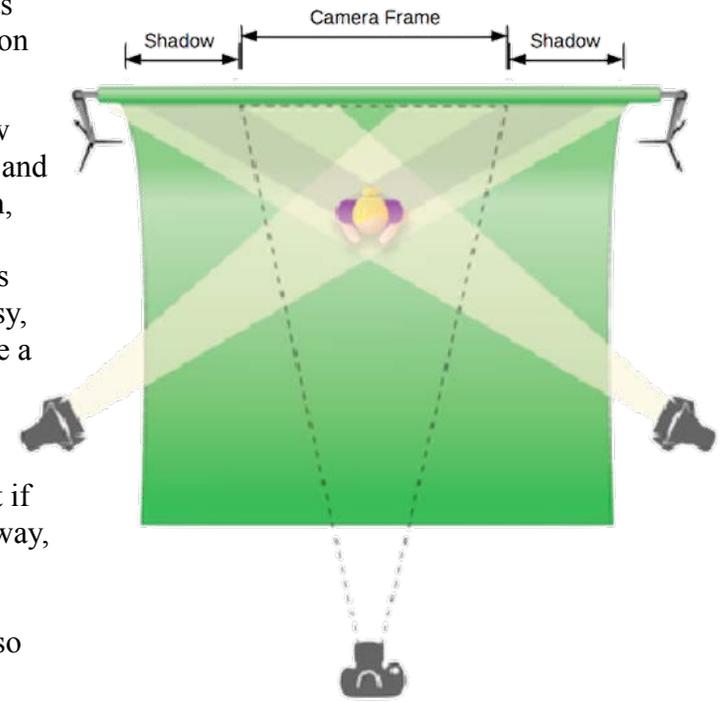
Posing and lighting to showcase the outfits.

visit me and get their photos taken. It was only then that I finally knew I had hit upon an idea that resonated with others.

Fast forward seven years, and I now have more than a thousand backgrounds and attended events in four states – Michigan, Illinois, Minnesota and Wisconsin. My backgrounds, which cover such genres as science fiction, steampunk, anime, fantasy, horror, pop culture and historical to name a few, are a combination of stock photography and 3d models. The use of 3d models allows me to create

backgrounds that would be difficult if not impossible to obtain any other way, such as the interiors of spaceships, steampunk-themed airships, and medieval castles. The 3d models also allows me to create detailed backgrounds that match a particular angle, fit larger groups of individuals, or focus on a particular element within the background.

My setup consists of a 10x20 ft. (3x6 m) custom made green screen, which neatly folds into a small portable package. Once the green screen is set up, I generally drape a large black fabric along the back to help reduce light affecting the green fabric. As for lighting, I use professional studio flashes for key lights, and set fill lights closer to the green screen to light the screen itself, rather than the subject, to eliminate shadows. An even, well-lit screen is absolutely essential for



Green screen setup with professional lighting to illuminate subject while avoiding shadows. Image: [Videomaker](#).

cleanly separating the subject from the background.

I use a mirrorless camera tethered to a laptop which saves captured images to a local networked storage drive. This provides the greatest safety possible for the captured images; losing any images would be disastrous! Using a networked storage drive also gives me the ability to call up images on a nearby computer to review them with a customer and select the best one, and even work on them in various software packages as an event is going on.



It often requires a number of shots to get exactly what the final image needs.

Some event photographers take only one or two photos and call it done. I take photos until both the costumer and I are pleased with the results. This takes extra time but it is well worth it. I feel strongly about being able to give individual attention to each and every costumer who comes to me for photos.

Often, it requires taking a number of shots before a costumer feels comfortable, so I will reshoot photos until we get exactly what the final image needs. I check each photo to make sure lighting is good, no badges are showing, the pose is correct, there are no obstructions, the subject did not blink, and even that the costume itself sits perfectly and isn't covered up or folded incorrectly. Often, a client wants to show off certain side of the costume, for instance a bustle that required a great deal of effort.

This is a good opportunity to discuss what goes into a photograph. Creating the final image is not as simple as placing a person in a costume on a green screen, attaching a background and calling it a day.

There's more going on. When the costumer steps in front of the green screen, I greet them and ask questions regarding the costume, including what the concept is behind the work and any particular details that might help clarify the final image. Understanding the costume and the costumers' intent is extremely important.

Next, I'll ask the costumer what they would like to see as the final image. There are two basic types of photographs. One is a regular portrait, where the the costumer generally stands composed and static in order to showcase the costume. The other is an action shot, where something is happening in the image, whether that is running, walking or engaging in an activity that tells a story.

Costumers who know what type of image they want are not shy to let me know what they have in mind. "I want to have two images, one of the front and the back of this costume," or "We want to be walking along the Thames as night," or "I want to be involved in a battle where I'm firing my weapon and taking fire from all angles. Oh, and my weapon fires a purple-yellow bolt of energy please." This is greatly helpful and allows me to proceed to the next step.

In the event that the costumer is looking for ideas or isn't unsure of what to consider, I will spend time with them to share some thoughts, present a few ideas, and see how they feel about them. I recall a family who visited, asking me to take their photo. This was a family that I took photos



Special effects like this double image can be added to give atmosphere.

of for years; they were early customers of mine. They had no particular idea for the final image. I turned to the daughter and asked, “How would you like to be fighting off a giant octopus?” Her eyes lit up. I explained my idea, which used a tentacle which we had recently created for an undersea themed adventure.

To create the appearance of being attacked by a giant octopus, I took photos of the parents separately, asking them to show concern and determination. I then coached the daughter in how to not only jump, but to jump forward and to hold a look of horror in her face. She was such a trooper! Within just a few takes, we nailed an image that captured her expression perfectly.



Flying effect produced by shooting girl separately and compositing it with the image of the other the figures, the tentacles and the background.

The color of a costume affects how I take the photo. Certain shades of green will interfere with the chromakey software, causing patches to disappear as the software removes certain hues. Although any color can be selected and removed, chromakey software is generally predisposed to remove greens or blues. In cases where a costume has shades of green that may cause this behavior, I will use a blue backdrop instead. As a last resort, I can remove the background manually, using tools built-in to Photoshop.

I recall attending my first anime convention. A number of my customers came for their picture dressed as the character Link from the *Legend of Zelda* computer game series. This character’s design includes a color that is nearly the exact shade of green that the chromakey software is looking to remove. While a green costume is not the end of the world, it can complicate matters. Using a blue instead of a green background corrects this by reducing or



Astronaut in prop spaceship on background with rocket exhaust effect.

eliminating the tendency for the software to remove patches of green.

Costumes with shiny elements, such as suits of armor or reflective pieces, can be particularly challenging. Lighting has to be carefully controlled to reduce glare and the green screen may be replaced with a white background to eliminate the possibility of a color such as green or blue reflecting back onto the shiny material.

Props can also introduce complexity into a photoshoot while adding realism. Some props can be large, and may extend beyond the edge of the green screen. While it is preferable to confine the prop entirely within the boundaries of the green screen, the prop can be dealt with in the same

manner as a green outfit, by manually selecting the object and removing it from the background using Photoshop. Some articles of the costume may also act in a similar manner by breaking the boundary of the green screen, such as feathered hats, wings or just by being tall. This is typically not a major concern but still requires additional time and effort to correct.

Hats often require additional attention to make sure they sit correctly and don't hide the subject's eyes. Raising the hat brim slightly helps show the eyes, and the eyes are often the central draw of a photo. I spend extra time making sure I note that the eyes are visible, where they are looking and whether there are reflections from the eyes.

Posing is critical and I cannot overemphasize its importance. It is an art form in itself, and an entire book could be written regarding this part of the process. Posing consists of the costumer or multiple costumers adopting or holding a particular stance to help create the illusion for the final piece.

Posing is not just static, like standing still, turning the head or raising the chin slightly. To help sell action, posing can also include adopting stances to indicate



Group shot composites individual figures onto a background with multiple elements.

movement. If the final image is an action shot, then people are arranged to simulate that action. For example, posing might include simulating walking. The costumer leans forward slightly from the hips, raises one heel, bends the knees and swings the arms. In some cases, actual walking can take place, and the camera, when timed and set correctly, captures the walk.

I start with the angle of the body, where the feet are pointed, whether or not the knees are bent or straight, the posture, and positioning the arms and hands just so. Even the tilt of the head, angle of the chin,

pulling the shoulders up, moving an elbow out, or curling the fingers just so can be important. After the body, I also review the face. The face must convey emotion, in order to help “sell” the action taking place, whether that is fear, anger, shock or happiness.

Groups bring their own challenges to posing; generally no more than four can fit on the green screen at any one time. More than that, and people will be obscured, and the effect will be muddled. I sometimes take them in smaller groups at a time, but I really prefer to take individual shots of each of the participants and later combine them into the image

I process photos from a costume event as soon after the event as possible. I use up to seven different software programs to process a single image. Each image can take up to five hours to process, depending on complexity. In general, each photo usually requires an hour of processing time. After color balancing, I remove the green screen background, check for light spill or extraneous light rays that fall beyond the intended target, and then carefully composite the image with the selected background. Shadows are hand crafted, as desired, and I create elements or effects according to the wishes of the costumer.

Once I check the results and everything is in place, I transmit the final image to a location on the Internet and send a link to the costumer so that they can download and review the image. I can also send prints, such as an 8x10, to the costumer. The final result is one-of-a kind image that captures the the costumers' intent and showcases the costume in a way that a traditional photo cannot.

Here are some tips for those who want a commission a photographer to take high-quality photos of their costumes, regardless of whether by me or another photographer.

- Select an experienced photographer, who is willing and able to work with you to obtain a fantastic image.
- If you have a specific idea for the final photo, let them know. Explain the idea and then work with the photographer who will help place you in the best pose and best light to capture your idea.
- Make sure that your photographer checks your costume to make sure there are no anachronistic or distracting parts, such as cellphones, convention guides or badges.
- The photographer should also review your costume to make sure no hanging threads or lint is showing. I carry lint rollers with me and offer those as a way to deal with those.

- A full length mirror also helps the photographer provide the costumer with a final check to make sure the costume flows or sits correctly, is tucked in where needed and hats are sitting where desired.



Rockwell-esque image of couple in historical clothing against a background of fireworks at a county fair.

- Don't be shy about asking for an idea; any photographer worth their salt will work with you to capture your idea in the best way possible.

Taking all of these into consideration, the final image can be a rewarding experience that helps inspire others about the world of costuming. I love combining photos of costumers with novel and exotic backgrounds that showcase the style of their costume and their intent for the final piece. When a costume is put in the proper environment, it truly reflects the dedication and skills that went into its' creation.

*Scott Johnson is owner of Realtime Portrait Studio LLC, which specializes in showcasing creative costumes in a photo that displays the costume and costumer in the best way possible. Scott has had an interest in photography since age 12, back in the days of film, and has taken photos across the United States at events where costumes figure predominately. Scott's interest in costumes started by attending anime conventions in Chicago and also DragonCon in Atlanta, a world premier location for costumes. Scott continues to enjoy meeting other costumers, learning their backgrounds and providing photography that allows the costume to shine! Visit his [Realtime Portrait Studio website](#) to learn more about his work.*