

[adjective][species] Retrospective Year 1

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Part I

Introduction

This volume contains the major articles posted in the first year of [adjective][species].

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Part II

The [adjective][species] Retrospective, Year 1

Chapter 1

November

1.1 Just Like the Rest

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I can almost pinpoint the time I realized that furry was just a slice of humanity as a whole, and not some special fandom elevated above the dregs of the world. I think it came sometime in around 2007, and it probably happened in a text-only, electronic gay bar on the Internet (and I'm pretty sure it was while pretending to man-sized fox wearing a nice suit on the internet, but that's a given).

The subject was girls. In the Purple Nurple (t tpn on FurryMUCK), this comes up occasionally. Being a gay bar of sorts, the e-bar tends to attract some very gay people. Which is to say, it attracts everyone, but since it's a gay bar, most people tend to gay it up pretty hard while there, and so when girls come up, reactions are pretty much as you'd expect:

- The nice folk – a few who are probably a Kinsey 6, but most who are somewhere less than that – tend to just ignore the topic.
- A few who are feeling pretty snarky or eager to fit into the very-gay scene will pull the ew girls! card out and wave it around.
- The token straight guy will start throwing people out the window.
- Any girls present seem to fall into two categories:
 - Those with female players will likely roll their eyes. Whether they act that out on the MUCK or not is up in the air.
 - Those with male players will pout, get defensive, or say nothing, depending on why they're pretending to be a female animal-person on the internet.

This sort of scenario seems to come up every once in a while in the Nurple, where females are mentioned in a sexual context among a group made up of primarily homosexual males; and that's not a grammar gaffe: several homosexual males I've met online seem to base a large portion of their personality and social interaction on the fact that they're homosexual.

While I don't remember for sure, what I think happened is that I was dwelling on this as it was happening some time around early 2007. It was a pretty introspective time of my life, with bits of college working out very well while others collapsed around me in ruins. I was spending a lot of time reminiscing about high school and the way I had changed as I grew up. When I was depressed, it would border on where did I go wrong?, and when I wasn't, it tended towards how

did I get here and how can I get where I want?. It was the romantic, introspective springtime of youth that all young foxes must go through at some point or another.

During high school, I had been part of a support group of sorts, OASOS: Open and Affirming Sexual Orientation (and gender identity) Support. It was a group organized by the Boulder County Health Department, and was made up almost entirely of young men and women trying to find the easiest way to fit into their imagined roles of gay and lesbian, or, more accurately, GAY and LESBIAN. One of the defining moments of my life came from this group when I met a female-to-male transgender guy by the name of Michael. The reason this was a defining moment in my life (and part of the reason Michael and I started dating) was because it helped me to understand the difference between sex and gender, and more importantly, how that changed my outlook on how these young GAYs and LESBIANs were acting within their stereotyped roles.

Something clicked inside, that day in 2007 as I was sitting in a fake gay bar on the internet populated with fake animal people. Being somewhere less than a Kinsey 6 myself, I was one of the ones who kept quiet, and as I watched, I realized that this was OASOS all over again. These were almost all GAY young adults saying “ew, girls” while the STRAIGHT young adult e-threw them out the i-windows. Those in the Nurple who I had perceived as basing a large portion of their personality on the fact that they were homosexual were really no different than those at OASOS struggling to do exactly the same thing (though, being older, those in the Nurple were probably a little less fraught with hormones and acne – but maybe not, who knows).

I feel it’s important that I say that I love all the wonderful people I’ve met online and in the Nurple especially, and I really don’t mean to cast aspersions on those who hold true to the Kinsey 6s and 0s out there. My point here is that society contains several sets of roles that, in the western world, tend toward heteronormative. My discovery those years ago was that these roles existed through all of western society and permeated even into my messy little fandom – furies really were just a slice of society as a whole, trying to carve themselves a new, more exclusive role. Perhaps this change in my perception began even sooner, though, and the shift in thought was more the final step after a long build-up.

I had been to a few conventions by this point – I believe AnthroCon ’06 and FurtherConfusion ’07 – as well as a few considerably large parties down in Denver and the normal weekly furmeets. When I had stopped hanging out with furies solely online and moved my interaction to real life as well, perhaps that’s when my slow realization began. It was undeniably fun to head out with a group of people who wore tails and ears, who made their stupid noises and were overly affectionate in public (if not to me, than certainly to the non-furs around us). It felt good to belong to this exclusive group with shared interests and ready conversations.

After I’d suffered my sea change, however, the boundaries between our little (or big) groups and the world around us started to blur, for me. I saw the same societal currents moving within the

fandom that were moving in the world around me, and I began to see furries more as a group of mostly middle class, mostly western, mostly young adults.

The changes in perspective were subtle at first. “Perhaps furry is just more welcoming of the misfits and the minorities than other groups,” I thought. “Maybe the preponderance of homosexuality within the fandom is due to the more liberal attitudes therein.” Over time, however, these views have changed, though only slightly. I feel it would be more accurate in both cases to put the sentiments in the subjunctive mood: “Furry wants to be seen as more welcoming of the misfits and minorities than other groups”; “The preponderance of homosexuality in the fandom is due to the liberal attitudes the fandom wants to be perceived by the outside world.”

This, of course, makes it all seem a little sinister, though it’s nothing of the sort. This is just the politicking that happens with any subset of humanity in order to increase its chances of survival. If the western world as a whole is shifting towards more liberal attitudes towards homosexuality and minority groups, then a group can “get ahead” by being perceived as having liberal attitudes those things. The fandom is really just like the rest.

I see this same thing played out time and again within subsets of the community around different issues. Recently, our local furs went through something of a upheaval due to the very same gender issue as above. There have been issues surrounding the use of one site over another, issues over those who like fursuits and those who don’t, and even within that, issues between those who like fursuits with certain holes and those who don’t. It’s even been claimed that the fandom is more drama-filled than any other group or the society as a whole; a claim that’s easily debunked by listening to an episode of *This American Life* (really, just pick any one, it doesn’t matter!) or by watching any news around election season.

Our only real claim to uniqueness is that we do tend to be more interconnected than most other groups of people. Currently, I would hazard a guess that furry is much more interconnected than most other social groups, thanks to the internet. However, if you had asked me that five years ago, I would’ve suggested that it be twice as interconnected. This is an arms race we’re going to lose, and that’s okay. We really don’t need to be different or better or more distinct than other social groups; we’ve cemented our place in western society already and our little supposed enclave is secure for the foreseeable future. Just that we’re all just like the rest, is all.

1.2 The Default Fur

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When I write a blog post – either on here or my personal blog – I tend to “stub out” the entry before I even write it, sometimes days or weeks before I get to it. It’s something like outlining, though not as structured as that implies. More like jotting down ideas in the order in which they should occur in the article, though more structured than that implies. For this article, the first line read: “witty comment about the standard furry – fake psych exercise to envision a default furry”. As an introduction, I was going to come up with some sort of goofy little quip about how one would envision the standard fur. I’m only referencing it instead, because the more I thought about it, the more I realized that it’s been done before. Countless times.

With any society come a whole heap of internal stereotypes. With programmers, there are the hierarchical nerds who strive for alpha status, the quiet smart people who do cool things, the loud smart people who also do cool things, the designers, architects, and engineers. In music, things generally follow the lines of instrument or voice part, but there are some ideas that cross boundaries, such as the dramatic opera singer, the crazy instrumentalist, or the lazy genius. One could, perhaps, measure the strength of a subculture by counting the amount of inside jokes contained within it. Furry is far from immune to this, and there are several recurring threads.

One definite theme within the fandom is that, to quote an old page, The Animal Kingdom is full of a plethora of amazing and interesting species, and so you’ll probably be a Fox or a Wolf. Canids seem to far outstrip other species as far as representation within the fandom. An informal poll shows them making up nearly a third of all respondents. There are even stereotypes that go along with each species (though these have, admittedly, weakened over time), such as that “foxes beg for it, while huskies are just targets”.

Default fur so far: a wolf.

Age also plays an important factor in the fandom. It could be that something about furry speaks to those just coming of age, or that the liberal nature of the subculture fits in well with the general liberal nature of youth; the oft miss-attributed quip “if you’re not a liberal by 20, you have no heart...” seeming appropriate. With its widely espoused (and practiced, though perhaps to a lesser extent) values of acceptance and tolerance, it’s not really much of a surprise that a good portion of furry falls into the 18-25 age group. I was pretty firmly entrenched within the fandom, myself, by sixteen or so, and here I am, twenty-five, and writing a slightly satirical blog about furry - which I still love plenty, mind!

Default fur so far: a 22 year old wolf.

Geekdom, particularly computer geekdom, has almost always been dominated by males. The reasons for this are many and complex, but it seems to be a nearly universal truth that the tech-

nologically literate castes for the last several hundred years have been made up primarily of men. Furry, which is made up in good part by communications taking place on the Internet, can no more escape that than it can escape certain episodes of certain television shows or, if you've been around for a while, certain articles from certain magazines. Gender in furry is a complicated enough issue to warrant several of its own posts, but for now, let's call it decidedly male.

Default fur so far: a 22 year old male wolf.

Now is when things start to get hairy (har har). The stereotypes still exist, but have less basis in reality. Perhaps it would be better to say that the basis is less readily apparent, though. Take sexual orientation: if one were to go by the way people act, the art that's posted, and the relationships formed online, one could pretty easily leap to the conclusion that the standard fur is a gay male. However, this doesn't quite appear to be the case. Rather than showing up as predominately homosexual, respondents seem to be fairly evenly divided among different quanta of sexual orientation. With the decidedly affirming nature of our little subculture, it's easy to see how this could lead, first of all, to the even distribution of orientations, and second of all, the more visible and vocal nature of the more homosexual portions of the population. It could possibly be construed that society as a whole is likely divided up fairly evenly along Kinsey's scale, but that, due to social, evolutionary, and personal prejudices, we're left with a more uneven seeming distribution. Even so

Default fur so far: a 22 year old gay male wolf.

The waters get even muddier as we move on, and even the stereotype gets harder to pin down. Furrries have a reputation of being highly sexual people. More so than their reputation from the outside, however, furrries pretty strongly believe that their subculture is full of highly sexual people. Things get weird here, especially, because most respondents don't consider themselves to be very sexual people. Stranger still, most respondents believe that the majority of the general public views them as highly sexual. This is certainly a tough metric to judge, and it would be hard to rank the fandom amongst other subcultures when it comes to sexuality, but it appears that furrries, by and large, assume that furrries are pretty oversexed.

Default fur so far: a 22 year old gay male wolf looking to get laid.

And now we're getting into some pretty speculative territory. From within, it seems that most of the fandom is made up of socially awkward people who care very strongly about one thing, which is likely to be computers or games – that is, nerds. Nerds that drink. Geeks that party. People who don't communicate effectively with each other, but never stop trying. I have no graph to go along with this; it's partly based on introspection into my own outlook and partly from listening to others when they talk about the fandom. I would have left this out due to it being so hard to pin down, but considering how large it figures in all of the satires of the fandom, I'm not sure I could justify that.

Default fur: a tipsy, awkward, 22 year old gay male wolf looking to get laid. Cute, huh?

So, given our wolf guy here, what's right and what's wrong? Sure, he'll fit in pretty well, he's

certainly welcome within the fandom, but what, in his construction, is just due to demographics and what's due to stereotypes? Judging by the few datasets we have, our RandomWolf here is probably a young adult male wolf due simply to the make up of furry itself. Given any one member of the group, and that member is likely to be a male canid somewhere in his early twenties. As for the awkward, gay, and oversexed parts, though, these aspects of our fictional character are more likely stereotypes than anything (however attractive or not you may find them).

Just like any group, our nutty little fandom has its fair share of preconceptions, misconceptions, and stereotypes. We've got our in jokes and our quips (I've heard "by and large, furries are bi and large" enough to turn the study of it into this article, after all), and we've got our reactions to those. As a group, we're introspective enough to recognize trends and turn them into stereotypes. The visualization on sexuality in the fandom is most telling: there's the way we perceive ourselves, the way we perceive our fellows, and the way we imagine the world perceives us – they may not always align, but that's just the warp and woof of subcultures, and I think just adds to the fun. Me, I'm gonna go hit on this awkward wolf guy, buy him a drink, and see if I can get him to come up to my room with me.

1.3 Boys, Girls, and the In-Betweens

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For many, perhaps most, it's easy to envision furry as being made up in large part of gay males. Some evidence bears this out, even; results from the Furry Survey suggests that a majority of furry is indeed male, though the sexual orientation side of things suggests a different story, which is still, of course, far and above what's considered standard in western society. The point of interest comes in the way gender and sexuality are explored strictly within the context of furry, whether through art or through text, particularly on the Internet.

I, admittedly, grew into the fandom with a similar mindset, expecting that it would be a warm and welcoming place for a young gay (as I identified at the time; things have since shifted) man, and I certainly wasn't disappointed. There was a very welcoming, bordering on celebratory, attitude towards non-heterosexual orientations, and there was certainly no shortage of guys around to fit into that niche. I came from a pretty standard family as far as gay kids from upper-middle class liberal America go, and even I was pleasantly surprised by the amount of acceptance and testosterone flowing around within the fandom. It definitely fit in well with my burgeoning sexuality, in that I had a lot of supportive people surrounding me and, to put it bluntly, a lot of choices for the targets of my affection. Even today, I'm surprised at how large a part sexual orientation plays in those that I meet, to an embarrassing point, in some.

More surprising than the gay men, however, was the women I met. Specifically, the discrepancies in gender ratios online versus that which I heard about and encountered at conventions, meets, and in person in general. This wasn't some sort of taboo phenomenon, either. Some openly joked about how males on MUCKs were males, and females on MUCKs were probably males too. Others who were a different gender online from in person treated it as an open secret and joked about it often. Even those who didn't joke about it weren't coy about differentiating between player and character when talking online.

I'm sure that there as many, if not more, reasons for someone to have a character of a different gender from their player online as there are people who actually do that. In fact, there almost certainly are a good deal more reasons for someone to do that than there are people who do that, just due to the fact that people change over time.

Here now, I've been playing coy, and that's probably not a good thing for writers to do. I know that this is the case because, in eleven years of being around within the fandom now, I've done my own fair share of playing around with gender and talking with those who do similar online, and I think I definitively state that there are several reasons for doing so. They can be divided into needs and wants: those things that are biological or psychological imperatives and those things that are more desires than must haves.

Topping the list of wants is likely the desire for heterosexual interaction – not necessarily just in the realm of sex, either. In a predominately male social group where sexual orientation is divided up fairly evenly, people have found a way to increase the amount of females available for this interaction through role play and art. When it comes to sex on the Internet, it's then easier for people to find partners even if they're playing the female role in the act. This has surely led to more than a few instances of relationships that have started based on this interaction and then failed due to that not actually being the case in real life.

Along with this is the same concept of exploration that is almost stereotypical in society at large, where gender and sexual orientation are balanced differently. Some players who identify as primarily homosexual may spend sometime playing with or as female characters as a means of experimenting more with a new experience. For some, it's simply testing the waters, for others more of a kink type thing, something to indulge in that's not quite the norm. In line with that, the Internet has certainly engendered increased sexual liberation, and some may find themselves exploring broader and broader areas of interest as time goes on, and playing as a female character may just be another way to branch out and have fun.

This ties a little into the separation between character and self. In these instances, the female character's player likely retains a fairly solid sense of male gender, as opposed to the instance where the difference between player and character sex is driven more by a need. The net has definitely brought around several benefits, and the layer of anonymity inherent in interactions provides a unique outlet for gender dysphoria; that is, some will undoubtedly play characters of a different gender from themselves because that gender will more closely match the gender that they feel.

As a bit of an aside, it should be noted that there's a difference between gender and sex, in this context. Sex is fairly easily defined as the biological make-up of the body, whether male, female, or intersex. Gender is a little tougher to pin down. It can be seen as a psychological thing, as in whether or not one feels comfortable or not (dysphoric) with one's given sex. It can also be taken in a sociological context, as several feelings in regard to gender have to do with how one is perceived by others and what societal roles they fit into. While western society is heteronormative, gender can, like sexual orientation, be interpreted as a continuous scale from one extreme (totally masculine) to the other (totally feminine), meaning that these perceptions and roles can apply to portions of a person's life rather than simply the entirety.

Gender identity is always a sticky issue to get around, as it doesn't have quite the recognition that sexual orientation has, and thus has less support behind it, both from medicine and psychology, as well as society at large. Many don't understand the issues surrounding gender, and it's difficult to comprehend what exactly is involved when gender and sex don't match up. Despite my own experiences with being in a relationship with a transgender person, I didn't quite understand things until only rather recently.

The reason I'm writing about this at all, and still having a hard time not being coy or dancing around the issue is that it's difficult for me to speak about openly. That I have any problems at all with my own gender identity was very difficult for me to admit to myself and is harder still to admit to anyone else. This is the first time I've mentioned it to anyone besides my partner and one or two close friends, actually, and it worries me that I'm doing so in so public a fashion, but it is pertinent. As with sexual orientation and coming out, it's the type of thing one fears losing friends and family over, and with myself, it led to a period of depression earlier this year lasting several weeks.

The reason I even bring it up, though, is simply to make the point even more clear on the importance of gender within furry, the fandom which is so welcoming of those within it that the answers pertaining to sexual orientation in the furry survey suggest a truly equal distribution of the sexual orientation spectrum (this in comparison to the oft-quoted 10% thrown around in reference to homosexuality in western civilization at large). The fact that one can create a character with which they strongly identify in terms of gender and sex online can be an important psychological outlet. I can say first-hand that the discomfort felt during sex when one's gender and sex don't line up is intense and, when your sexual partner is your significant other, deeply upsetting.

Interactions online blur the line between the two socially accepted genders even further, as it introduces the possibility of playing out roles that even more closely match one's gender than society – or biology, for that matter – will allow. To pull some examples from recent art that's been floating around, if one identifies as mostly masculine with some female attributes, one's character could be a mostly male hermaphrodite, or, if even less masculinity feels right, a (and I feel the need to prefix this with my personal dislike of the term) 'cunt-boy'. The whole spectrum of gender can be expressed in your character with that layer of anonymity the Internet provides, including even lack of gender or inherently hermaphroditic species such as chakats.

The whole idea of mixed genders within the fandom wasn't something that I ran into until I had been exploring furry for a few years. I didn't really understand them or people's reaction to them for quite a while. The whole concept seems to be fairly divisive, with people taking either a firm stance against or for the whole concept. On one hand, I've heard mixed genders of different sorts described positively as "more fun, since you can stack them so many ways" and negatively as "guys just wanting to play with boobs and dick at the same time". I certainly can't speak for everyone involved and don't care to try and change anyone's mind, but my own opinion is decidedly positive: if the character fits the gender, excellent! If it really is just about sex and playing Tetris with warm bodies, well, sex is good too.

Furry is very much a sexual subculture, when taken as a whole (though not perhaps as much as people think). It's not surprising, then, that gender plays so large a role within the fandom, both online and off. It is an integral part of sexuality. If the fandom is so sexually liberal as compared

to the world it inhabits, yet is a subset of that world, it really makes me wonder how much of this is going on within humanity as a whole. Are we all so evenly distributed in terms of sexual orientation, and the bipolarity of western society just prevents that from being expressed? Are issues of gender versus sex more prevalent than it appears? And, with a few exceptions, are we really as on our own as it seems when it comes to mixing biological sex in one body? Hardly questions for a dumb blog on furies to answer, but interesting all the same.

1.4 Character Versus Self

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When I first got into furry, I was probably fourteen or fifteen. I know that it was the fall semester of my freshman year of high school, and that I started getting into it in my downtime in my first computer class at school (well, during class, too), as well as at home. I wound up finding Yerf and FluffMUCK back in their prime, and played around with IRC on YiffNet, as well. I found the whole thing from a website I was on called Puberty101 – which now sounds like a pedophile’s paradise; the name was later changed to GovTeen – a forum site for (supposed) kids to ask questions of other (supposed) kids about things like sex and sexuality, emotions, and all that jazz. Just so happened that I stumbled over a few posts regarding this thing called furry, one of which had this abstruse collection of letters, numbers and punctuation at the end, which was described as a ‘fur code’.

I had already been all about the good old furry favorites like Disney’s Robin Hood, The Rescuers, Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH, the Redwall books, and so on. Finding the fur code and what it meant at that time in my life led to a perfect, terrible storm of destruction for any hopes of normalcy I had planned for my life. I latched right onto it and, after spending three dumb days as a dragon, settled on a red fox with two tails as my character and dubbed myself Ranna. This was the subtle point that would take me the better part of ten years to disentangle: character creation.

I sometimes wonder if people involved in LARP communities, those in the SCA, or even pencil and paper RPG players get quite as involved in their characters as furries do. I honestly don’t know, as most of my knowledge is gained from an outside, media-tainted perspective, but I suspect that it might be a little different for furries for a couple of reasons. First and foremost is that our characters are intended to be a representation of ourselves. The thing that drew me in about FurCodes was the ‘T’ segment: If you had the chance, would you want to become a real furry. This wasn’t just something fun we did or some historical accuracy we strive for – people actually really, truly desired to become their characters. I’m sure there are folk in the SCA or in LARP groups that really do desire to be in the role they’re playing, but that leads us to the second point.

Furries don’t necessarily role play outside themselves. Someone who gets so into renaissance festivals that they wind up working there and living the characters on weekends is casting themselves into a totally different time, where the modern conveniences of life are gone and everything is fundamentally different. Furries – and, though I’m speaking from experience here, I know it doesn’t apply to everyone – are perfectly content to act out their day to day, mundane, boring-ass lives as anthropomorphic canines (statistically speaking). As I was growing up through high school, I hung out with a crowd made up of furry gamers, programmers, and computer nerds; not just the players, but the characters as well. As I grew and moved to college, I decamped from Fluff-

MUCK and moved over to FurryMUCK to spend most of my time in The Purple Nurple, an online, text only gay bar where predominately gay furry yuppies aired their college and post-college woes. We weren't just pretending to be cat- and dog-people, and we weren't just chatting about work, we were cat- and dog-people chatting about work.

Of course, I wasn't totally secluded in my world of young professional furry gay men, I hung out elsewhere online and experienced everything from multi-session, all-hours of the night role playing (usually dirty) to entire relationships enacted strictly in-character. However, while there were always 'OOC', or out-of-character moments, everyone was joined together in the fact that they were their character. Even when I was in college, the music department, a decidedly close-knit group, contained several people who were just in it because they happened to be good at playing, say, the oboe, and could give a shit less about music, being an instrumentalist, or even making money off their skill. In my experience, people like that in furry are rare: there's the occasional person who has no real attachment to the fandom other than they simply happen to be good at some aspect of it, but they seem to be far from the norm.

All of this adds up to something that I feel is fairly unique to the fandom. It is a strange line that divides character from self, in a fur. The line is semipermeable as some would gladly view themselves as their character as a sort of whole-body dysphoria, but there's still the separation between that aspect of personality and the person as a whole. Our characters are intangible, non-spatiotemporal; they aren't something that can be touched or felt, and are closer to an idea than anything real. However, they form an integral part of our concept of self, whether or not we would actually like to be our anthropomorphic fox character in real life. They inform our view of the world around us, as well, and not just in some vaguely foxish or wolfish way.

There is no denying that a good portion of the community revolves around art – visual and otherwise. As with any group of people, though, skill in one particular field is not evenly distributed, and while there are definitely a lot of amazing artists within the fandom, they are still a minority. We rely on the skills of a relatively small sub-set of our community to provide us with the more tangible representations of our characters, and here is where this blurred line between character and self can cause issues. However, the way in which furies interact with creators in the community differs greatly from the way in which a professional artist would interact with a client in a few very important ways. A client may commission an artist for a piece of artwork to appreciate or for others to appreciate – that is, something to hang in their house or something to hang in public. With music, you can branch out and say that a client may commission the artist for a piece of music to perform. In all of these cases, though, nothing works quite like it does in the fandom: with furry commission, you're not simply commissioning a piece of art to hang around the house and show others, you're commissioning a representation of your self.

Several seemingly unique issues in the way that artists and clients (or 'commissioners', as

they're called, leading one artist to create a feral Commissioner Gordon) stem from this strange difference. Some of the onus of creation is moved from the artist to the client in that much of the picture is designed by the client instead, because, after all, it is the client's character and the artist's talent. This seems to work closer to standard work-for-hire relationships, except that it has strange inflections on licensing: FA notably specifies that uploads fall under a policy of 'by you/for you', where a user may upload a picture that they created or that was created for them. Rather than falling under a standard work-for-hire relationship where it is the artist's talent and the client's art, there exists a continuing tension between the two parties, the artist maintaining near full rights over their creation while the client's rights remain in shady limbo – they maintain rights over the intellectual property of their character, and have some vague sense of ownership over the picture they've received, with a shadowy idea of where they're allowed to show it.

As a personal example, I was commissioned for a three-movement work for French horn and string base to be performed on my senior recital. As I had been used to the standard furry way of doing things, I insisted that the instrumentalists specify rather more than less of the work, a fact that led to much strife and pain in getting the piece actually performed. I was unable to live up to their expectations (they wanted me to write like Hindemith, and I'm not Hindemith), they were unmotivated to rehearse a piece that they felt they had a hand in creating, and my composition professor was baffled by the whole scenario. My senior recital turned out to be one of the most disappointing experiences in my life, largely in part due to the fact that I had failed to properly execute the commission that was expected of me.

From the other side, an artist on FA recently wrote a journal about possibly offering prints of works that were commissioned from him, mentioning that since it was work-for-hire, he would split profit with the client who had commissioned the piece in the first place. The result was rather out of proportion with the original post and helped to illuminate several of the differences between the professional art world and the art world contained within the furry fandom. My talent, not my art [is for sale]. A commissioner buys my talent to make their art, the artist writes, leading to a slew of comments ranging from decently positive to stunned and angry. This standard practice is in direct opposition to the way the furry art world works – limited rights to the artist's art is for sale, rather than simple access to their talent.

No small amount of drama has originated from this scheme. While the artist above relinquishes their rights to the piece they've created to the client as part of standard business practice, this is not the usual within the fandom, and a client doing something such as uploading their art to be seen by a wider audience on other furry art sites such as fchan, e621, or pawsru.org can certainly lead to plenty of strife. There is the occasional artist who will upload their art to these sites on their own, but the fandom has largely set them up as their villains, several of the sites or members of the sites buying readily into that label and stirring things up on their own. This concern over use of art is

doubly strange for a community so focused on appropriating heavily licensed characters such as those from Sonic the Hedgehog or anything from Disney for themselves.

The concepts of character and self are rooted deep in the furry community. Making a negative comment about someone's fursuit or images of their character can lead to trouble, as the words can be seen as a slight against that person. After all, the fursuit or image is a representation of the character's owner – even if you agree that a thing is ugly, a careless phrase can cause offense if that thing is dear to you. The result is something akin to an offshoot of the Dunning-Kruger effect – unskilled people holding illusory superiority while skilled people hold illusory inferiority – in that the one who receives a representation of their character is likely to hold it to some illusory ideal higher than just any similar piece. Meaning in art is a tough subject, and it's only made more complicated within the fandom when it comes to character art.

The two intertwined entities of character and self comprise a large part of furry. The fandom as it is is hard enough to pin down to any one definition, and I think that's due in large part to the myriad ways in which one interacts with one's character or characters. For some, their character is inextricably a part of themselves, closer to an anima or animus in the Jungian sense. For others, myself included, a character may carry smaller aspects of personality, and not, as a result, be as all-encompassing. Speaking for myself, I have three or four of what I would consider characters that I often interact with, and each acts differently, each more focused on a different aspect of my personality. This didn't use to be the case, though, as I previously had a single character that was more all-encompassing and close to my self.

Along with the shift in character interaction came a shift in friend circles, and it left me wondering how much this internal interaction define how we build up and maintain our lives within furry. I asked around on twitter and got a few answers: the way in which we relate to our characters does seem to have some relation to the types of people we find ourselves friends with. Whether that's cause, effect, or some sort of subconscious correlation, I can't say. All of this pondering around the psychological aspects of pretending to be an animal person with a lot of other people pretending to be animal people may just be another symptom of being a firmly-entrenched member of the very same fandom. A commenter on a previous entry used the word 'avatar' instead of character, and I feel that this was an appropriate choice of words, moreso than character. A character is an entity not necessarily connected to some person in reality, but an avatar has connotations of incarnation and appearance of something outside the world in which it interacts. This is the idea behind our characters: they aren't just some sort of disjoint idea that relates back to us, even if we create more than one. They are aspects of us, and as such, are integral to us. No wonder we can get so touchy in regards to our interactions with them.

1.5 First Impressions

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The world is headed in some pretty interesting directions when it comes to things like Augmented Reality. From little things, like QR codes next to items to allow further investigation of them, Google Goggles, which overlays locations of restaurants or other map markers on a real-time video of your surroundings as taken by your phones camera to all of the concept videos coming out from various places around the 'net. One of the more important, if not the most important, uses of AR is the addition of a data layer over what we perceive around us. Need to know more about someone from their business card? Snap the QR code on it and find out all you need. Its that simple, and let me tell you, furies are totally prepared for this additional layer of information: were already pros.

Were used to multi-layered channels of communication, in this fandom. With the majority of our interaction taking place online, we talk, role play, and chat plenty, but were usually not doing only that. There is still the base layer of our communication online, the words and ideas going from one person to another, or among several people, but there are several things that change the way we interact, and especially change first impressions. When we meet someone for the first time online, we have plenty of subtle ways of extracting information from or about them, and several of them without the other persons knowledge that were doing so.

When youre interacting with others on a MUCK, such as FurryMUCK or Tapestries, you have several tools at your disposal to tell you more about the person than you could ever find out in real life without knowing them for years. MUCKs are text-only, so one of the first commands you learn is 'look, which will provide you with a short description of how someone looks; an obvious addition for the primarily visually-oriented furry. Beyond that, however, there are commands such as 'wi or 'wixxx, WhatIsz, which will show you what a person is interested in (or not interested in) in areas both clean and dirty. Some of these are specific enough that they would likely not even crop up between a couple with no online interaction for years. Another tool thats available is, depending on the muck 'cinfo or 'pinfo – character information or player information. Even more free form than WhatIsz, these commands will let you know not only about the character, but about the person behind eFox or iWolf youre chatting up, as much as theyll let on.

Its not just on MUCKs that we have these additional layers of subliminal conversation going on. Even on IRC where such commands are much more limited, we still have the rest of the internet available to us, and by far, FurAffinity has changed and helped this the most. As soon as you see someones name online, theres a good chance that youll be able to just look them up on FA and find out a good deal about them, from where they live to the types of things theyre into judging by the art they favorite there. FA isnt the only site out there, of course, and you can also find out

much more explicit detail on sites like F-List and The Rabbit Hole, not to mention other art sites like VCL, SoFurry, and e621.

These are so entrenched in the furry fandom that, writing this, I keep feeling like its not even worth mentioning. Every time I think that, though I remember that its one of the things that helps to set us apart from other subcultures out there. The fact that we can and will find out more about the people were interested in based on a few short commands or a quick search online sounds pretty sinister – its just not something people in general do, at least not to the same extent. If you apply for a new job, you can expect to be Googled, Facebooked, and LinkedIn by your potential new employer, but thats about as close as youll get to someone looking up personal information about you. Its so totally normal for us that we havent realized that its changed the way we make our first impressions of each other. In an AR sense, this is roughly equivalent to walking down the street and seeing someone rather attractive, only to find out via a little thought-bubble above their head that they secretly really enjoy being spanked, bitten, and tied up when they have sex.

If you meet someone within the fandom now, its easy to find out more information on them than you would ever find out otherwise. Friendships are formed more quickly than outside the subculture and are based on much more in-depth knowledge of each other. Add in the benefit of sex without physical consequences through playing around online and youve got a strange basis for a culture that relies almost entirely on a multi-layered channel of communication. The more I think about how different these first and lasting impressions are within the fandom, the more I think it stems from the previously mentioned difference between character and self that is inherent within furry: we are so eager to use any tools available to us to more completely represent our characters online that were willing to change the basics of personal interaction in order to accomplish it. Add in the anonymity provided by the internet and you have a whole subculture that is far more willing to share personal details with those that they havent even met yet than most any group out there, online or offline.

Interacting in person with other furies, particularly at conventions, is a strange mix of normal interactions as well as some amount of this multi-layered communication. Im sure that much of this has to do with how generally tech-literate furies, or at least the con-going crowd are. If you meet someone at a convention, youll likely to do it by scanning their con-badges for images of their character or a recognizable name, rather than, say, looking at a face (the con-greeting). With the information contained on a standard con-badge, one still has as much to go on as on IRC – namely, the ability to look someone up on FA and figure out more about them. Maybe Ill try an experiment with FC 2012 and make a QR code badge and see just who all interacts with it.

Beyond that, however, I wonder just how much of our in-depth first impressions translate outside of the fandom, but into other, tightly knit groups. If, say, an academic winds up at SIGGRAPH or a designer winds up at TED, meets someone in the halls, and notices a convention badge with

a name on it, chances are good that theyll be able to go check on their work somewhere on the internet. However, these examples are academic and professional, not social, and I havent had the opportunity to go to, say, an anime or comic convention to see if lasting personal or even sexual relationships are formed in quite the same way as they are within our own subculture. Would I be able to go to Nan Desu Kan, a local anime convention, and expect to meet two or three people there whom I would be able to instantly look up on my intelligent telephone, know intimate details about, form lasting friendships with?

With this confused blur from total immersion in our characters to the unobstructed view of self that we provide glimpses of, our mixed-up concept of first impressions within the furry fandom is understandable. These first impressions are based not only on the actions of a persona as we perceive them, but also the more static metadata left behind on the other layers of communication within the fandom, whether its information left on FA, attributes on f-list or within a command such as 'wi, or art, visual or otherwise, of a character doing whatever that character does, providing a glimpse of how that avatar moves within the larger arena of the whole subculture, or even reacts to the world at large. Perhaps it really is no big surprise that the furry community is both incredibly tight knit and also renowned for the drama that it puts itself through.

Chapter 2

December

2.1 Dressing Up

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I've been within the fandom for about eleven years now, and only relatively recently (about a year ago as of this post) did I get into fursuiting. Prior to that, I must admit that I didn't understand the concept at all, and even found it vaguely creepy. While I understood the desire to more physically look like your character, I didn't understand how fursuiting would be the solution: it seemed like wearing a onesie of faux fur combined with slippers, gloves, and a ski-mask coated in fur-covered foam was rather more like some elaborate Halloween costume effect than getting nearer to one's character. However, having gone suiting and wound up with a fursuit of my own, I think I'm gaining a better understanding of it now.

Fursuiting is clinal, a gradient from one end of the spectrum to the other. It can be very meaningful, where putting on the suit makes the wearer into their character, or as close as possible. Or it can be relatively meaningless, where suiting is closer to a job than anything, something you do rather than something you are. Along the way, the amount of meaning passes through the still very meaningful desire to at least look like one's character, to enjoying the act of costuming itself, to enjoying the varied social interaction that comes with wearing a full-body costume somewhere other than Halloween.

As I grew within the furry subculture, I started out thinking that everyone with a suit must be attempting to be their character in real life, rather than just online. My opinion of how I would react to suiting, however, was closer to the other end of the spectrum – I could see how it might be fun to do that, but didn't really see it going further, for myself. As time went on, though, I started to experience how suiting was different for different people, and, at the same time, I felt myself climbing the scale in the opposite direction. The concept started to make more sense to me, and I could understand how someone might enjoy looking rather more like an animal, specifically like their character, even if it was most definitely in the context of costuming. Sometime in 2010, these two converging lines met when I was given the opportunity to try a friend's suit for a day at Anthrocon.



The friend is a bit of a sarcastic sort, and he had a black-backed jackal suit that I wanted to try on to see if I could (jokingly) sully his reputation by acting super furry and overtly homosexual. It just so happened that we were the right size and he thought it was as good an idea as I did, so I went up to his room at ten or so in the morning and put on the suit. I was immediately surprised by how warm it was, and I had a bit of a hard time getting used to it, at first, since Pittsburgh in the summer is already plenty warm. It was a bit

of a trial getting from the convention hotel to the convention center, though it's a relatively short walk. Once I got inside, however, I really started to get into the swing of things.

I had a lot of fun interacting with people around me. A surprising amount of fun, really. I was expecting that, wearing a full body costume that required a wicking layer, I'd be uncomfortable, but goof around and act flamingly gay for a little while, then head back to the room to strip it off. However, the costume was comfortable and I felt comfortable acting like a fool in it. Wearing paws and having a stuffed tail behind me made me walk different just to see how it felt, and those around me ate up the fact that I was a big dog-man acting like a nutjob. I wore the suit longer than intended; I made a few stops by the "headless lounge", ambled around the dealer's den, followed people around and mimicked them, and spent more time than I usually would talking to, playing with, and otherwise just interacting with furies. When I got home, I placed an order with the maker of the fursuit, Jill of jillcostumes for my own, settling on an otter after some discussion.

That was about the time I started to realize the diversity apparent within a subculture of a subculture. There was more, I figured, to wearing a fursuit than just getting closer to your character, being your avatar. It was a whole different way of interacting with those around you, whether you're one of those suiters that never talks or one that rambles on in suit (I am, of course, the latter). Having asked, there are those who do feel like it brings out aspects of their personality that bring themselves closer to their character, but that's not the only way of looking at it out there: there are those who find them sexually attractive, those that like them because of the social interaction with those who aren't necessarily part of the fandom (interacting with kids is mentioned as being particularly awesome), and those for whom it is a living. It's a whole spectrum, just as are other aspects of furry, but it comes with its own culture: listen in on conversations in a headless lounge and they're most certainly unique.



Figure 2.2: A member of the Otterman Empire

Things aren't all sunshine and roses, of course. One of the first things I found out once I got my suit was how to clean it, and how divisive such an act was. There are currents and trends of thought within the suiting culture just as there are within furry as a whole, and something as simple as washing a portion of your suit can cause strife. Having personally known the maker of my suit, I trusted her when she gave me instructions for washing not only the bodysuit but also the head in the washing machine. However, even after she posted a video of how she cleans her own and her

customer's fursuit heads without harm, others within the fandom insisted that she was damaging the heads that she had made, despite all evidence pointing to the contrary. Similar discussions rage around how best to transport your suit from place to place, particularly on a plane. Any fursuit lounge is bound to be filled nearly to the brim with Rubbermaid Action Packers, while anyone (say, yours truly) who travels with his suit in a duffel is scoffed at openly.

And then there are the people. Oh, the people. Not every interaction is a positive one. In fact, we can start to break down the other parties into rough categories:

The Talker The talker will hover close, and may or may not be affectionate, but will insist on talking to you "out of character". Rather than interacting with a fursuiter, they will insist on interacting with a person wearing a costume. "This is really well made!", they will say. "I think this is a cute one, but the older version was cuter, in my mind," you will be informed. "One doesn't see black-backed jackals all that much, it's nice to see that the colors are very accurate," they'll say, pointing out the patterning on the suit despite your lack of peripheral vision. The talker is mostly harmless. Mostly. You can't spell 'stalker' without it, though, and it's only a few minutes too long of following you around that separates the two.

The Toucher This is the one we all kind of worry about. You'll be wandering around, and someone (99.44% chance that they're male) will open their arms for a hug. "Sure!" you think/mime/say and approach them. They'll hug you and maybe coo at how cute your suit is. And the hug will linger. And go on a little too long. And you'll try to pull away, and the Toucher will laugh and ruffle his hands down over your back, sides, or front, and then it will come: the Touch. Sometimes the touch is fumbling and quick, because you're likely in public, but it's even worse when it's not, the Toucher grabbing rather firmly at some decidedly tender bits or giving your backside a squeeze. The worst part about this, for me, is that all I feel I can do is just get away. It's surprisingly hard to tell someone to stop or to move their hand when you're dressed as a giant otter.

The Maker The Maker is closely related to the Talker and the Toucher, though obviously more innocent than either. They will spend a lot of time touching you while talking out of character. The whole time, though, rather than grabbing at your crotch, they're feeling along the seams of your suit or inspecting the eyes' construction, all while talking about air-brushing or fur selection. While not quite as offensive as the Talker or the Toucher, this is nonetheless still quite awkward for someone who most certainly did not make their own suit.

The Fursuit Hater I don't know what to do about it. Look, I'm sorry that I'm a grown-ass man dressed as a giant otter among a bunch of other grown-ass men. I'm having fun, others are having fun, and those that aren't are doing something else. Why do you need to tell me that

fursuits are creepy and probably gross and covered in semen and countless other things I really don't care to hear about. You pretend to be an animal-person, too.

The Other Suiter This one's up in the air. Normally, hanging around other fursuiters while in suit is pretty awesome. You can commiserate about those around you, play around and get some laughs (and plenty of pictures), and just plain have fun. Occasionally, though, you'll run into a suiter that also happens to be a Toucher, or even more so. I don't deny that some suits are pretty attractive, of course; the problem lies more in the lack of respect for differing opinions, especially around how to act in a public place. Fursuits serve to offer some of the same anonymity provided by the internet, and there has been more than once instance of someone grabbing or grinding on me in a scratchy, hot, faux-fur onesie in a hallway or dance that has led to quite a bit of discomfort.



Figure 2.3: Revenge

Even with the occasional bad apple, it's definitely more fun than not to pretend to be an animal person, or at least interact as one, or to act a fool as one. I picked up my suit at Further Confusion 2010 from Jill once I arrived at the hotel. Just for giggles, I wore the suit as a partial for the rest of the night, roaming around to find people I knew so as to surprise them. I stole sips of beer, batted at people with my paws, poked my enormous nose on them, and basically just had fun. It's another way to entwine yourself with this strange fandom of ours, and provides a unique mixture of in- and out-of-character interactions with those around you. For some, it's a way to become their avatar, and for others it's a fun way to, in the jackal's words, "get drunk and touch friends." And, whether you're a fan of them or not, suiters are an integral part of our subculture, shaping not only our own interactions but the views

of those looking in from outside.

2.2 Convention Mystique

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I was too excited to sleep, the night before Anthrocon 2005. It was the first convention I would be going to, I'd be meeting some truly awesome people for the first time basically the minute I stepped into the hotel, and sleep just wasn't going to happen. In order to make sure that I could make it down to the airport without crashing or anything, I planned on subsisting almost completely on black tea through the night, then stopping on Starbucks twice on the way down from Fort Collins to Denver. Unfortunately, both my roommates were asleep, so I was listening to music on my headphones. I had forgotten that I had put the kettle on for tea, so I was interrupted from my jittery reverie by my roommate knocking on my door to inform me that the kettle had been whistling for five minutes or so by that point. I was lucky I hadn't boiled it dry.

With the lack of sleep and my excitement, I was basically useless for the first day of the convention. I got into Philadelphia at around 2:30 or so in the afternoon and to the hotel by 3PM. I stumbled into the lobby and met, for the first time, my friends, some of whom I had known for five years, by that point.

Due to my age and some lingering doubts about meeting furies, I had never really planned on going to a convention, at least not until the beginning of 2005. I had met furies in person before, of course; my partner and I had visited each other on several occasions for the years previous, and I had a small group of furry friends around me throughout high school and moving into college. It wasn't really until March or April of 2005 that I started really meeting more and more members of the fandom, and then only when I was dragged to a local furmeet by a friend of mine, where I had plenty of fun.

The problem with conventions for me until that point was two-fold: first of all, there was this negative stereotype floating around about who furies were and how they interacted with each other – the most succinct comment to this was the oft-quoted “by and large, furies are bi and large” – which I found vaguely disturbing; and secondly, I was so used to interacting with my friends online that I wasn't quite sure how well interacting in person with them was going to work out. I knew, for instance, that my friend was a five and a half foot tall red fox on the Internet, but I had been assured that he was a good bit taller and most likely not actually a fox in person. How would I interact with him? I knew for sure that I wasn't also a fox, so there were probably certain things that we were used to doing that wouldn't likely happen in person: no swishing, for instance, and there would probably be a dearth of nuzzling, murring, and all the rest.

Having started to interact more with furs offline, however, much of my fears were allayed, and I warmed quickly to the concept of heading out to a convention. The people I had been meeting were normal people, and we had a ready-made topic of conversation. I figured things would be fine

with a few more of them around. I pulled my money together and flew out to the final Anthrocon in Philly. Rather than finding a bunch of normal people milling around with a ready-made topic of conversation, though, I found that conventions were a little more complicated than just that.

For me, the first con was all about validation. It wasn't so much that I was around a bunch of people who could talk about the latest fursuit they'd seen or bit of gossip they heard. It was more than just a group of people, period. Furry wasn't something we did, it was something we were. I hadn't understood the concept of a furry lifestyle until then, but that certainly cemented home the fact that we weren't just partaking in a hobby, but interacting with others who also had this integral part of their lives, and expressing that with them. I don't really mean to wax rhapsodic about my first con, it wasn't all sunshine and scritchies, just that it was certainly more than I had hoped for: my friends and I got along just as wonderfully in person as we did online.

It also helped drive home the idea that conventions are more than just a bunch of people interacting in person rather than online. I talked to several of my friends that I had met at the local furmeet online and interacting in either location was just a matter of either typing or talking, it didn't matter which. A convention, however, is more a unique medium. It's not just a big furmeet, and it's not just furies interacting offline instead of on; everything works slightly differently in a con setting. It's as if, after a certain number of attendees (lets say twenty five), or in a certain location (almost always a hotel), we cease being interested parties and become a little society of our own, with our own mores and modes of interaction.



Since I was pretty effectively hooked after that first convention, I did my best to head to several more after that, making several more Anthrocons and man Further Confusions, as well. While I enjoyed my first few conventions in a near ecstatic state, I settled down soon after to relax and enjoy my time in these new surroundings and in this new society. Conventions have a rhythm to them, a tempo, or a curve. There's the building excitement leading up to the trip, the hassle of packing and flying, and the first exciting few hours catching up with your friends and having a few drinks, then the sustained joy over the next few days until things start to wind down, with more people leaving the area, having to go to bed early to make their early flights, crying in the hallways, lobby, and airport. It's something you settle into like a comfortable sort of routine. Every convention's different, of course, but I think the general experience follows that same ramp up, sustained level, then tapering off, even if, in the case of Camp Feral, there's that last trip back out of the woods tossed in.

There are a few other seeming universals tossed in along with the convention. It does seem possible to break the attendees down into several fairly constant categories:

The New Attendee Bright eyed, in the throes of ecstasy, the new attendee is easy to pick out

from all other groups (excepting perhaps The Nut) as the one who is mostly gung-ho about everything. They want to go to all the events, they want to ogle all the suits, they want to hug all their friends. These folks are really relatively harmless, and they help keep the conventions exciting for those who frequent them.

The Nut Similar to The New Attendee, this person is totally gung-ho about everything, except that it's almost certainly not their first con. They have the relentless, determined enthusiasm that drives many groups to go to events or check out new restaurants in the area, or, on the flipside, drives many people nuts. While it's nice to keep some of that joy from the first visit to a furry con, and it certainly is good to keep experiencing them, sometimes it's best to just calm down, breathe. . .

The Lobby Lounger Sitting in the lobby and ordering a ceaseless round of drinks (even if they're just waters), drawing and kibitzing, texting all their friends to tell them to just meet me in the lobby, this attendee is a near permanent fixture in the lobby of the main hotel, preferring to soak the con up rather than necessarily go out and experience it in panels and the like.

The Wanderer Wandering from lobby to Dealer's Den to Artist's Alley to the panels to their room to restaurants to the lobby ad nauseum, this person is easy to find, but not so easy to pin down for plans – why stop? They might miss something! Of course, having spent the whole convention wandering around, there's a chance they actually saw less than they might have otherwise. An important sub-category of this is The Fursuiter, who wanders around with good reason – it's hard to do anything in one place for long without overheating or, heaven forbid, not get quite enough attention.

The Worker There's always money to be made at conventions, or if not money, a little bit of power, however benign. The Worker is the artist who will work their way through the con to hopefully come out of the affair net positive, or the volunteer who will check badges at the door to do their part for the convention. Even if it might be difficult to see them for more than a few minutes at a time, they're still an integral part of the con atmosphere.

There's another universal almost too obvious to mention: convention badges. Most any convention has their own, obviously, but within our fandom, it's customary to not only wear the membership badge, but also art badges created specifically for the wearer. These small, commissioned bits of wearable art represent the owner's character, another unique artifact of the difference between our selves and our characters. So unique, in fact, that, concurrent with



the upcoming Further Confusion, there will be a portion of a gallery exhibition in San Jose dedicated strictly to the art of the con badge. They act as a way to help carry our characters into our real-life interactions and blur the line between the two somewhat. We may not all be dressed up like our creations, nor can we all swish and bark and so on, but at least we have a sign of just who we are visible to those around us.

Of course, anyone who has been to a furry convention knows the basic duck-and-weave of the con greeting. With the near-absolute saturation of con badges, it's become standard practice to approach someone looking at their chest, sleeves, or belt, wherever they've hung their badges. Depending on how friendly you are and whether or not you know the other person, you might jump straight into a hug after that, or start chattering right away. If you don't know them, of course, you still know more about them after that brief glance than you might if you had just met on the street, and that's something we've written about before. It gives a whole new meaning to my face is up here (and, of course, if you put a QR code on your badge, now they're pointing a camera at their chest...).

The mystique surrounding the convention and the medium of interaction that it represents is an integral part of the fandom. For many, our conventions are the high point of the year, a time to both see friends we rarely get the chance to see and blur the line between our selves and our characters. It's the time when we get to let down our guard somewhat and show some of our back-stage selves, show some emotion with how we feel about our little subculture, and maybe even act a fool in a giant animal costume. They're the time for us to live out our culture in person. It's interesting that, with a group based so strongly on interaction on the Internet, some of our highest points are the times when we get off the net and hang out in person – whether it be to relax, to have fun, or to make money.

I'll see you guys at Further Confusion 2012!

2.3 My Fursona is a Mole

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Yeah, you probably haven't seen it. It's pretty underground.

I first began to suspect a furry:hipster overlap in the dealer's den at Furry Weekend Atlanta, when I observed that the ratio of hat-wearing men was precipitously high. Not ballcaps, mind you fedoras, flat caps, bowlers, and other examples of the sort of headwear that one would expect to find less in Atlanta than in, say, 1954.

If hats aren't your thing (and how do you fit your ears through them, anyway?) you may defer instead to the Skinny Jean Quotient, which is also elevated. If anybody asks why you're staring at their pants, just tell them it's for research. Nobody wants to stand in the way of science.

As it happens, this helps explain a lingering geographic dilemma I've had. If you take a bunch of furries and group them by state, you can create a sort of density map: what percentage of furries live in any given state compared to what percentage of Americans in general reside there.

When you do this, you don't find too many anomalies. Furries are underrepresented in New York, possibly because, let's face it, most of us can't afford to live there. And in general it's what you'd expect: we're slightly less common in the American South; more common on the west coast. Standing out as islands, as compared to their surrounding states: the Pacific Northwest, Michigan, and Colorado.

What's the common thread?

By instinct, you want to look for furries in high tech density areas, because the basic idea that "furry=geek" is pretty well established. But only 8% of furries work in technology fields; a majority, 60%, are students of some stripe or another. This latter angle bids I point out that these islands are, for example, also where you can score high-quality pot. But I'm sure furries know nothing of that (certainly I don't; I don't like smoking, and I can't eat brownies because chocolate is poisonous for dogs).

Anyway, when seen through a hipster lens, the inclusion of places like Portland, Seattle, Denver, and Ann Arbor suddenly fall into place. And this helps to explain the hat-wearing. It also helps to explain the results of a microsurvey I put together a few weeks back. I asked several hundred people 32 questions on their personal beliefs and behaviors, and I plugged this into a sinister machine of my own devising, the Behavioral and Attitudinal Tabulation, Mapping, and Analysis Navigator.

I asked BATMAN for "two-box" responses: when it tells me a general skew, it's because a given respondent either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" (conversely: "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed"), leaving out the middle parts and focusing on the extremes. The computational engine whirred and thunked, and then it told me this:

- 80% of furies say that trying new things is fun and interesting
- 36% say they're often the first person in their group of friends to try something new
- 29% say their friends look to them for advice on music, movies, games and so forth

BATMAN pointed out, in its surly fashion, that only 10% of furies say they're ahead of the curve where pop culture is concerned. But that's not surprising, actually: 44% describe mass media as being too "lowest common denominator" for them and 41% describe corporations and their products as "rather soulless." That probably explains why 55% of furies agree or strongly agree that they'd rather patronise a small business.

These figures are all positively correlated with each other: the more likely you are to be asked for advice by your friends, the more likely you are to reject mainstream pop culture and the more likely you are to gravitate to small businesses. They're also related to the creative spark: 58% of furies say creativity is one of their strongest assets, and 37% say they'd rather make something than buy it.

Beyond the numbers, this shouldn't really be surprising to anyone who has spent much time around the fandom. We trade heavily in social currency who you know and how well you know them. Listen in at the discussions at your next convention:

"Oh my god, who did that drawing?" "Is that conbadge one of...?" "Have you read...?" "This is the new work by..." "I'm getting a commission from..."

It's all about the names. And since nobody is, let's be honest here, really going to break out of the furry fandom, celebrity here has to be milked for what it's worth. So there's a fair degree of bandwagoning, as well, and you can get props for picking up a famous' person's work at the auction just as easily as by discovering an up and coming artist on FA.

I don't think it's a particularly mysterious phenomenon. Hipsterism tends to arise in bohemian cultures where monetary capital is undervalued (either because everybody has money or nobody does). We're certainly bohemian on the fringes of social acceptability, wildly creative, anti-establishment, consuming mass media and pop culture only as far as it lets us repurpose it...

And, of course, money has no value in the fandom because we're all digital here. Physical possessions and the means to acquire them are, more or less, completely irrelevant. As long as you have enough money to pay your ISP, you can plug into the fandom. So establishing your credibility has to rely on something else, and social capital steps in to fill that gap.

Some of this we can acquire by dint of our own creativity those of us who are skilled at drawing, writing, music-making, fursuiting, roleplaying, or any other audience-focused activity can trade our abilities there for recognition and status. And if we can't make things ourselves, we can know people who make things, and serve as a proxy to their own works: being the first person to share a new picture or story is the next best thing to having written it yourself.

Every meeting of furies I have ever been party to inevitably involves some modicum of gossip and discussion, frequently about those people whose talents we respect (or envy) and whose work we enjoy. And gossip, too, is essentially hipsterish: we prove how “in the know” we are by being the first to a scoop (or, if not the first, by having the most information!). It’s the common ground, for when novelty-seeking iconoclasts band together.

So we have attracted some of the trappings of what, ironically, I would have to call mainstream hipsterdom: the self-referential humor, the love of memes, the unorthodox fashion. To this we have added our own spin: I joke about having a mole for a furry avatar, but I’ve seen species propagate from a single point somebody cool decided they were going to be something, and a bunch of people jumped right on. And artists acquire the same fetishistic attachment here as they do in any Seattle enclave.

But before you all try and close the circle by Rule 34ing Hipster Kitty, let me suggest that it’s not such a terrible thing. It’s who we are, and in a sense it’s what makes us unique: a shared sense of identity, a shared love of the new, the interesting, the exciting, the different, the crazy, the creative, the passionate. You could do worse than that, and if it helps you find a great new artist or two, your life’s all the richer.

Besides, at least PBR is cheap.

2.4 Online Relationships

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I spent a night a while back cooking dinner for my fiancé, who was sick with the flu and a sinus infection. Though I was either cooking or working, we had a few moments of banality together, talking about work or taking NyQuil for the night. Eventually, I sent him to bed before he could start another TV show; I was feeling jealous that I was working so much and he had taken the day off. We said our goodnights and our I love yous, and he left to go lay down. As he did so, I was immediately struck by how weird the whole evening was to me, then fascinated that such would be the case. The whole night was totally banal, as are so many others, but it took place in person: something relatively unique to me and seemingly uncommon in the circles in which I hang out in the fandom. Even all of my relationships that weren't strictly based online still had some interaction in that arena, and I think there are a few good reasons for this.

Furry is really important to me. Like, really, really important. I've thoroughly entrenched myself in the fandom, have lived it for more than a decade, and relish every moment of my interactions with it. That's the whole reason I started this blog, really: the act of writing helps me understand what this is and why it's important to me, and the act of sharing what I write is one way that I feel I can give back to the community that has meant so much to me. I've written about a lot, lately, and I feel that my topics have been fairly diverse, but not without their common threads. Of course, there's the difference between how we feel and how we act, and the importance of a separate character from our selves, but what I think is the most important attribute of our fandom is the way we interact and the relationships we form with each other in the context of furry. There is a reason that the most-used tag on this site is the social interaction tag. Second to that is, of course, Internet, and the obvious combination of the two leads us to online relationships – that is, dating – which play an outsized role in our community.

I am no stranger to online relationships. Far from it, in fact: I think I can say that my online relationships outnumber my in-person relationships two or even three to one. One of the big draws to having a relationship online in a culture that is based in large part on the Internet is that you gain the advantage of the selection bias: by interacting in a primarily furry setting, you have at your disposal for potential partners primarily furies. A good part of a relationship lies in having a good deal in common with your partner, and that is almost built into the fandom. You likely have a group of people with similar levels of technological aptitude, a ready-made shared interest in anthropomorphics, and you don't have to explain your activities to your partner. That you share this ahead of time makes a good case for dating within the fandom. It's simply easier, perhaps healthier to be in a relationship with another furry.

I went through a relationship with a non-furry a few years ago, and while I cared for my partner deeply, there was always this thing we could never quite share. It's not that we didn't have other things in common, nor that we didn't talk about furry. It was that there was this bond that I shared with other people that I could just never share with her, not without her becoming a part of the fandom, which is something I could never force her to do, and she did not seem interested in doing on her own. I still care for her and do miss some aspects of going out with a non-fur: particularly, I miss the fact that it often caused me to step back and take a look at the things that I was doing or saying or thinking as part of this subculture from an outside perspective. While I've always considered myself a fairly introspective person, I can honestly say that this was probably the first time that I had started to really look into what furry meant to me, particularly because either it or my relationship was on the line. The relationship didn't last and was probably never meant to, with this another differences keeping us apart.

Another thing that that relationship lacked was not only the interaction between the two parties on a personal level, but interaction on a character level. Even though my fianc and I rarely talk online (he's a terrible speller – sorry, James!), we still have this multi-layered relationship that may be essential for a couple within the fandom. For furies, you have to interact well as a couple not only on a personal level, but as characters and vice versa, and this is one of the reasons several of my other relationships did not work out quite as well as either party had hoped. Although things may have been spectacular or mind blowing online, you're just not really an eFox or iWolf in person (probably). Species aside, our characters are very much front-stage constructs, in the Erving Goffman sense. We build up these characters to emphasize or even take on attributes that may be lacking in us, and that's what helps to make them a separate entity from our true self. It's amazing to think back on all of the wonderful times I have had over the years in the relationships I've been a part of and realize that, when thought of that way, it's like watching two completely separate people fall in love: my iFox to your eWhatever, and you and I are only the narrators, or the readers of a story.

More than just these separate aspects of our personas, however, is the barriers inherent in online interaction, particularly in a furry setting. The best, and also quite possibly the worst thing about online interaction is that, being primarily text based, you have the ability to construct your persona moreso than usual. You have the ability to reread what you're about to say, and the ability to build a reply that is carefully designed with the other party in mind. It comes as a shock interacting with someone in real life after having only had the ability to interact with them online for so long. This is, of course, especially true when there are additional levels of fantasy involved in your interactions, the most salient example being gender play: not only are you constructing your front-stage avatar with this additional type of foresight, but you are changing a very basic fact about yourself in the process. Gender roles are complicated things that have their tie-ins even with

role-play online as animal people, and when those roles are inverted or otherwise changed between the two settings of online and off, the interaction between the parties of the relationship is put at risk. Even so, it's important to have that interaction between both character and self within the relationship, offline and on. James is still my dog, and I'm still hiswhatever species I am that day, even though we're both grown men working our day jobs and taking care of each other when we get sick.

All of this relies on technology, though. It relies on the fact that we, as a group, tend to be some fairly tech-savvy people. I write these articles on an iPad, sync them to a remote site, then publish them on a copy of WordPress that I set up myself on a server I purchased space on myself, with a domain name I obtained myself. That may fly as impressive with, say, my folks, but I can already hear the jeers from my audience that I even mentioned an Apple product (hey, it was free, alright?). We are some pretty tech-literate folk, and that just adds to our relationships with each other. It takes a certain type of willingness to embed a portion of our lives in this thin layer of augmented reality that hovers over, beneath, and through everything else, and a certain type of person to find the thought of that enjoyable as compared to perhaps going out to a bar in an attempt to pick up a date.

This is not to say that we're all nerds or anything. In fact, I'm pretty sure that much of the stigma that affects nerds outside the fandom translates to within it as well. Rather, we are a group of people that has embraced the technology around us and made it part of our lives, even if we don't necessarily know, or even care how it works. We may not always be cutting edge, but we are contemporary with our generations, and maybe even a little ahead of the game, in general, and that may just serve as the basis for much of the social interaction within our subculture, and the relationships within that, taking at least second-seat to our interest in anthropomorphising animals.

I should wrap up by saying that I am not against online relationships in any way. That they didn't work for me in the end is a fact I've come to accept, and that some of them led to pain on my partners' end is something I deeply regret. But in the long run, I feel that I am who I am today in large part because of them – I'm one of those even the bad times are beneficial guys. I think that any chance we, as furs, get to share in the closeness of our bonds to each other and our characters' relationships is worth taking, for sure. Online relationships have become almost an integral part of our fandom and it would be strange to see the culture without them in the fore. Love itself is too big a topic for a lay-fox like myself to even begin to comprehend; I'm simply glad that I had and have the chance to experience so much of it with such an awesome crowd, both on the net and off.

Chapter 3

January

3.1 Layers of Fantasy

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I found out recently that there's a name for the concept behind the movie *Inception*: *mise en abîme*. It's a French phrase which means "placed into abyss", and refers not only to the sort of dream-within-a-dream concept so heavily pounded upon in *Inception*, but also the concept of any thing within itself, such as a representation of the painting within a painting, or the feeling of standing between two mirrors and seeing the infinite representation of self receding into the distance. It also has to do with different layers of representation and meaning in art, and, even though I've mentioned before that it's surprising how mundane much of our interaction is, that's what strikes me about the prevalence of fantasy and science fiction within the furry fandom's artistic output. It is a sort of stacking of different layers of fantasy, with our focus on anthropomorphic animals being layered atop science fiction or fantasy elements.

I suspect that a lot of why this weird dichotomy of mundane and fantastic trends within the fandom is so striking to me is due to the different avenues into the fandom that we've taken. Speaking for myself, I found the fandom along a decidedly mundane path – Yerf.com. Even though I'd read all the *Redwall* books at the time, had watched Disney's *Robin Hood* over and over, and spent much of my time in elementary school role-playing scenes from *The Phantom of the Opera* with a friend wherein everyone was a cat, none of those actually struck the furry chord, as it were. It was finding PacRat's art on Yerf.com, images of furies in more mundane settings, that got me into things. I liked the fact that species became more an aspect of self rather than some fantastical attribute about some fictional character.

That is, of course, not the only route into the community: several people I know have talked about their entry into the fandom being based around some of those things that I already mentioned, such as *Redwall*. In fact, a good majority of my friends found their way into furry through the more fantasy-oriented routes, and that struck me as interesting, as here we were, already pretending to be animal people. It was intriguing to think of layering fantasy atop fantasy like that. It's difficult, of course, to draw a hard and fast line between these two routes, as there are several people who are content living in a mostly mundane world set perhaps a few years forward or backward in time, or even a mundane life in the far future or distant past, yet I do feel that there is a difference in mindset between the more and less fantasy oriented furs.

I suppose that the difference between these two views of the fandom isn't so much that we're applying our culture to a fantasy setting versus a mundane setting, so much as how we view our focus on our characters. If one views one's character as some sort of fantastic being, some concept of self with additional elements which extend beyond the norm, it's easier to place oneself in a fantastic setting. From the other point of view, if one views one's character as one's self, simply

expressed differently, or as something one possesses rather than one is, then it might feel more comfortable to exist in a setting closer to the one inhabited by the player – that is, a more mundane set of circumstances. The difference there being that there is a bit of a divide, no matter how vague, between two sides of looking at one's character – as fantasy, or as mere re-representation of self.

This sort of thinking struck me as interesting back when I was first getting into the fandom, on one of my first sojourns onto a MUCK. When you describe your player using Triggur's seemingly omnipresent `editplayer` command, you are given the opportunity to set a bit, or attribute, on your character to say whether or not you can fly. I had personally thought this rather strange: I was just a teenage fox guy, living in a teenage fox guy world, where I had surrounded myself with several other teenage fox, cat, or what-have-you friends living in the same world. What use did I have for flying? I set the bit in order to more thoroughly explore the MUCK that I had wound up on (Zorin's FluffMUCK), as it was needed to do things such as go up, instead of just north, south, east, or west. Every now and then, I would play around with it, flying up above the park, the main location on the server, where I could joke around with friends or get away from the inane chatter below, but I never really thought of it as flying, *per se*.

It wasn't until I started to explore further on other MUCKs such as SPR and FurryMUCK where role-play was taken more seriously than it was on my original hang-out of choice, that I found out that it really did matter to people less mundane than I whether or not the flying bit was set. Although in the long run, I wound up simply finding another, older crowd of more mundane fox, cat, and wolf people to hang out with, it always stuck with me that here I was, a fox guy that could fly for, in my case, no real reason. I never flew (I rarely do much more than hang out in one room, to be honest), and even to this day, never really consider it flying. However, having seen and, once or twice, taken part in more serious role-play in a more fantastic setting than what amounts to a glorified chat room most days, I can say that this is likely due to me just not being a very fantasy-oriented person, and perhaps there's a personality trait that helps determine whether or not one feels more comfortable interacting in a fantastic or mundane setting.

The downside to all of this, of course, is that it becomes difficult to maintain without potentially losing some aspect of the fantasy. A furry story set in a fantasy setting runs the risk of being a fantasy story wherein all the characters are animal people for no discernible reason, or perhaps a furry story in which fantastical things keep happening with little explanation. Perhaps that's the sign of a really good furry role-player or writer, though, being able to maintain a level of coherence within all the separate layers of fantasy. The requirements for a furry fantasy to be pulled off well require miscibility: the risk is great of having a fantasy that happens to be furry or vice versa, and so it seems to be important that furry be either a strong part of the fantasy or at least part of the plot in order for everything to work out well.

Another downside to these different routes into the fandom is the segregation that is built into

that fact. That western society views role-playing of most types as a geeky pursuit and geeks as a frowned-upon minority, it's no surprise that the same outlook can carry over into furry pretty easily, given how much of the fandom is based in western society. Perhaps that's a big claim for me to make, but having seen the way that the issue of "RP" can polarize furries, I'm not sure of what other explanation there might be. There are those who totally buy into their character, and especially into the fantastic aspects of them, and there are those who are in the fandom for some other reason, perhaps more of an affinity than an identity. The two groups occasionally have their clashes, with arguments being based around the one group "powergaming" the other, or the other group being too serious or roleplaying in comments. As yet, at least, the clashes seem to mostly involve the two groups poking fun at each other.

Furry is a fantasy, there's no way around it – at the very least, it is a hobby that revolves around what could basically be explained as fantastic creatures with human attributes (or vice versa, of course), and on the other end of the spectrum, it can be seen as a set of people with identities that more closely match that of some other species besides their own, those who are perfectly willing to buy into the fantasy. Adding additional fantasy on top doesn't always work out quite as expected, but seems to be the natural course of events in that it's so easy to extend furry beyond its roots and into such realms. Some just like their animal people to be pretty normal, though, and that's okay, too. It's long since gotten to the point where the fandom is big enough to hold all of us.

3.2 The Dramagogues – Episode 1 – Strife

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I've been tiptoeing around this subject for a while now. It's one of those topics that is both a pretty big deal and should be talked about, as well as one that is pretty divisive and some people could be tetchy about. My big worry in bringing it up is not that I'll open a discussion on the topic, because that's what I want to do. Rather, I worry that any discussion that does happen would be more inflammatory than anything. It's one of those topics that a lot of people seem to agree on, but not agree on why, and it's difficult to describe in words in any event. So I'm going to do the band-aid thing here and just say it all at once: either furies are more dramatic people than other groups, or they think they are, and either concept is fraught with implications and certainly worth exploring, given how much time and energy the fandom seems to put into its drama.

There is no metric of drama. It's a hard thing to gauge and an even harder thing to gauge objectively. To say that furry is more dramatic than other groups, or more dramatic than life in general or simply the non-furry portion is a hard statement to back up. Is the drama more intense or less? Does it happen more frequently or less frequently? Is it more or less legitimate? Or important? Rooted in reality? That there are even so many questions in the second paragraph of a write-up on the subject bodes ill for saying, definitively, whether or not furry is more dramatic. Instead of trying to determine one way or another on the issue, I think it would be best to explore why this either may be the case or at least why many of us believe it is. I asked this as a quick poll on twitter a while back, so I'm going to structure the first two parts of this article around the responses I received to the two parts of the question that I posted, starting with one of my own views, while the third portion will be more about the duration of dramatic events in the fandom, with potential future exploration down the line.

Let me begin with some of the thoughts that have been going through my own mind as I work through these articles. I think that one of the biggest issues I've seen behind the drama, at least that which I've been party to or part of, is that furry is larger and more diverse than we expect it to be. We, as a community, share a strong common bond in our shared interests. We have our unique ways of interacting with each other, our unique modes of expression, and our unique concept of character. We have gotten so good at dealing with what we have and how that works within our subculture, that I think we believe our group is more self-similar than it really is. With our strong connection, it's easy for us to expect that those around us will share more than just our interests and some of our mannerisms, that they will also share our opinions and our eccentricities.

Part of why I started to see this was due to the fact that many conciliatory efforts that I saw being made publicly were posited as diplomatic ways of informing one on how to interact with others. However, many of these efforts come off more as ways to successfully interact with whichever

party posited them. That is, the one who attempted to solve the problem did so by assuming the embroiled parties (even if they were one themselves) saw things the same way that they did. While it may seem like we're a collection of mostly canids and there is a lot of self-similarity in character creation and our shared interests, we're just not that much alike.

In other instances, however, it appears that furry is smaller than we want to think. We want the fandom to be large enough to accommodate every aspect of ourselves, and we want that to include a group of friends who share the same experiences. Furry just isn't big enough for that, though. There are going to be clashes here and there in everything from names to interests. I ran into the name problem, myself, years go. When I started into the fandom, I went by Ranna, which was a name I had stolen from a book (and that's why I rarely go by that name anymore). Of course, the minute I tried to sign up for SPR using that name, I was rejected due to there already being one there. Same for Tapestries – a different Ranna, in fact.

In the long run, I really shouldn't have been surprised that I ran into other Rannas out there. We all wanted to be sure in our own little parts of the fandom, though, and so actually running into someone with the same name was a bit of a shock. The fandom just wasn't big enough to hold that, though, and so we run into all these instances of people knowing friends we thought they would never know, and we find out that those friends maybe know much mores about us and our relationships than we had previously thought – this was something that happened to be twice within the past few weeks, actually: a friend I had known for a while under a different name didn't know that I wrote for [adjective][species].

The drama, here, comes perhaps from the fact that it's easier to speak about other groups of friends within our groups of friends. It's easy for me to talk about drama at work when I get home and, with a filter in place of course, vice versa. Similarly, it's easy for me to ramble on about some of the goings on in my offline life to my online friends, but things get difficult when it turns out that someone I talk to online knows more about the relationships than I had thought. This is another downside of our heavy interaction on the Internet: it's so easy to say something to one group of friends and a different, perhaps contradictory thing to another group that could spark some strife when the information is shared between the groups. Enough from me, though, on to what others have to say.

Minority identity acts as a force multiplier on social dynamics. In-feuds carry the implicit baggage of membership.

– krtbuni

Although is is a tough statement to unpack, I feel that it captures a lot of what may actually be going on within the fandom. By belonging to a discrete segment of society, we are all members of a minority group. Members is too gentle of a word, even; this is something that we feel is

part of ourselves. For many of us, furry is part of our identity. The downside of that, is that every interaction within or about that social context of which we are a part is also about part of ourselves. That's the force multiplier: that there is some drama that may not even be connected to us makes little different when our membership carries this implicit baggage with it.

Every interaction that happens within some circle that's important to us becomes a part of us in a way. If you are Jewish (disclaimer: I am not), antisemitism can have a very real effect on your life, whether or not you experience directly; if you are an African-American (disclaimer: I'm 1/16th black, but that means very little), the racism that our country still struggles to overcome may impact you in a very real way, even if it may not seem like it from it outside. Accordingly, if a tv show misrepresents the fandom of which you are a member, it is very easy to feel personally misrepresented, or if there is a fight between two furs in which you agree with one side, it's easy to feel as if it is your fight as well. This would explain the way in which what seems like a relatively small bit of drama snowballs out of proportion once others know about it.

Any community whose central theme revolves around crafted image has inflated drama.

see: art, acting, politics, high school etc.

– _am3thyst

This is similar to the above quote in that it has to do with the fact that we are members of a community, and that fact is what makes us a little more dramatic. However, this touches on some of what I've mentioned before here on the blog. Specifically, our whole subculture is based on the fact that we interact not with our selves, but with constructed personas that are intentionally misrepresentative – granted, in the relatively innocuous way of being a different species, or perhaps a different gender. The downside of this, of course, is that we are not our characters.

We have the same amount as other fandoms. Ours are just in the forefront unfortunately.

– Adonai_Rifki

You know, it may just be due to the online nature of many of our interactions that the perceived level of drama is so high within the fandom. Having spent a good portion of my childhood years with a step-brother and two step-sisters taught me that there is, indeed, plenty of drama in the real world. I used to keep a toy on the frame of my step-brother's and my bunk bed that I would move from one end of the bed to the other as he annoyed me to sleep – my own version of "I'm going to count to three..." – which of course just caused him to act out all the more and led to fights. I was a real brat, growing up

So really, being around drama wasn't something that's unique or new when I joined the fandom, I had been around it all the while growing up. The thing that changed instead, was the visibility

of the drama, as everything was now written down and immortalized somewhere. Even if you're hanging out in a MUCK or IRC server, the text will still linger there on the screen until its pushed off the top, and even then, it resides in scrollbacks and countless logs. I found a log from years and years ago chock full of drama the other day and sent it to an acquaintance who had been involved, and everything was still fresh to the both of us. The text had endured and, along with it, the drama behind it. That is the same drama we complain about on twitter and FA: every time something happens and hundreds of people make journals about it, the drama explodes and becomes all the more visible, and often winds up outlasting even the original problem itself by quite a wide margin – “Krystal can't enjoy her sandwich”, anyone?

3.3 The Dramagogues – Episode 2 – Drama

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In the last post about drama, I wondered whether or not we, as a community, really were more dramatic than those around us, and if so, why, or if not, why we seem to think we are. Much of the content of that post came from responses to a few questions on twitter. Perhaps the best thing about our fandom is our willingness and ability to communicate, and that really is the basis of much of these articles, I had asked previously whether or not we were more dramatic and why, and gotten several very succinct answers as to why that might be the case, Beyond that, however, I also asked if our drama is in some way different than that in the world around us, and got several additional responses to this question, which is the basis for this, the second episode of The Dramagogues.

Yes. Furry drama sheds and gets all over everybody.

–rustitobuck

While this response may have been provided tongue-in-cheek, I think it does illustrate something that we do fairly well: appropriate. Furies are very, very good at deciding what is furry and what is not, and will do so every chance they get. There was a book published several years ago, *The Architect of Sleep* by Steven R. Boyett, which featured anthropomorphic raccoons as its characters. The author did not intend for them to be furry, and had originally planned on the book being the first in a series, but the response from the fandom was so outsized and, from the author's standpoint, creepy, that he refused to continue the series with the fandom's response being the reason why (he was not so polite in his wording).

We are so eager to appropriate things around us in the name of our fandom that it could be that, whether or not our drama is indeed all that different, we have made it ours. It may be just drama, but, being involved in the fandom, it becomes Furry Drama. There are, of course, some issues that may be unique to our subculture such as the intellectual property one has in a character, but it feels sometimes as though we could stick cat ears and a tail on any old problem and turn it into a furry problem. If you get short changed at the farmers market, you can complain about it, and if the artist you paid \$5 for an icon takes a few days too long, you can do much the same, but it's now possible to make it into a furry problem.

not particularly. the irony of the furry fandom is that it's more human than humans are.

–_am3thyst

Another way to look the same issue is to consider that our drama is simply an artifact of us being a slice of humanity as a whole. Humans have their own little dramas that are being played

out all the time. However, humans aren't a small, rather tightly knit group of people with many things in common. While all our problems may be relatively human, it could be that we just read more deeply into them because of our commonalities. On the other side, because we read so deeply into them, we do tend to be more focused on the day-to-day human dramas of our fellows. I think that may indeed be why we are so closely knitting the first place, at least in part.

This is one of those good-for-you scenarios. Even though the drama around us is... well, drama, it's still an instance of us interacting, which is a good thing, and the fact that we are so emotionally tied to the issues at hand is evidence of our emotional investment within the fandom. I used to wonder what the fandom would be like without all of the drama at seems to come with the package, and I think I've come to the conclusion that I just wouldn't like it that much. It's not that it's comforting by itself, so much as that it's evidence of how much we care about our hobby. If furry were something where being involved didn't mean enough for one to get emotionally invested, really don't think that it would be something that I would've stuck with this long, nor something that would've grown as fast as it has, even if it means focusing on our all-to-human problems.

Drama is drama, regardless of who says it or the content.

–Adonai_Rifki

I mentioned a quote in the last post, “Minority identity acts as a force multiplier on social dynamics. In-feuds carry the implicit baggage of membership”. Perhaps our drama really is just drama and has no special furry significance, and although the Internet likely has its effects on the issues involved, it could just be that our membership in the community makes us feel obligated to interpret things in a furry context. This quote does well to tie together the previous two in that it brings together the “content” being appropriated and the “who” of us just being people.

Our membership in this group carries the implicit membership in the drama therein. By taking it onto ourselves and turning it into the fandom's drama, we may wind up blowing it out of proportion (or way, way out of proportion), even though it's still just a little spat between individuals, as would happen between any groups of people. Still, it's comforting to know that we can do so much together, even fighting among ourselves.

I'd say any look at Facebook would say no.

–mousit

On the other hand, perhaps it's not our membership to the fandom that makes us so keyed into each other's drama, and our drama seems different and out of proportion because we happen to be tech-savvy people. The benefit of anonymity provided by the Internet, or at least a lack of direct consequences for our words and actions could be part of why it's so easy to turn any little

thing into drama. Perhaps our reliance on such a medium in order to properly express ourselves has its downsides: both an enhanced sensitivity to the language used around us (due to its relative permanence as compared to speech) and the ability to maintain a structured, even institutionalized facade presented to those around us.

Before I got into furry, I got into the Internet and some of its culture. I've mentioned before that I started out on some bulletin boards in about 1999, and we were no strangers to drama there, either. With communication on the Internet, it's easy and even encouraged to "write for your audience", to steal a term. Speech is very extemporaneous and it's easy to have a slip of the tongue or to say something potentially offensive without meaning to (foot-in-mouth syndrome), but it's much easier to write with a purpose, rather than extemporaneously. That is, even when you're discussing the relative merits of two different restaurants, you are writing with a very specific goal, reading and reread in what you've written, and making sure, even if only subconsciously, that you present yourself at your best. At the same time, however, you know that others are doing just the same and thus tend to pay a good amount of attention to language that's being used around you.

In furry, this structured presentation of self has become institutionalized in the concept of one's character, no matter how tightly associated the individual is with it. Even on visual media such as SecondLife, our interactions take place as structured language intentionally built to deceive, in a way. We intend to show ourselves as our characters and we write carefully in order to do so. Perhaps this is a symptom of furry, but it seems as though it's built into the Internet as a whole. The ability to maintain near-real-time communication using text allows one to build up whatever facade they wish while still coming off as a real person. The drama here comes up when a bit of that facade slips or is let down in order to share an honest opinion with someone, or let loose with some previously hidden emotions. This happened nearly as often in the boards I had been a member of as it does within furry, but seeing as how we were all a bunch of hormone-saturated teenagers, I had chalked it up to that, instead. Having been around the net as an adult now, I can say that we're just as childish (if not moreso, sometimes) as we were when we were teenagers when presented with the opportunity for anonymity, however partial.

If I were asked to give an opinion on the spot as to whether furry drama is different than regular drama, I would say no. Within the fandom, we have some very ordinary problems, and I don't think that our membership to this subculture changes the problems we have in any way. However, I would not be able to say that without a caveat: our membership does change the way in which we interpret drama. Our problems may be very similar to those among any predominately text-based culture, but our focus on our characters adds a strange twist to everything we do here, including fighting.

3.4 Participation Mystique

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Despite my frequent use of the word, I am more of the opinion that furry is a subculture, rather than a fandom. That's part of the problem of being a writer and having mostly just one topic to write about: thinking up enough ways to refer to the same concept again and again without sounding repetitive can prove difficult. I think that part of the reason that I keep referring to furry as "the [furry] fandom" is that it is a phrase engrained within our subculture, due to its historical use. Perhaps at some point in time, furry consisted mostly of a collection of fans, but as furry grows, so do the means with which it's members connect with it. That's why I enjoy subculture as a word to describe us: it is much more all-encompassing and, in the end, perhaps a little more accurate in describing our hodge-podge group.

When I was reading William Gibson's book *Pattern Recognition*, I was introduced to the term participation mystique, which comes from early Jungian psychology, adapted from Lèvy-Bruhl in order to describe the means by which we, as people, can define a portion of ourselves through membership in a community or association with an object. This, I think, is the core of the furry subculture.

I don't think that I could entirely get away with not using "fandom" to refer to furry. While anthropomorphism has figured large in most cultures, I think that what we call furry today stems in large part from a combination of other fandoms, such as those surrounding comic books, cartoons, and science fiction, eventually coalescing into a more coherent group, though still (and as yet) without a enteral nexus. It would be unfair of me to discount not only the formative years of the fandom, but also a still significant portion of furry that relies on their association with some extant product that contains that kernel of anthropomorphism.

So much of not only my own childhood, but my early years within furry had to do with the little fandoms that revolved around individual films. Disney's *Robin Hood*, the *Redwall* books, and even less direct examples, such as animal companions – talking and not – in Saturday morning cartoons or books such as Garth Nix's *Abhorsen* series (embarrassing admission: when I first got into furry, I tried to do a comic of *Sabriel* with the characters being foxes – lets just say it's good I stuck with music).

These sources are important to us because they give us an extant product to latch onto, a body of work to study, expand upon, and dream up new microcosms in the macrocosm of their world. For the rare few who are gifted enough to create the world in itself, it can be a little (or very) distressing, but the human mind is always adept at treating a fictional world as a fractal, looking closer and finding – or at least adding – more detail. It's doubly important, then that furry itself grew up' around these sources, at least in part. It allowed us to start with several very specific ideas,

look deeper into them, and come out with something general enough that a group of individuals from different interests could come together and say “this is us”.

Of course, this led to a new way of thinking of furry, especially once its presence on the Internet began to grow. A new member could find their way inside through some way other than some existing fandom. Despite being a big fan of all the classic furry books and films, none of them really struck a nerve with me – it was finding that others had built something new from those roots that caught my attention. I’ve mentioned before my roots in finding the fandom through Yerf! and a few other sites (Side7 and Elfwood, anyone?). With the disclosure that it’s what I’d call my own point of entry into the fandom, I feel that a good portion of those who call themselves furry today follow much the same route: a general interest in the concept of anthropomorphics not necessarily tied to one single source other than what the fandom has already produced.

I freely admit that this isn’t a very intense association with furry. For a little bit near when I was first getting into the fandom, I did think about myself as a fox (as I was at the time), and would often spend nights awake in bed imagining myself comfortable with my partner, both of us our cute little fox-sona selves. I know that for some, this sort of self-zoomorphism can become almost a whole-body species-dysphoria, extending from feeling as though one exhibits characteristics of their animal character to feeling decidedly uncomfortable being a human. I feel as though I should be careful writing about this, partly because I know relatively little about it beyond my own simple experiences, but mostly due to the fact that it tends to shift at this point into ourlets say “sister subcultures” of therianthropy and the were culture, which are not necessarily the focus of [adjective][species]. That said, this focus on the species as it pertains to the self is still important within furry culture, particularly when it comes to character creation (“I don’t feel like much of seagull, so why would I make my character one?”).

We certainly cannot leave out the spiritual aspects of furry, either. While this, like most things, seems to go through waves of popularity, it’s never waned so much as to become insignificant as an aspect of the fandom. This is a topic that certainly deserves its own article, so I’m only going to touch on it a little here, but it is interesting to note. As there have been anthropomorphic aspects of many cultures back through time, it’s easy to see these creating “fandoms” of their own. This is its own gradient as well: some may latch onto the legends and play into the roles set down for them, while others, seemingly unattached, will admit that they enjoy the trickster aspect of their coyote-sona or the cleverness inherent in being a fox-based-creature. There’s so much more that can be said about the spiritual aspects of being a furry, that I really do think it will have to wait until its own article. I still have to tie this all back together with participation mystique after all!

With something as loose-weaved as furry, it’s difficult to imagine there being anything more than the faintest borders around the subculture. There are, though, and where there are borders, there’s bound to be someone aiming to push them. Beyond simply the species available here on

earth, many are more content to explore the bounds created in science-fiction and fantasy universes. At least one of the followers of our twitter account is a Wookiee, and for a while, there were several Kzinti and Skiltaires floating around.

Beyond even the constructed species of these fictional worlds lies the only vaguely-defined realm of post-furry, a sub-sub-culture of sorts with the goal of pushing the limits of anthropomorphics beyond the “pure” combination of animal and human characteristics. While this may lead to some rather borderline or intentionally humorous character creations, the postmodernist viewpoint that seems to influence the postfurry attitude serves well with its looser sense of reality. This is another topic probably more deserving of its own post in the future, considering the intriguing variety possible within it, yet the dearth of information available on it.

All of these describe different aspects of our participation mystique as furries. The way we associate portions of our own selves with this abstract noun that is “furry”. We identify with the fandom in all our myriad ways, and by virtue of our identities, form the fandom in itself. The question has come up several times in the last few days about what exactly makes a furry. That’s one of those questions that’s decidedly difficult to answer in a way that’s satisfactory to all. I think that the best definition that I could come up with is that a furry is someone who claims to be a furry. There are probably some who fall outside this definition that others would consider as members of the fandom, but it’s part of our mystical participation that it be consensual – one cannot be forced to identify with something. I guess in that sense, furry’ winds up being more of an adjective than a noun, though the word as an adjective already carries too strong a meaning to be overloaded like that.

That there is a phrase for identifying with a group such as this is evidence that this is not a unique phenomenon. In the context of the aforementioned Gibson book, it was used in much the same way: describing the fascination and partial identity with a fan base for a specific creation (in the book’s case, bits of film slowly appearing on the internet, and in ours, anthropomorphics), but the same idea lends itself to other memberships that form portions of identities in individuals. A good example that comes to mind is one’s political or religious affiliation, which, for some people shapes a good portion of their identities. To state another example, since we’ve covered the belief and fan ends of the spectrum, many members of the LGBT community also base their identities on their membership, adopting styles, modes of speech, and mannerisms from what they believe is the norm for such an identity, thus perpetuating it’s existence.

Given these examples, I’m tempted to ask what modes and mannerisms within the fandom are perpetuated by identity with the fandom? There is certainly a good amount of lingo that comes along with our membership, such as the word fandom’ itself. Beyond that, though, there are certain things that do go along with our culture, at least in the case of conventions: certain styles, stances, and actions can identify the furry from the non-furry. Again this is something worthy of its own

post, but it's still worth noting that our participation in this larger culture called furry comes with its perhaps price is the wrong term, but certainly its expectations. One is no longer necessarily obligated to be familiar with *Watership Down* or *Rescue Rangers* (though one should apparently be familiar with dubstep), for instance. The criteria for participation remain loose enough for us to be a fairly accepting fandom, and it could probably be argued that they have loosened over time, but there are still some lines, however faint and pushed by the post-fur crowd (to name only one example) they are, which identifies us as furies.

Participation mystique, mystical participation, is perhaps one of the best phrases I've found to be used to define the fandom. It's not something we can (or should) whip out when trying to explain our subculture to those non-members around us. The concept of basing a part of our existence off something non-spatiotemporal makes it all sound a bit like a strange religion, especially when put in terms like that. However, with all the different levels of identifying with our animal characters represented, plus the consensual aspect of self-identifying as a furry, I feel we've got just about all the bases covered: a connection with our characters, no matter the source, and our participation forming a portion of our identity as the crazy animal-people we are.

3.5 Looking for the Furry Vegetarians

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In 2008, Klisouras furry survey asked “Would you describe yourself as an advocate of animal rights?”. 43% of you chose ‘yes’.

In surveys from 2009 onwards, Klisoura asks exactly the same question but only 27% of you choose ‘yes’. What changed?: in 2009, a new question was added on the following line: “Would you describe yourself as a vegetarian?”

This is an example of a phenomenon known in the psychology world as ‘priming’. When asked about animal rights and vegetarianism together, the thoughts of some users will have been drawn to their latest bacon sandwich and decided that, no, they weren’t an animal rights advocate.

My favourite example of priming is a study that investigated voting patterns in Arizona in the 2000 election. That year, there was a proposition to increase school funding. Support for the proposition was significantly greater when the polling station was in a school, compared to support at other nearby polling stations.

It’s natural to disbelieve the effect of priming in the furry survey, or in the Arizona school district examples. It suggests that we are all susceptible to change our opinion based our immediate surroundings. However priming is a common phenomenon and there are many examples: the science is unarguable.

The results in the furry survey could have been skewed in the other direction of course: if the question about vegetarianism were replaced by “Do you support the prosecution of negligent pet owners?”, the number of animal rights advocates would have gone up.

The large priming effect in the furry survey demonstrates two things:

It’s very difficult to write a survey, especially when you’re asking for opinions. Many people see a link between caring for animals, and choosing to eat them. This apparently simple connection is surprisingly controversial to many people. I am vegetarian and I’m keenly aware that nobody likes a holier-than-thou attitude. The intent of this article is not to advocate vegetarianism. So let me get a few things off my chest:

- Meat is delicious. It’s delicious because the human body has evolved to take advantage of the copious nutrients in meat.
- But you don’t need meat to be healthy. Studies of vegetarian and non-vegetarian Indian Hindus show no significant difference in life expectancy. (Western vegetarians live longer than non-vegetarians but this may be due to other lifestyle choices, such as smoking.)

Being vegetarian can be a hassle and requires vigilance. As far as I am concerned, the convenience and deliciousness of an omnivorous diet is a good enough reason to eat meat. It's just not for me.

Some vegetarians, like me, are ethical vegetarians. These people follow the general philosophy laid out by Peter Singer in his 1975 book, *Animal Liberation*. Singer's utilitarian philosophy can be summarized simply as 'minimize harm'. An ethical vegetarian might consider their options for a meal and decide that a vegetarian pizza does less harm than a pepperoni (which does less harm, in turn, than a meatlovers).

A key premise for Singer's philosophy is that you must believe humans to be an animal. (This may be a problem for you if you are religious and you believe that God created man in his image.) If you accept that animals are capable of suffering, then you can weigh the suffering of those non-human animals against the suffering of a human animal. This explains why it's okay to slap a horse but not okay to slap a baby; this also explains why animal testing of medicines is a good thing.

It seems logical to me that this reasoning would be more likely to resonate with furries, people who usually identify with or as non-human animals. Furries are much less likely to consider human beings to be a special case in the animal world, and much more likely to think about animal welfare. Consider the charities supported at furry events, or the 27%+ animal rights advocates.

So is there a higher proportion of vegetarians amongst furries? No.

- About 4% of furries taking Klisoura's survey "consider themselves to be vegetarian".
- About 4% of people in western countries identify as vegetarian.

It's been suggested to me that meat-eating might form an important part of the identity of a furry with a carnivorous character. This may be the case for some furries, but it's not the case in general: analysis of survey data shows that a furry with a pure-carnivore character is just as likely to be vegetarian as a furry with a pure-herbivore character.

The key to furries and vegetarianism comes down to gender bias. Anyone reading this will be keenly aware that furry is male dominated. Survey data suggests that around 80% of furries are male. (The women are also more likely to consider themselves only 'weakly' furry.)

This is important because, out in the non-furry world, women are twice as likely to be vegetarian than men. (If you are male and vegetarian, like I am, the question you'll be most often asked is "so is your girlfriend vegetarian?" The correct answer, by the way, is "I reject the premise of your question".)

In the furry world, the same ratio holds: women are twice as likely to be vegetarian than men. If you adjust the data for this gender bias (the male:female ratio is 50:50 outside furry; 80:20 inside furry), the relationship between furry and vegetarianism looks very different.

- If you are a male furry, you are twice as likely as a male non-furry to identify as a vegetarian.
- If you are a female furry, you are twice as likely as a female non-furry to identify as a vegetarian.

It's probable that the gap between furies and non-furies is starker still. Incredibly, a full two-thirds of non-furies who identify as vegetarian regularly eat meat and/or fish. I suspect that furies have a far stronger grasp of the definition of 'vegetarian'.

Even so, I remain surprised that vegetarianism isn't more common amongst furies. The logic, while not for everyone, seems straightforward to me. I wonder if there simply isn't the critical mass for many furies to be exposed to the idea - vegetarians certainly have a reputation for being obnoxious and evangelical.

I saw Peter Singer plugging his latest book a few years ago. He talked about the publicity and positive criticism generated by *Animal Liberation* back in 1975, and how he expected that vegetarianism would quickly become more commonplace. He talked about his surprise that the proportion of vegetarians has remained static since then. (Not coincidentally, his new book explores the idea of the ethical omnivore.)

So perhaps I'm being nave. As the priming example demonstrates, none of us are purely logical beings.

3.6 Horses and Houyhnhnms

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Many of you will be vaguely familiar with Gulliver's Travels, the satirical novel written by Jonathan Swift and published in 1725. However you may not know that the book is overtly furry.

Gulliver is a traveller who, through misadventure, voyages to four unknown lands: Lilliput (a land of little people); Brobdingnag (big people); Laputa (a scientific ruling class repressing an uneducated populous); and finally Houyhnhnmland – land of the rational horses.

Pronunciation note: 'houyhnhnm' is the name the horses have given themselves and so should sound much like a horse's whinny – 'hwinnum'.

I won't go into the plot in detail (although I will discuss Houyhnhnmland a little later on) but suffice to say that it's a very easy and entertaining read. The language isn't as antiquated as you might think; no more so than the contrivances used by some fantasy authors.

And then there's the furry content.

For starters there are the rational horses, the houyhnhnms themselves. They talk, they use their forelegs to handle tools and to eat, and they live in a society. In short, they are anthropomorphs.

Swift uses his anthropomorphic horses much in the same way many furry books, and sometimes furries themselves, use anthropomorphs: to reflect on human society. The houyhnhnms are entirely rational and live in a peaceful collective where the concept of lying is unknown. To draw a parallel with a more modern invention, they share similarities with Star Trek's Vulcans and in many ways, Borg.

Swift goes a step further by including zoomorphic humans: the yahoos. The yahoos are humans stripped of their rational nature. The resulting animal is reduced to a violent, selfish, scatological and sex-driven being. Gulliver is so disgusted by the yahoos that he begins to hate himself as he sees his instincts reflected in their behaviour. He yearns to be less human; more horse.

The entire book, not just the Houyhnhnmland voyage, looks at human society from an outsider's point of view. This, in my opinion, is how many furries see the 'human' world: as a collection of laws and unsaid rules that are often illogical and arbitrary. In each of the four islands visited by Gulliver, he experiences an askew version of England and English society.

Most famously, on the first island, Gulliver is a giant amongst two nations of tiny people who are at war. They are, literally, at war because they disagree over which end of a boiled egg should be sliced off before eating: the big-endians and the little-endians. On his second voyage, Gulliver finds himself the diminutive amongst giants. He attempts to justify the slaughter of his fellow tiny men in the war between England and France by the insignificant perceived differences between the two nations. His explanation is met with the same disbelief and horror that Gulliver expressed over the endian war.

England is no longer at war with France however the metaphor is just as strong today. I think many furries consider themselves to be outsiders from human society, and see many of society's actions as equally illogical and harmful as the endian war. I don't think you, reader, will struggle to find a relevant modern-day analogue.

Back in Houyhnhnmland, Gulliver's Travels explores the conflict between our instinctual, atavistic side and our rationality. By creating beings that are purely rational (the houyhnhnms) and purely animalistic (the yahoos), Swift asks the reader to consider himself. We like to think that we're rational beings, but how true is that? Surely most of our decision-making is driven by instincts like fear, or sexual desire, or love?

Furries explore the same questions pretty directly. By presenting as non-human (or part-human) animals, we're disassociating ourselves from the rules of 'normal' human behaviour. Starting from a position a half-step away from humanity, and a half-step towards our furry avatar of choice, we think about our animal instincts and consider that perhaps some of the artifices of human behaviour are untenable. The traits that we've appropriated from our avatars are usually instinctual ones; instincts that bring us closer to the animal world, and closer to one other. We've learned that a hug is often preferable to a handshake.

Through this lens, furries, like Gulliver, can see how humans everywhere are guided by instinct. (Many, if not most, people would deny this.) Once you think of everyone as an animal, it's easy to see selfish or territorial or lustful behaviour. And it's easy to see that denying that these behaviours are instinctual, and so applying a sheen of redemptive 'reasoning', often leads to harmful outcomes.

The houyhnhnms have no such instincts and accordingly their lives are guided by purely rational principles. They know neither love nor empathy. Decisions are made collectively and never second-guessed. Mating pairs are selected based on genetic synergies. They enslave and freely execute yahoos, rationalising that such wretched creatures cannot have worthwhile quality of life. They eventually exile Gulliver after observing his human flaws.

The furries might say that embracing instincts for what they are – natural – leads to a new understanding of ones self, and leads to the possibility of a richer life. If you are naturally flawed, it's easier to accept that everyone else is too. The furry community, for all its problems and drama (brilliantly encapsulated in these virtual pages by Makyo), is a welcoming and tolerant one. Swift's houyhnhnms and yahoos, representing the two extremes of our human animal nature, live in two very different but equal hells.

Gulliver's Travels is out of copyright, and so is available to download for free from Project Gutenberg (www.gutenberg.org). You can get it in any format imaginable: plain text, Kindle, HTML, even as an audiobook.

No copyright means that there are no royalties payable, and so the story of Gulliver's Travels has been adapted countless times. The 'fantastical voyage' aspect of the story makes it ripe for

adaptation into children's stories, much in the manner of *One Thousand and One Nights*. The book has also been exploited with varying degrees of adherence to the source material in middlebrow cinema, notably the 1990's TV miniseries featuring Ted Danson and the recent film starring Jack Black.

Adaptations of *Gulliver's Travels* usually focus on the first two of Gulliver's voyages, where he is respectively huge and tiny amongst the native population. The adaptations usually water down the occasionally explicit sexual content of the novel, which is a key theme. Human sexuality is a major societal motivation and Swift does not withdraw from the topic: Gulliver's comparatively massive genitals are key to his activities in Lilliput; he becomes a sexual plaything for teenage girls in Brobdingnag; crude sexual advances from pubescent yahoo girls lead to his eventual abandonment by the *houyhnhnms*.

Gulliver's Travels and Swift's *houyhnhnms* helped me understand my own identity as a furry. It's given me an insight into myself and also provided the language and framework to allow these ideas to become fully formed. Swift's focus on the true motivations of the human animal – instincts such as sex and fear – helped me understand that my own motivations are just the same as everyone else.

I sign off my emails as 'your friendly local *houyhnhnm*', but this is not to say that I see myself as a rational being. It's quite the opposite. The *houyhnhnms*, for me, are a reminder that I am just an animal. I have instincts that I can't deny or rationalize away.

Gulliver, on the other hand, is seduced by the logic and the reason of the *houyhnhnms*. Despite being cast out by the *houyhnhnms* and being returned to England by sympathetic humans, Gulliver rejects human society outright, seeing only a group of yahoos. He ends the novel as an embittered misanthrope. Sadly this is also the fate of many furies. Like Gulliver, they are blinded to the greatness of society by contemptible human actions, false rationalisations and the other ways in which we humans fail.

Swift encourages the reader to empathize with Gulliver and this is part of the book's genius and power. We watch and understand his downfall but we ultimately reject Gulliver and his beloved *houyhnhnms*. We can choose a happier path.

My furry self, the horse, stands for two things: my animal nature that I need to learn to embrace and accept, and the fact that I can use reason and rationality to improve myself and my life. The *houyhnhnms* and the yahoos are metaphors for our dual nature as human animals. They're something I'm running towards and away from at the same time.

There is irony here. By stepping away from my human form into my furry one, I've learned how to be human. The most human version of myself is the horse.

3.7 Full Cotton-Polyester Blend Jacket

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When I was pulling together the contributions page, I did my best to think through all the types of submissions that would fit in here on [adjective][species]. I wound up tossing “fiction” in there just in case someone could think of a way to write meta-furry fiction. I could think of one example by WhyteYote that wouldve fit, except for the fact that it was erotica.

However, lo and behold, our first piece of fiction arrived just a few days ago. Katzenjammer, after hearing stories about overzealous convention security, pulled together a short piece about a rent-a-cop taking his job protecting the animal people a little too seriously. . .

–Ed.

“Why did you do this, Lewis?”

“The rules state only one handler per. The lady or gentleman involved was attempting to bring two. That is double the allotted number.”

“But did you have to tackle one of them?”

“They were not responding to my verbal direction.”

“People here are calling us Nazis. I dont need to tell you that is not the image we are trying to project.”

“With all due respect maam but Im certain that at the Nazi furry convention we would not be having this conversation as no one would consider bringing two handlers into the headless lounge because they had a respect for order that is sadly lacking here.”

“Oh. . . are you some kind of World War II history buff, then?”

“Huh? . . . no.”

“Oh. Well Im just concerned because youve been doing such a great job so far. I mean, we all appreciate you taking this seriously. I know that this can be a job that is difficult to take seriously. But there are limits. How did you come across this job anyways?”

“Well I really dont know much about your organization here, but I saw the posting at the temp agency for additional help and it seemed. . . it seemed important to me.”

“Important?”

“Yes.”

“Thats a very strange choice of words.”

“I apologize.”

Sigh. “So, how am I going to explain this to the staff?”

#

It was 1983 when we landed in the swamp.

They told me that the mouse lived here. Thats all I needed to know. Why did he live here, I wondered, in this oppressively sweltering land? Perhaps to keep his enemies at bay. Perhaps as a challenge to the righteous. I was righteous. Did he think that a lay over at the stagnant, labyrinthine Atlanta airport would stop me? Did he think that making the best option for lunch the airport Applebees would slow me down? There was a lot of suffering in that Applebees.

Muggy. Thats how people from the midwest describe a hellhole. People with values. Good people. Thats how my parents described it. They didnt deserve this.

We arrived.

The sign had printed on it The happiest place on earth but I understand that what it was saying was Abandon all hope ye who enter here. The snow cones around every corner seemed like a sick joke. What chance did they have?

It wasnt difficult to find him. The mouse. We stood in line, I would have my meeting, it was imminent. But wait.

They came out of nowhere but the incessant, shrill cackling was unmistakable. Teenagers! They descended on the mouse. I couldnt tell what was happening and they disappeared as quickly as they had arrived.

When I finally got a view of what was going on I saw it happen. He just collapsed. The mouse. How could he be so weak. His image adorned every surface that could take it for fifty miles around. This was the reason I had come so far? Yes. This was nothing, a surprise attack by cowards, no real damage was done. A prank. My concerns were unwarranted. I thought.

But he stayed down. His vassals arrived.

Then his head came off.

What?

His HEAD came OFF.

WHAT.

They lifted it off, like it was the lid on a jar of pickles that a friend had already failed to open but regardless claimed credit for totally loosening it when you succeeded.

I dont. I dont understand.

Yes. You do.

Oh god.

Its not over yet.

Why.

Its just not.

What is that inside of him? Is that a person? What was going on here? This was madness! Was I wrong? Was I not prepared? My mind was too fragile. Why didnt they warn me?

But it wasnt over, he was right. In this heat, this... interloper started... vomiting.

Alright thats just gross.

I know. Im sorry. But it happened. It seems so obvious. He was vomiting out the magic. It kept coming out of him until it stopped. Then, mercifully, they took him away.

But it stayed. It just lay there, baking in the sun. The magic. To say that it was ruined was offensive. It was destroyed. Annihilated. Extinguished.

Never again.

#

“Hey? Hey are you listening to me? You kind of zoned out there for a while. Just dont it again, alright. Try to relax huh, try to have some fun. This isnt exactly Fort Knox. Youre too tense.”

Chapter 4

February

4.1 Eighty-Twenty

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One of the interesting things about running a blog is that you get to write about whats important to you. And one of the interesting things about running a blog with more than one contributor (hi guys!) is that rather than focusing on the whole field, youre more able to spread the labor around and focus on specific things within the field that are very important to you. Given that Ive already written a more broad-picture article on gender and am now about to delve into another 2000 word essay on the same, its safe to say that I think the whole things terribly interesting, and that furry itself is probably one of the more interesting subcultures in which to examine gender, sex, and sexuality.

As I did in the previous article, I feel the need to provide the following information and disclaimers about myself. Firstly, I am a biological male, I do not identify as male-gendered, and in terms of sexuality, while Id call myself pansexual, I am engaged to another man. Since thats what Ive got to work with, thats the viewpoint Ill be writing from, even though Ill try to draw as much as I can from others. In addition, the title is in reference to results provided by Klisouras Furry Survey, which will be mentioned within the article itself. Some of the thoughts in this article come from the responses to the [adjective][species] survey on gender identity and sexual orientation in the fandom. Finally, I know that my articles are wordy, perhaps more so than they need to be, but given that this topic is especially important to me, I do hope that youll forgive a slightly longer read.

Now that weve satisfied that nagging part of me that needs to make disclaimers

Part of what got me interested in this whole topic to begin with is the way I spent most of my time in the fandom for the first five or six years of my time here. Without going into more detail than has already been covered, I spent a lot of time hanging out with mostly gay guys online, primarily on MUCKs and IRC. It was what Id call a comfortable existence. My daily routine online consisted of connecting and immediately heading to the gay-bar-analog, whether it was an IRC channel or a room on FurryMUCK, to spend some time chatting it up, or maybe even looking for some hot, hot text-only action.

And it was pretty fulfilling, too! I met some wonderful people I still love to spend time around (hi guys!), had my fair share of relationships that occupied heart and mind almost completely while they lasted, and just generally lived out my little hedonist life as a red, then an arctic fox. I explored some things that I would never do in person, and some things that arent even possible offline, but in all, it was a young gay mans paradise; sex without consequences, a large dating pool, and a surrounding subculture that was almost fanatically accepting.

There were a few little things, however, that I hardly noticed at first, but started to bug me more and more as time went on.

I've noticed a trope in western gay culture, such as it is, that discovering you're gay goes through five main stages. Put glibly:

Age 5-12: "ew, girls are icky!" Age 13-14: "I'm supposed to like girls now" Age 15-25: "ew, girls are icky!" Age 26-32: Maturity Age 32+: A mystery. Some say The Gay ends, some say that this is about 102 in gay years, and some say that a few mythical couples live on Alright, so that was put very glibly. Even so, I bring this up in continuation from last week's article, Participation Mystique, wherein I mention some of the participation mystique that gay men have with western, or at least American gay culture.

There is a certain rebelliousness that we (and I say "we" freely; I identified as gay for quite a while) buy into. It starts with the rebelliousness that many teenagers go through without further prompting, continues on through liberation to college or working life where we know everything, and peters out around the time we land a job or career we aim to keep for a while. It's a rebelliousness against the heterocentrism that is inevitable in a world that, to requote and oft-quoted statistic, is 90% heterosexual. The bias is justified, sure, but were up-and-coming young adults and there's no reason we shouldn't assert not only our existence, but our membership to the gay culture, our participation mystique.

It's been successful to some extent, as well. The whole "were here, were queer, get used to it" scene has done much to push the culture and its members into the conscious mind of America, and change is indeed happening at both a state and national level. It's the return to the "ew, girls are icky!" stage that I find intriguing, though. A focus on marriage rights, matronly pop-stars, and men having sex with men is not the only thing that the gay culture brings with it. Of note to us is a sort of misogyny that is based within this rebelliousness, a rejection of the female body as being unappealing which seems to go hand-in-hand with the trope of straight men liking lesbian porn due to the lack of male bodies in the picture. While it's a subtle sort of misogyny that is based around the bearer of the bias own state more so than the bearer of the brunt of the bias (that is, this particular bias is based in the fact that gay men do not like women, rather than the fact that women are perceived as fundamentally inferior in some way), it is still just that.

It is what it is, though. My high school history teacher said several times that, in order for a segment of society to gain what they perceive to be equal status, they have to push a little too hard, go a little too far, in order to let things swing back toward the middle.

It is what it is, I should say, except in the case where you have a population that is effectively 80% male and 20% female, rather than the standard fifty-fifty split. Here in furry, we have a predominately young male culture, anonymity provided by the Internet, a sexually liberated atmosphere, and a group that is decidedly accepting of most anything. In short, we have a perfect storm

for something that smells good to gay men. While there are countless roots into the fandom, I don't doubt that several are through the exploration of homosexuality online. I don't doubt it, because that's how I got here: a combination of some people posting in a forum for gay teens and some stories on a certain nifty website. Needless to say, given all that, it's no surprise that there is the concentration that there is of young gay and bisexual men within the fandom.

I know that this was a long, round-about way to get here, but I feel that it really is very important to understanding some of the misogyny within the fandom. The misogyny that I'm speaking of, in particular, is the reaction to sex within an adult image or story. We really are a tolerant crowd, and there's room for everyone within this fandom. That the subject matter drop-down when submitting a piece of art to FurAffinity includes such things as "paw (tame)", "pregnancy (adult)", and "abstract" (while somehow managing to leave off "crafts") is telling of just how open a community we really are.

Were all welcome here, and yet still there is this strange misogyny that expresses itself almost as heterophobia in the reaction to art. What would an image depicting a straight couple having sex be on FA without the "this would be better if they were both male", "ew, gross vagina :(", and "you're cute, so I guess I'll just cover up the other side of the screen" comments? It's become pervasive on FA, respondents to the survey have mentioned it, and I've started noticing it within day-to-day interactions with those around me, as well.

This is, of course, only one example of the sex and gender bias within the fandom, of course. Along with our unique brand of heterophobia, there do seem to be some unique gender roles that we've appropriated for each other here in furry. As with most gender roles, they focus on dichotomies and binary states. Men are x, women are y, and never the twain shall meet. I tried to pull together three good examples, but there are, of course, plenty more than that.

Female as creator, male as consumer This, as with all of the examples I have here, is based in part off a gender role that is common in fields such as crafts or amateur art. That is, the female is seen as the one who takes the time to create, the one who would do such a thing as a profession, while the male is seen as the consumer, the one who would buy the created object. Though there are certainly a good number of male creators and female consumers within the furry fandom, it does seem that there is something of an expectation for the female furies to be the artists and fursuit makers, those who are creating, while the males are the ones browsing along the aisles of the dealers den, looking to purchase.

With this, as with most gender roles, there is little danger in bucking the trend, but the pressure to go along with it remains. One will not be castigated because one is a female consumer or male creator, but there is still an expectation that things will work a certain way, and perhaps a bit of disappointment when they don't. It is interesting to see the differences

in sex between those who are roaming the aisles and those who are working the tables at a convention dealers den, however, especially given the reported demographics of the fandom as a whole.

Female as nonsexual, male as hypersexual A friend on twitter recently mentioned that one of his favorite things about a certain adult website was that it provided some insight into the feminine state of mind when it came to sex. “Society makes that hard to see,” he said. “Since for girls, sex is some big secret for the most part, when guys are concerned.” This is a codified gender role that goes way, way back; centuries, even. That a female would ever enjoy sex was something that was simply beyond the ken of many, and to this day, that remains a concern within society.

Conversely, that a man might not be all about sex violates the code of machismo that, if nothing else, is codified in western media, if not society as a whole. There is a growing population of those – male and female alike – within the fandom, as noted by a respondent to the sexuality and gender survey, who identify as either asexual or non-gendered. What my friend was bemoaning was the double standard and that surrounds sexuality between the genders. This is perpetuated, to some extent, within the fandom by the western culture that surrounds so much of it. While a female bucking this trend is not likely to be called a nymphomaniac, nor is a male likely to be called a eunuch, that its strange and new for us to see the opposite sides is telling of how gender works within the fandom and our society as a whole.

Female as offline, male as online One of the interesting experiences surrounding gender that I had in college had to do with the gender differences between the majors offered by the university. I went to a school that very much bought into a lot of old-school ideas, from the way it treated the arts to the ways it expected students to act. Students and parents bought into this, as well – there was another, more liberal school in the state, and our goal seemed to be “dont be them.” So, not only were female engineers and scientists more rare, but they more readily bought into certain roles such as “nerd” that males didnt necessarily need to buy into. You could be a “jock” male computer science major, it seemed, but you couldnt be anything but a “nerd” female computer science major.

This is a wide-spread issue that is being focused on by many better minds than my own, but its effects are also seen within the fandom. Along with the creator role mentioned above, it seems like the females of the fandom are not expected to be as willing to partake in MUCKs, IRC, or even forums to some extent as much as males are. Combined with the previous point about sexuality, and it is unsurprising just how much of the population of Tapestries, a sexual and BDSM MUCK, is male.

I know that Ive likely gone on for far too long, and probably lost readers along the way, but I feel that this is an important topic for the fandom to consider. We are an open-minded bunch, all told, but there are a few sticking points where we have our troubles, and one of the biggest problem spots has to do with gender. Even if its not necessarily the cause for huge amounts of drama, it always seems to be riding beneath the surface of our interactions, making itself known here and there in all our myriad means of communication.

Rather than end this overly long article on a simple concluding statement, thought, I want to take the more proactive approach by putting out a call for submissions. Ive written this “Eighty-Twenty” article from the standpoint of a mostly-male furry in a mostly-male fandom. What I think we really need, though is the “Twenty-Eighty” article written from a female standpoint about how the fandom works from that point of view. I know that a few of you (hi guys!) have already approached me about the possibility of writing such an article; well, let this be your call to action – I dont think Im alone in wanting to hear more sides of the issue!

4.2 Zoophilia in the Furry Community

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One in six furies self-identify as zoophiles. The real number is probably higher.

This piece of information comes courtesy of Klisoura's survey and I don't think it would surprise many furs. A quick mental poll of the furies I know – the ones that I'm close enough to have an insight into their sexual preferences – suggest that it's about right.

Like many things in the furry world, exactly what comprises a zoophile is a little blurry. It's arguable that furry porn, as appreciated by a large majority of the readers of this blog, might be considered zoophilic. Taking the non-furry world as our reference point, furry erotica is certainly a half-step in the zoophilic direction.

In the psychology world, there is a growing consensus that zoophilia is a legitimate sexual orientation. Research taking place this century is roughly equivalent to the human sexuality research famously performed by Kinsey in the middle of the twentieth century.

A sexual orientation is usually judged to be valid based on three criteria:

- Affectional orientation (who we emotionally bond with)
- Sexual fantasy orientation (who we fantasize about)
- Erotic orientation (who we prefer to have sex with)

Using these three criteria, it's easy to qualify homosexuality as a legitimate orientation. (You would struggle to make an argument for plushophilia.) There is growing scientific evidence that zoophilia qualifies on all three counts.

There has been very little research into zoophilia. Up until very recently, scientific research focussed exclusively on mentally disadvantaged or low-IQ subjects. However research in the past few years has started to focus on so-called high functioning subjects', which is a slightly weaselly euphemism for normal people'.

Jesse Bering, a research psychologist and regular contributor to Scientific American, is probably the world's leading mainstream voice on zoophilia. Bering has explored the topic on several occasions in his Scientific American column and elsewhere. Among his data and discussion is the rather startling statistic that around 1% of people probably qualify as zoophiles.

1% is a lot. Consider that around 5% of people are homosexual.

Bering, however, is a pragmatic scientist. He will argue that the facts support zoophilia being a legitimate sexual orientation, and that there are a lot of zoophiles out there. (And many more amongst us furies.) But Bering doesn't touch the other side of the argument: the moral argument. And it's a big one.

Is it okay to be a practising zoophile?

Peter Singer, the ethicist I mentioned in my article on vegetarianism a couple of weeks ago, bases many of his arguments on the simple premise that humans are animals and therefore not a special case. This is not to say that the life of a human being should be considered as valuable as, say, an ant: quite the opposite. Singer argues that the suffering of a human being should be given equal consideration as the suffering of any other species. So a species with little capacity for suffering, like an ant, gets proportionally little consideration.

Singer, in his tragically-titled 2001 article *Heavy Petting*, makes the point that interspecies attraction is completely natural. He mentions a few obvious examples including incidents of zoophilia in humans, but also sexual attraction towards humans by other species. He discusses a typical amorous housepet and also a case of a male orang-utan making overt sexual advances towards a female human.

The best documented case of a non-human anthropophilia is Lucy the chimpanzee. Lucy was observed to have no sexual attraction towards members of her own species, but would masturbate to pictures of naked (human) men displayed in Playgirl.

Dan Savage, the sex columnist and ethicist, responded to a zoophile correspondent in 2008 ([link](#)). The question posed was a simple one, and one probably on the mind of many zoophiles: I'm emotionally, mentally and sexually attracted to dogs. I'm not attracted to humans. What do I do?

Savage acknowledged the difficulty of the situation. Importantly, this included the tacit concession that his correspondent was a zoophile by orientation, and not by choice. The zoophile would not be cured' by therapy (no more than a homosexual might be) and the zoophile would be well served to learn to accept, rather than fight, his orientation.

Savage suggested that his correspondent find a canine partner and keep his personal life to himself. This qualified endorsement was made on the condition that the zoophile keep himself safe (from prosecution or persecution) and his dog unharmed (from the sexual acts committed in the relationship).

This is the crux of the issue, I think: harm.

Both Singer and Savage make the obvious comparison between eating animals and having sexual contact with animals. They both conclude that bestiality is less harmful than eating meat.

I've touched on this topic before in other forums and I know it's a controversial statement. It's not easy to conclude that a societal norm like meat eating could possibly be worse than bestiality, a taboo sex act widely reviled for its perceived cruelty. However, if you can put aside those pre-conceptions, it's easy to see that the harm caused by a practising zoophile pales against that caused by someone eating (say) one factory-farmed chicken a week.

Even if you are vegan, I don't think you can hold a strong aversion to bestiality on ethical

grounds. The harm caused by the myriad of meat-eaters is overwhelming compared to the relatively few practising zoophiles. This comparison holds even if you assume that the zoophile is harming the animal in question.

This is not to say that zoophiles don't have a responsibility towards the welfare of animals: of course they do. Most zoophiles are attracted to horses or dogs. The duty of care of a zoophile is exactly the same as that of an owner of one of these domestic creatures. From a harm point of view, the sexual component is not relevant.

The large majority of zoophiles will be ethical and responsible carers. Because of the emotional connection – something required for the zoophilia sexual orientation to apply – it's likely that zoophiles make excellent pet owners. There will always be a selfish, sex-driven cruel minority, however it's unfair to tar all zoophiles with that brush.

This allows me to wheel out one of my favourite phrases: the most visible members of a minority are rarely its best ambassadors. To put it another way: the majority of zoophiles are not doing harm and they are largely invisible. Recall that upwards of 1 in 6 furies are zoos.

Through most of last century, and still today in many parts of the world, homosexuality was considered to be abhorrent. This belief, of course, didn't prevent or reduce the number of homosexuals: it simply made for a lot of unhappy people. Freud believed that elevated suicide rates of young homosexuals was evidence that homosexuality is a mental illness. Fortunately this belief no longer prevails and homosexuality is accepted as a legitimate sexual orientation.

Zoophiles are in a similar bind in today's society. Tolerance and acceptance amongst the furry group, where zoos are so numerous, will do a lot of good.

Many furies argue that the community is too tolerant. This is a point of view with some merit; self-policing helps reinforce positive behaviour. However I think the sentiment is often misguided – it's important to differentiate between what is innate, and what is a choice.

I'm not arguing for unconditional tolerance.

Instead, I'm arguing that zoophiles should be accepted for who they are. They should not be castigated or shunned for something that's innate. Zoophilia is a sexual orientation. We should encourage discussion about how one might become a happy, ethical zoophile.

4.3 Participation Mystique 2 – On Words

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This is a post I did not intend to write. I certainly did not intend to continue the Participation Mystique post into another.

Actually, truth be told, I had planned on taking a week off from writing; coming up with some fluff post pulled together from a combination of responses with some neat witticisms thrown in for good measure, or even just tossing up a guest post. Work's been decidedly hellish, and when I haven't been working, I've been feeling some emotional strain resulting from a large case of over-commitment on other projects. Come Monday, however, I'd caught up on sleep, and started rifling through comments and tweets in response to a few statements I'd made over the past few weeks. I eventually decided that I shouldn't be a lazy fox-man and pull together a formal response here in the form of an article.

So. What is furry?

It feels like every website, blog, and even every individual has to take a crack at defining furry. I personally wanted to stay away from it as much as possible because I didn't want my own attempt at a definition to color the views of the readers of the site. There have been a few comments on my last two posts and a few of my tweets, however, that have shown that that's already the case, and that my circumlocution around the issue may have caused more problems than it avoided. That is, for certain definitions of "problem": I love this sort of discussion, truth be told. Almost as much as I love circumlocution. Or the word "circumlocution". Sorry I'm so wordy.

"Furry" is an overloaded term. One of the most descriptive definitions of "overloading," as I understand it, comes from the realm of computer science. When one overloads an operator, that means that one is changing the way that operator works within a certain class of items. That is, the '+' operator, given two numbers, will add them together, but when given two strings, will turn them into one string by concatenating them. Additionally, when one is dealing with structured data, one can overload a reference to a piece of that data. 'ID' can refer to a student ID, a class ID, or Idaho.

I like this metaphor when it comes to overloading words in language. In particular, I feel that the concept of an overloaded term intended to mean multiple discrete things is particularly applicable, given the response I've gotten to certain posts and tweets. Namely, Altivo's comments to the article on sexism in the fandom and Sparf's responses to my twitter query about one's favorite "unintentionally furry work of fiction". In both cases, the difference between one person's definition of furry and the other's is notable. The big discrepancy seems to be whether or not the holder of the definition considers things that are not intentionally furry as furry or not. Put another way, is anything that represents an anthropomorphic animal furry?

The whole concept of anthropomorphism, as I'm sure my (likely 100% furry) audience already knows, is the attribution of human characteristics to non-human objects, usually to non-human animals, real or fictional. Since I seem to be on a tear of explaining myself, this is what I would call the parent category of what is furry. The fact that Coyote could talk, that Mickey Mouse could stand on two legs, that Garfield hated Mondays, these all fall into the camp of anthropomorphism, without a doubt. However, in each case, the author or authors designed the animal in question without a thought (at least, at first) that they might be subsumed by a fandom that was not specifically related to that exact thing (insofar as there is a Coyote, Mickey, or Garfield fandom).

Both of the commenters I mentioned before appear to disagree with me on this, however, and I know that they are not alone in their definitions of furry. In fact, the number one response to the question "Describe furry in your own words" on the [a][s] Census and Survey far and away seems to be "an affinity for anthropomorphic animals". However, I'm not convinced that I'm alone in feeling that this isn't exactly the case for many who call themselves "furs".

My biggest complaint with simply claiming "any anthropomorphized animal" as our own is that the definition is simply too big for a fandom to be able to be structured around it. Specifically, I feel that there is more to the fandom than simply anthropomorphic animals: avatars. It's not so much that we share thoughts or even fantasies about anthro-animals with each other, but that we all create our own avatars consisting of a mix of ourselves and an animal of our choice. I'm not sure that a furry convention would be able to gain multiple thousands of attendees if it simply consisted of many people agreeing loudly with each other that they like talking foxes.

On the other hand, I know that there are many levels of auto-anthropomorphism within the community. Some people find it a fun thing to draw, some think it's pretty awesome to dress up as an animal, and many find it perfectly pleasing to interact with each other on the Internet as if they were anthropomorphized canines and felines. The main thing that ties all of these diverse individuals together is the fact that they enjoy the connection between man and animal embodied in the concept of anthropomorphism. It is the root of our community, and the base of our interaction with each other. There are two questions that deal with this on the [a][s] survey: "what is your level of anthropomorphism?" and "what is your means of interaction with the fandom?". That such questions are even part of what could be considered a general census of the furry fandom is a clue that there is something more than the specific concept of having a partially-animal avatar.

This is why I prefer the definition for furry as "a collection of people who identify as furries". I think that it encompasses the right amount of people without overstepping bounds. It allows me to say things like "unintentionally furry" in order to differentiate between those who do something related to anthropomorphic animals and those who consider themselves members of a group who is willing to focus on anthropomorphics to the extent that many will even create for themselves an avatar for interpersonal interaction that is an anthropomorphic animal. In short, it allows me to

step on the fewest toes. Or tails.

I feel that this differentiation is important, not only for us being able to define ourselves to ourselves, but also to the world around us. I've mentioned before the reaction of the writer Steven Boyett's reaction to discovering that his novel *The Architect of Sleep* had been latched onto by members of the furry fandom (for those who missed it, it was decidedly negative). When we define ourselves to others, we have to take into consideration our own definitions of the fandom, as well as others'. This is something that was elaborated on by Samuel Conway (that is, Uncle Kage) in his Anthrocon panel on interacting with the media (something which I very much recommend watching). Conway neatly breaks this down into a few key points:

Don't define ourselves in terms of what we're not If you say "it's not about sex!", then the first thought that will leap into the minds of your listeners is "wait... why did they mention sex?"

Don't define ourselves in terms that aren't easily understood This ties into some of my qualms about defining furry as "people who are interested in anthropomorphic animals": doing so provides such a broad definition that it becomes easier for the listener to oversimplify than to understand, and that only if they already know what we mean when we say "anthropomorphic animals".

Do be aware of first impressions Conway suggests that you lead with your answer to the question "what is all this?" by saying that we are fans of "cartoon animals". While this grates on my nerves, I have a hard time disagreeing. If someone's first opinion of you is as a fan of Tom and Jerry and Rocky and Bullwinkle, then there is little harm done before you go on to explain the fact that many of us come up with our own personal characters with which we associate.

Do be aware of the listener's preconceptions While this isn't explicitly described in detail in the talk, it is implied with Conway's interactions with the ex-military audience member: if the listener already thinks that we are a bunch of sex-crazed maniacs who fetishize getting it on in animal costumes, take that into account in your own interactions with them.

These are just a few of the items mentioned in a lengthy talk on interacting with the media, but I feel that they're important to consider when coming to terms with defining furry. There are many who hold their own vague concept of what we are already in their heads due to either their own personal interaction (or membership) with the fandom or with a media outlet's portrayal of us.

Besides even that, though, our interaction with others within the fandom depends in part on what we consider to be a furry. Some have a more liberal definition of furry, in that it includes constructs that are not intended to be included in a fandom of those who create their own constructs

for themselves. Others, however, hesitate to even call themselves furry, so much as furry artists, or eschewing even that, anthro or even animal artists. Put that way, my own definition seems to be something of a cop out: I say that those, whether or not they have constructed their own characters, are furies so long as they identify as such.

In more concrete terms, I think that this is the definition that my readers should take into account when reading my articles and the twitter feed. When I say that there is a focus on sexuality and a certain sort of sexism in furry, I mean within those who identify as furry; similarly, when I ask what is a favorite “unintentionally furry” work, what I really should’ve asked is what would be a favorite work focusing on anthropomorphic animals that didn’t originate from our own subculture. This is partly in my defense as a response to those who have called me on my use of the term, but also me tossing my own two cents in when it comes to defining furry: it is what you make of it!

4.4 Fur on the Lens

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As a reader of this article, you may or may not have seen a recent mini-documentary on the furry fandom, filmed by National Geographic. Although I'm not a subscriber to this fine organisation, I've read many of their articles. Time and time again they produce splendid pieces on interesting aspects of history, the environment, and culture. So my first thought upon hearing that they'd chosen furies to be the subject of one of their small documentaries, was confusion. Why had they let their standards slip this time?

Don't get me wrong. I love being a part of this fandom. Despite the various oddballs and undesirables, there are a number of absolutely fantastic people within this little group. The artwork can be fantastic, and the process of thinking up a character is more fun than you'd like to admit. But the reason that the public has never properly welcomed us with open arms, attacked us with pitchforks or even acknowledged us is because we aren't all that interesting. Apart from the fact that we all like anthropomorphic animals in some way (and that we maybe have a tendency to be a bit nerdy) we aren't one collective body that thinks and does the same thing.

If you watch another documentary or read another article from National Geographic, you'll know what I mean. A well written piece about gang culture in Peru has more going for it than a bunch of nerds that dress up like anthropomorphic animals. Because that's really what we are.

When I first saw this mini-documentary, it was posted on a forum for furs from the United Kingdom. I was at a friend's house at the time, who also happens to be a fur. I pointed at the screen with a grin, and she sighed. While the documentary was unintentionally entertaining, it was also extremely predictable and more than slightly embarrassing.

The main problem with these films is that they all seem to have a similar layout. First we are introduced to an individual, who is supposedly usually 'shy and reserved' but is 'happy and playful' when it comes to wearing a fursuit or roleplaying as their character. I always find this part rather annoying. If these people want to portray us as likeable, interesting individuals, they aren't doing well by describing themselves as semi-autistic.

As someone who is fairly heavily involved in fandom, I don't need to take on an alternative persona to socialize with people. Most of us are very capable of doing it ourselves. I mean no malice towards people who have difficulty interacting with others, but it does seem that we are too often portrayed as shoe-gazers that need to pretend to be an animal in order to cope with reality.

And so we come to, wait for it, deep breath everybody, the Sexual Side of the fandom. In a number of furry related documentaries, everyone always quips without hesitation, "There is a porn aspect, but it isn't really that strong!"

This was interesting coming from people like ‘The Ranting Gryphon’, who has a whole skit dedicated to roleplaying online sex with furry characters. When we talk about the sexual side of the fandom, it is nothing less than stupid to deny that porn is not a big part of furry culture.

I have no idea if FurAffinity is the most used furry site. I do know, however, that it is very much up there in terms of the number of furies that use it. Refreshing the front page with the filter off, it is very rare to not see a single piece of ‘adult’ artwork on the front page. Doing a Google search of furry with mature content doesn’t give a particularly clean result, either. I’m not going to deny that there are people in the fandom not interested in the sexual element. I do feel sorry for them. But even they acknowledge the fandom’s ‘darker side’.

All in all, I’d prefer it if there were no more documentaries, films, or TV programmes based on the furry fandom. With that said, if someone ever shoves a camera in my face, asking if I’d like to give my opinion on the fandom, I’ll put down my drink, I’ll sigh, and I’ll look straight into the lens.

“We’re all a bunch of porn obsessed freaks”.

4.5 Born Again

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George W. Bush is probably the world's most famous born again Christian. At age 40, he was a borderline-alcoholic, a failed businessman, and the son of a successful politician. He credits a conversation with the Reverend Billy Graham in the mid-1980s, a high-profile preacher and Bush family friend, with turning him around.

Whatever you think of Bush as a politician, and whether you believe his story about rediscovering religion (plenty of people feel it's a convenient fiction), it's a compelling narrative: "ne'er-do-well boozehound finds God; becomes president".

Bush's story is unique but the sentiment is common amongst born-again Christians. Born-again Christians like Bush credit their faith for showing them the path to becoming a fully realized person. It is a revelatory experience to discover, or rediscover, your direction in life. The strength of that experience is such that born-again Christians are notoriously evangelical about their faith.

Which brings me to the furry community.

Many furies don't discover the furry community until they are already an adult. The experience of learning about your personal identity, combined with the fellowship of the community, is often intense and profound. It's common for such furies to go through changes that might qualify as being born again: they reconsider their lives and find a new, more honest direction. A born-again furry immediately gains an important social group; commonly re-evaluates their sexual preference; and sometimes changes career, relationship status or living situation.

Finding furry later in life can be revelatory. Just like born-again Christians, the experience is so strong that born-again furies can be evangelical about the community. (Some of them go so far as to write articles for websites dedicated to meta-analysis of the community itself.)

To those people who discovered furry as they were maturing, for whom furry has always been a part of their adult lives, the evangelical attitude of born-again furies can be a bit ponderous or cloying. After all, the furry community is flawed: the drama, the toxic personalities, the popularity contests, and the cliques are all reminiscent of the worst aspects of tribal juvenile behaviour, otherwise known as high school. How could a self-destructive and childish community be so great and life-changing?

To which the born-again furry might answer: try being a latent furry who doesn't connect with their natural social groups. Or perhaps: if you think furry is childish and self-destructive, you should see what the rest of the world is up to.

The evil funhouse mirror version of the born-again furry is the anti-furry. An anti-furry (for the purposes of this article) is someone who thinks the furry community is a bad thing. In my experience anti-furies usually fit into one of two categories:

The burned fur a fur who has been hurt by or become disgusted with the furry community. They usually cite the endless whirlpools of drama, or the community's tolerance of unsocial or oversexed behaviour. These furies often ragequit by airing their grievances in some public forum, quietly lurk online for a while, and eventually return – albeit harbouring ill will towards the community in general.

The troll someone who rails about the horror of the furry community. Something Awful was a notorious hotspot for this sort of behaviour some years ago. I'm happy to say I have personally seen less trolls in recent times. The trolls who are obsessed with the furry community are often (surprise surprise) latent furies who haven't managed to admit it to themselves.

The anti-furies are similar to the born-again furies because they have equivalent confidence in their opposing convictions. They are also similar in that those strong opinions are rooted in personal experience: the revelation of the furry community at a late age; the feeling of being let down by the community; the pain of being a closet case.

Regardless of your own opinion, born-again furies and anti-furies alike have interesting and valid personal stories to tell. They are all worth your time and your fellowship.

There is a rough truism here – a closely-held extreme belief often belies a transformative personal experience – that can apply in any case where a strong opinion is expressed. It holds for born-again Christians and, to refer back to my recent post, it holds for controversial topics like zoophilia.

My article from two weeks ago makes a defence for ethical zoophiles, practising or otherwise. It's a topic that is rarely discussed in any sort of intelligent fashion. In my experience, most conversations devolve into flame wars between two people who hold extreme positions on either side. But there are strong reasons to defend and appreciate the people holding both the extreme pro-zoo and the extreme anti-zoo opinions.

A few weeks ago, there was a zoophilia thread over on Flayrah. The subject is a furry who has been prosecuted for bestiality. The subsequent comment thread is difficult to read without becoming enraged for the un-nuanced opinions asserted from all sides – see below for a relatively mild example.

But let's consider a closely-held extreme belief often belies a transformative personal experience. This puts a different perspective on our flamers. I have already made my defence of the zoos, so let's look at the anti-zoos. Here are a couple of plausible scenarios:

- The topic of zoophilia is important to our anti-zoo because she is a zoophile and is rejecting it in her own head. Participating in zoo-related discussions helps reinforce her belief that zoophilia is wrong. It also helps her believe that she will be able to escape her own sexuality. And perhaps, subconsciously, it's also a little titillating.

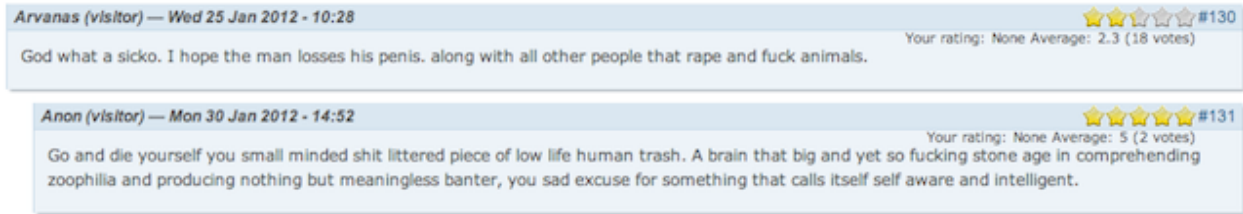


Figure 4.1: Comments from Flayrah

- The topic of zoophilia is important to our anti-zoo because he experimented at a young age with the family pet. What if our anti-zoo was discovered by a family member mid-act? (We all vividly recall our own shameful experiences and we know how powerful they can be.)

In either case, our angry furies are a lot more complex and interesting than their comments suggest.

Some of the most interesting furies I've met were angry. The topics that triggers their anger are all different, but they all share the same destructive consequences: anger is exhausting and, in the long run, unhealthy.

The furry community is a positive one for people exploring their own mind and their own personality. This holds true for the angry furies as well. Most of the angry furies I've met have changed or moderated their position over time – the community has helped them accept their sexuality, or their past, or their familial relationships, or whatever it may have been. Everyone has a unique story.

It's easy to get fired up when someone disagrees with you. I'd suggest that we should be tolerant towards all parties – even the trolls, even the born-again Christians. They might surprise you with their intelligence and ideas. (Your mileage may vary if you befriend George W. Bush.)

4.6 Interconnectivity

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Some things are better enjoyed alone.

Driving, for example! That we even use the phrase “back-seat driver” points to it being an endeavor best carried out by oneself. Typing, as well, and writing. And programming for sure; I know that I certainly have a difficult time with paired programming (because I’m right, of course). Exploring one’s own emotional state, plumbing the depths of one’s psyche, and working through one’s own problems are certainly meant to be solo adventures. Sometimes we just have to be solipsistic, separating ourselves from those around us to figure out what’s going on within us.

Furry, however, has become something that goes beyond solo. It has become a subculture, past even a simple fandom. It’s something to be shared, to be experienced with others, and I imagine it would be difficult to find an individual who would identify as a furry solely in a solipsistic sense.

I know that I’m being a little glib in my use of ‘solipsism’, here. Solipsism is the idea that nothing really, truly can be sure to exist beyond one’s own mind. It can be useful, to be sure, in the ways that I mentioned. Part of the reason I took last week off is that I’ve been struggling through a bit of a tough spot, and I needed evenings and a weekend alone to help sort through some of the mixed up emotions that have been plaguing me. I had to withdraw from a lot of friends, both online and off, in order to get my thoughts in order, even at the expense of spending time with a bunch of animal people I really enjoy being around, usually.

From a layman’s perspective, this is an inkling to the big difference between psychology and sociology. Not simply that I was thinking about myself instead of others, but that in order to do so, I had to pull back from the society around me: work by myself, think through my own problems, and eschew the distractions of chatting online or even in person in order to get through this. Now that I’m on my way back up, as it were, I’m doing my best to reintegrate with my friends and cohort, to become a member of my team at work, get back into dealing with my fiance and parents at home, and slip back into the fandom.

When I was a little younger and a lot more foolish, I spent some time writing on what I was calling the Manifesto Project (which still exists in a crippled form to this day; I won’t dignify it with a link), which was my attempt to explain what I believed and why. The project wound up stalling out before I got very far with it due to the sheer broadness of the goal “write about what you believe”. Before I sputtered to a stop, however, I had started to pull together some of my thoughts on what sociology was, what it meant to be part of a group. Prior to that point, I had written primarily from a solipsistic point of view, pulling together ideas that had to do with me and me only. And, as I’m sure you all are well aware, I have a habit of boiling things down to a pithy phrase that I can go off on for a few thousand words. In this case, I chose “triangulation of self”.

I never claimed to not be a nerd.

I had been (and have been recently) thinking that a lot of what we do in our interactions with others was done in order to help define ourselves. We surround ourselves with friends and embed ourselves in a society in order to define our own boundaries. And here, by interactions, I don't simply mean talking and touching and what not, but judging others' reactions to us, and our reactions to others. This helps us see the shape of ourselves similar to how a visual artist can depict a chair using only negative space. The negative space is sociology, filling in the details is psychology.

Of course, this is a long way around back to furies, and I'm sure there's some far better term to be used besides "triangulation of self". It is important though, given how robust a subculture furry has become due to this interconnectedness of its members. We, as a group, rely on our social interactions to perpetuate our interest in anthropomorphics in art, in communication, and in self expression. All of this, combined with our loose and varied definition of what we actually are leads to our strength through our plasticity. That is, our strength comes from our ability to reshape the community, or even our views of the community, allowing us to thrive and grow over time.

It's this assignment of importance to social interaction in furry that provides some of its greatest draw, I believe, especially during certain periods in one's life. It may even account for some of the skew in age seen in those within the fandom toward those in their teens and twenties, that time in life when defining oneself becomes so very important. Add on top of that the common reliance on a constructed avatar specifically used for interacting with others, and we have this "triangulation of self" in spades. Communicating and interacting with other furies, both online and off, provides this definition of character so many crave ("character" meaning both the character and the mental and moral qualities of the player, here). This definition of self through interaction is perhaps part of the reason that conventions, furmeets, social communities online and off, and so on are all so successful.

This is also so highly visible due to the ways that we communicate online, where a record is left of our interactions. Art sites such as FurAffinity, SoFurry, and Naby, not to mention intentionally social sites such as The Furry Agenda, the FA Forums, and the fluctuating community of furies on Twitter and other not-specifically-furry social sites are good examples. Heck, even sites like this one are nothing without both contributors and readers. [adjective][species] is its own little community, in a way.

This may just be one of those things that is too obvious to require stating. I mean, of course we communicate with each other. Of course we interact, and we feel that we need to interact in order to express our characters and show our animal selves. What is interesting, though, and perhaps this is an artifact more of the fact that we're a loose-knit online community than furies, is that a lot of these services are free, fan run, and contain only fan-provided advertisements, if any at all.¹

¹As I was asked previously, [a][s] is run without ads and doesn't bring in any money – it's all paid for out of

The reason I bring up the free status of these services is to point out something unique within communities such as this. Whereas in the larger community of, say, the western world, capitalism suggests that a company's success is decided by consumers spending their cash with them: Wal-Mart and Target are as large as they are because so many people spend their money at those stores, voting with their wallets in a sense. With our free services, however, the currency isn't financial, but social. Sites like FA and so on are popular and remain that way because they have earned our social currency.

The benefit for us as members of this culture is that we now have these treasure troves of as the basis our social standing. The relationships and social dynamics within the fandom are very complex, and proof of this lies evident in the ways that we interact through the 'net. Not simply discussions taking place in public, nor even the text sent back and forth between two people, but in the ways we react and interact with each other, defining ourselves through others. One can buy art of one's character – a little, a lot, or none at all – and one can comport themselves in certain ways in order to shape the way they're viewed, and identify themselves through the process.

As a bit of a personal anecdote, I wound up finding my current career through another fur, who wound up being my boss, in a way. Almost every time we talk about the fandom, I'm surprised at just how many people we both know, how much of their stories and the fandom's history we can recount to each other. It was recently estimated that, on Facebook, rather than there being the oft-quoted "six degrees of separation" between you and any other individual, the gap is narrowing, now nearly down to 4.74 degrees of separation. And that number is from the unintentional community of facebook users. It's no wonder that, with furry being a more intentional subculture and with our draw to interpersonal communication, that that number seems to drift even lower, especially keeping in mind that the average person can keep track of about 150 people in their heads, and that most furs seem to surround themselves with like-minded friends.²

I know that this article was rambling, and I hope you'll forgive me as I get back into the swing of things. Even so, it's interesting that we are so reliant on our interconnectedness to help define ourselves within the fandom. Doubly interesting that we draw so much of this definition from the social aspects of so many different sources, online and off. Interesting and comforting.

pocket and contributors post for free under a non-restrictive license. We aim to stick to this as best as possible, too!

²Taken from an informal twitter poll and eleven years in the fandom – don't hit me!

4.7 Born Again, Again: The Ex-Gays

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Last Monday I posted an article comparing born-again Christians to born-again furies, those of us who found their life's ear-and-tail-filled path at a more mature age. The discovery of something so important and personal often leads to born-again furies (and Christians) to be evangelical about their revelatory experience.

I used this to introduce a rough truism – *a closely-held extreme belief often belies a transformative personal experience*.

We have all met furies who hold extreme opinions on various topics. These opinions are regularly infuriating – however there is often a personal story behind the opinion. And that story will help cast the extreme opinion in a new, more understanding, perspective.

This is a theme you've heard from me before and will likely hear in the future: that it's important to be tolerant.

I want to continue the theme by talking about the so-called ex-gay movement. It is a great example that has an equivalent resonance within the furry community.

The ex-gay movement is largely Christian-driven, based on the idea that homosexuality is a learned behaviour that can be treated. There are a couple of big problems here:

- Modern psychology has proven beyond any doubt that sexual preference is innate and essentially immutable.
- The movement reinforces the destructive idea that there is something wrong with homosexuality. Worse, many teenagers are cajoled or forced into a programme. Predictably, this can reinforce internalized homophobia and lead to mental health problems. The ex-gay movement is very probably indirectly responsible for many suicides.

Moving on from the moral failings of the ex-gay movement, the experience of people who attend and claim conversion is worth examining. Just like born-again Christians and born-again furies, ex-gays can be evangelical: they believe that they've had a life-changing experience.

For some of the ex-gays, this will be true. These are the ones who were never fundamentally homosexual: they were heterosexuals who were experimenting, or possibly hetero-leaning bisexuals.

Many furies have had a similar experience. There is no stigma on gay sex in furry, and most furies are not exclusively heterosexual. In this environment, many fundamentally heterosexual furies will have had gay sex. (The opposite of the non-furry world, where many fundamentally homosexual people will have had straight sex.)

Some straight furies will realise their sexuality later in life, perhaps after falling in love with a member of the opposite sex. Like the ex-gays, this can be a revelatory experience. And some of those furies will become evangelical about their experience, resenting the furry community's complicity in stymieing this revelation.

Consider an ex-gay-furry – let's call him StraightFox – who decries the community for pushing homosexuality on new members. StraightFox is convinced that vulnerable young people in the furry community are being placed at risk by established gay members. (I expect that most people reading this post have been exposed to someone like StraightFox at some stage.) StraightFox is probably going to get shouted down for trolling. This is wrong: StraightFox is misguided, but so is the furry – let's call him GayWolf – calling for his head.

Here's why StraightFox is wrong:

- Nobody in the furry community turned him gay. He was straight at the beginning; he is still straight now.
- He is assuming that everyone else has the same experience. StraightFox may have had a negative experience but he is neglecting those that have had positive experiences. Furry's enthusiastic acceptance of sex is manna to the repressed, the closeted, and the shy.

Here's why GayWolf is wrong:

- StraightFox has been damaged by the furry community. He deserves respect (for finding his true self and for being brave enough to voice a contrarian opinion) and pity (for his difficult experience).
- GayWolf, being gay (and a wolf), should think of his life in non-furry world, where he is a member of a minority. GayWolf should know that it hurts to have a personal and important belief shouted down.

Like StraightFox, those people who have “successfully” been treated through the ex-gay movement are worth talking to. They will have fascinating stories to tell. They might be in complete denial; they might be struggling to fit into a world that doesn't accept their sexuality; they might have an interesting perspective on sexual experimentation. And just like everyone else, they are probably a good person struggling to manage their human failings.

Ted Haggard is a high profile, oft ridiculed ex-gay. Haggard was a high-profile evangelical pastor who was caught buying methamphetamines and sexual services from a male escort. In the ensuing scandal, Haggard resigned or was fired from his various religious posts.

And we all enjoyed the sweet, sweet taste of schadenfreude: someone who supported anti-gay legislation was publicly shown to be a hypocrite.

Following the scandal, Haggard underwent ex-gay counselling and was declared “completely heterosexual” just three weeks later. This claim was met by general disbelief, derision, and laughter.

It is easy to conclude that Haggard is a deluded and/or calculating individual: that he is trying to fool either himself, his family or the general public into believing that he is straight. It's easy to disregard him as a caricature: a fake, greedy, self-promoting hypocrite masquerading as a community leader.

Yet it is wrong to cast Ted Haggard in such a simplistic way. In 2011, a journalist, Kevin Roose, went on a camping trip with Haggard and his two sons. Late night, over the campfire, Haggard put a different spin on his situation:

“I think that probably, if I were 21 in this society, I would identify myself as a bisexual.” After a weekend of Ted trying to convince me of his unambiguous devotion to his wife and kids, I'm at first too surprised to say anything.

“So why not now?” I ask finally.

“Because, Kevin, I'm 54, with children, with a belief system, and I can have enforced boundaries in my life. Just like you're a heterosexual but you don't have sex with every woman that you're attracted to, so I can be who I am and exclusively have sex with my wife and be perfectly satisfied.”

This is not to say that Haggard should not be criticised. But it's easier to see him as a flawed human being who deserves pity for his situation. Like the ex-gay furies, he's in a situation he didn't choose and he didn't foresee.

The story of the ex-gays is different from last week's born-again furies but the general conclusion is the same: people are interesting and vulnerable, but this is rarely evident on first impressions. This is why tolerance is a great virtue: it gives people a chance to show themselves in all their complexity.

So be friendly and respectful towards the people you disagree with. You might be surprised.

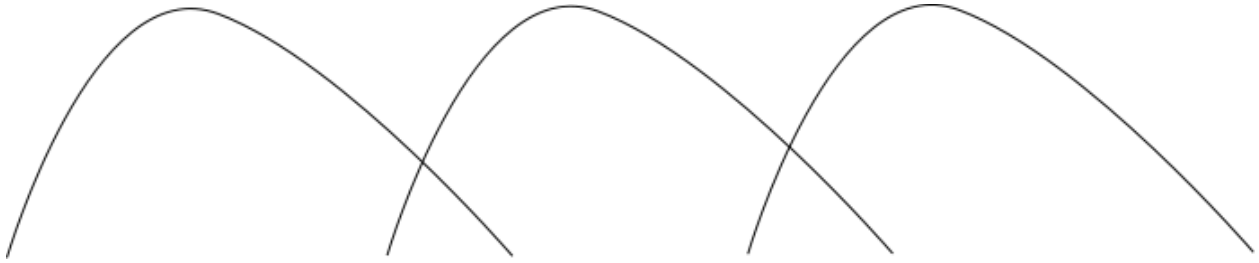


Figure 4.2: Arcs of drama

4.8 The Dramagogues – Episode 3 – Making Waves

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How many of you remember Sibe and Furry XDCC?

What about the PayPal kerfuffle with FurAffinity? That was more recent.

Ooh, or “Kristal can’t enjoy her sandwich”? Remember that one? That was a good one. It was pretty closely related to Yiffyleaks (insert eye-roll here), banning cub porn, and not banning Sonic art. They all sort of circle around FA.

Those were all pretty big deals! Remember them?

Now, when was the last time you thought about them?

I mentioned something like this a while back on the [a][s] twitter account. Much to my surprise, Sibe himself responded to the first tweet. I certainly wasn’t expecting what had seemed like some sort of evil boogiemani from my formative years in the fandom to actually respond to me, even having a short conversation with him via twitter. A few of my friends were there with me, staying over for New Years, and we all had a good chuckle about it, reminiscing about our pasts, when we knew each other only on the Internet, and we had all these giant things to care about, like whether or not people could download furry paid and private content on an IRC channel.

It really got me thinking that, in the last ten to twelve years as I’ve become a real person (a designation I won’t grant on who I was before 2000), I’ve noticed the way that the collective attention span seems to move in waves. It seems like something will come onto the scene, picking up steam quickly at first, then slowly plateauing before starting to fade from our attention span:

A lot of words and phrases will come readily to mind, here, and the one that will most likely leap to the forefront is viral’ or going viral’, or perhaps meme’. An idea like this will start with an individual or small group within our subculture, pick up a few more individuals, then explode in popularity until it seems like every other journal going through our FA feeds has to do with that one particular thing. After a while, you start seeing the “stop posting x” or “snarky comment about x” journals mingling in with the rest as the sheer amount of participants seems to plateau at

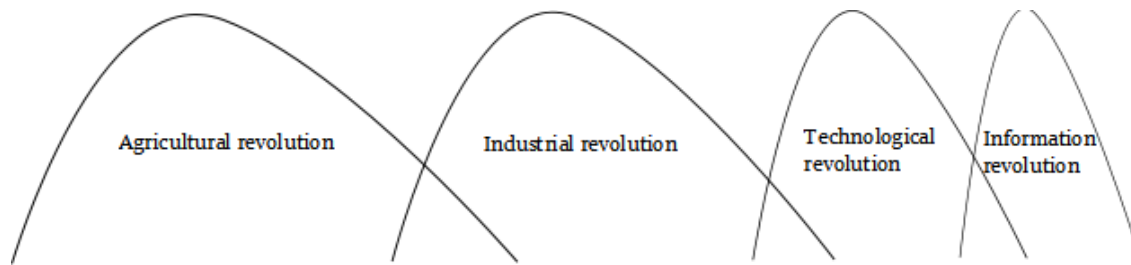


Figure 4.3: Arcs of revolution

some invisible high-water mark and slowly fade out after that. There may be a journal or two, then simply a reference or two within a few journals here and there. Finally nothing.

I was first made aware of this trend of arching ideas back in high school. The way that it was explained to me was in terms of the revolutions' in history, as in the agricultural or industrial revolutions. In each case, a few advances would happen near the beginning, then widespread adoption would follow, leading to a wider acceptance until it was part of the commonplace in everyone's lives. The point to be made was that, as each arch became part of the everyday, something new would start to come up, leading to a dovetailing effect, or even conflict, such as the French and American revolutions as the industrial revolution got under way, and the World Wars at just as the industrial revolution began to dovetail with the technological revolution.

Similarly, within our fandom, just as an issue starts to become commonplace (such as the cub-porn ban on FA) or even fade out (such as the Kristal-can't-enjoy-sandwich meme), only a short lull follows before the next surge rockets off from obscurity into brief popularity. The concept of strife at the dovetail fits at least a little bit here, though it may be a bit of a stretch, as we're not talking about world-wide wars. Instead, an event such as rumors that PayPal will flag your account if you mention FurAffinity in the message section of your transaction will trigger the next arch, and once that diminishes, we'll switch to perhaps a tracing scandal, or maybe a rumor about Sonic art being banned.

This isn't simply a furry problem, of course, and seems instead to be indicative of those who readily take part in the near-instantaneous forms of communication and new media so prevalent in western culture today. If we were to take a step back from the furry fandom, I'm sure I could ask similar questions. Remember the PayPal kerfuffle with Regretsy? Remember the debt ceiling? Remember the concerns over the Taepodong missiles? Heck, even I will admit to having not really thought about SOPA or PIPA much in the last week or two. In the revolutions graphic above, it's intentional that the arcs become narrower: the amount of time spent dwelling on each of these issues does seem to be growing shorter.

In our so thoroughly connected culture, we've picked up an incredible amount of communica-

tion. It ties us together more thoroughly than any previous era, that's for sure. On the flip side, however, we have picked up this shorter attention span leading to these more frequent waves of stress and drama.

I don't mean to come off as a get-off-my-lawn, curmudgeonly Luddite. I did preface that statement with how neat our new-found interconnectedness is, and I am writing this on a website, which will be published to three separate social sites and is powered by free and open-source software – things I know that I hold dear. There is, however, a problem in focusing on the extreme near-term with some of these Terribly Important Events. SOPA started its life a few months ago, but it wasn't until the end of December into the beginning of January that it went viral, leaving it plenty of time to incubate and gain strength. Additionally, after the house dropped it further bills either cropped up or gained visibility in the mediacentric west such as the OPEN bill and ACTA. There are, however, root causes to each of these bills, as there are for most such spurts of interest within the media. Just as online privacy and piracy are the backbone of SOPA, PIPA, OPEN, and ACTA, so too are gender, sexuality, and reproductive rights seemingly the backbones of much of the United States 2012 presidential campaigns. With that, as interest in the intellectual property bills waned, did interest in online privacy fade as well? And when the 2012 campaign trail comes to an end, will issues pertaining to gender, sexuality, and reproduction fade from the collective attention span?

That the furry fandom is beginning, in its own way, to exhibit the signs and symptoms shown by the larger culture of western society is indicative of at least two realities. First, this is a sign that the contiguous fandom is getting large enough to accommodate all of these issues. The furry subculture has seen a lot of growth in the area of those who identify specifically as furries in the last twenty or thirty years, but most especially in the last ten: we've grown large quickly, and we've started to encompass a variety of issues in our primarily social group.

Secondly, as these issues become more prominent and more prone to “viral outbreak”, it gets harder to see (and, arguably, more important to remember) that there are individuals at the heart of these Terribly Important Events. These are the people to whom the events are very important indeed, the ones who will hold onto and remember the moments that passed so quickly through the massed consciousness for a much longer period of time; the ones who care deeply. However, on the flip side, it's also important to remember that not everyone will react in the same way to what one might consider extremely important.

People, in general, can't hold more than a few things close to their hearts. It may be difficult to conceive of the fact that something that is of dreadful importance to us is only worth a passing mention to those around us, but rest assured that everyone has their own Terribly Important Events to care about, things that not everyone will have room in their hearts to care about as well. I've written before about how we're often just like everyone else, and it bears repeating now: we're all

just folk here.

That's what so much of this so-called drama' centers around: caring deeply. Or failing that, caring shallowly but loudly. An individual may care strongly in either a positive or negative aspect about gender and sexuality issues, to take an example from myself. But in a community of our size, any individual will not be alone in their focus, having enough many like-minded people around to form a minority sub-community. In previous articles, as well as in comments here on the site, the concept of minority and majority membership has been brought up: such is the stuff that these arches of drama are made of. Members caring about something enough to convince others to do the same, if only briefly.

Chapter 5

March

5.1 *Animal Farm*

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Animal Farm is George Orwell's 1945 classic novel.

Orwell is considered to be one of the great authors and *Animal Farm*, along with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is considered to be one of his masterpieces. It is about talking anthropomorphic animals that overthrow their human farmer master and run the farm on their own terms.

I recently re-read *Animal Farm* with the idea that I would review it for [adjective][species]. I was planning to conclude that it's a great book, and a great furry book, and that all furries should read it.

I have re-read *Animal Farm*, but I'm not recommending it: **don't read *Animal Farm*. Read something else.**

I don't think that *Animal Farm* a furry book. Which got me thinking about what constitutes a furry book.

I'll try to define what a furry book is later, but let's look at *Animal Farm* first. It has many qualities that might make it attractive to a furry audience:

- *Animal Farm* is not complex or difficult to read. Its full title is "*Animal Farm: A Fairy Story*", and it's written in a very deliberate children's storybook style. The writing is magical in its clarity, akin to Dr Seuss, J.K. Rowling or Philip K. Dick.
- *Animal Farm* is short: you can start and finish it in a single sitting. It took me a couple of hours.
- The animal characters are fully realized and easy to empathize with.
- Many furry readers will appreciate that the only romance in the book is homosexual, between Benjamin the donkey and Boxer the horse. In line with the writing style, the relationship is chaste and friendly, and would perhaps be better described as homosocial, a bit like Bert and Ernie of Sesame Street. Still, Benjamin and Boxer are devoted to one another and are inseparable to the point that they plan to retire together.

And yet I don't think it's a furry book.

Why? For starters, I think that furry is escapist by nature.

Furry books tend to embrace an alternate universe. Makyo touched on this in some detail in his *Layers of Fantasy* post earlier this year. He pointed out that furry art tends to exist in this context:

It is a sort of stacking of different layers of fantasy, with our focus on anthropomorphic animals being layered atop science fiction or fantasy elements.

Makyo goes on to point out that this isn't a rule that applies to all furry art, and that the alternate-universe concept falls over when we furries socialize in the real world. But I think that furry does necessarily involve some disconnection from the real world, if only to accommodate our self-images as animal people. I understand that this point is arguable (and please do comment away).

I think that a real-life furry gathering is always different from a non-furry group. The alternate names; the blas acceptance of ears and tails and fursuits; the non-traditional treatment of sexuality, and;- most importantly – the implicit acceptance that each of us are the being that we feel we are on the inside. I'm an anthropomorphic horse; RandomWolf is in a funny mood because there is a full moon; Bob is just a friendly human who likes Thundercats.

I think that furry books reflect the furry community, in that the community is disconnected from the real world. As furries, we want to escape – however marginally – from the real world. We create our own reality.

Animal Farm, despite its talking animals, exists firmly within the real world. It is allegorical, not fantastical. I wouldn't recommend Bulgakov's *The Master & Margarita* as a furry book either.

Animal Farm is an allegory of the Russian Revolution. It retells the story of Russia and the USSR from around World War I through to the last years of World War II. The primary porcine protagonists – Major, Napoleon and Snowball – are respective literal analogs for Marx, Stalin and Trotsky. *Animal Farm* is no fairytale: there is no redemption, no success. The farm, following revolutionary overthrow of the despotic Farmer Jones, charts a course back to corrupt dictatorship as straight as an arrow.

The children's storybook language is key to the book's power and testament to Orwell's genius. The language primes us to expect and hope that our farm animals will earn themselves a better life through hope and struggle: we've read storybooks before. We expect conflict and dark times, but we also expect redemption or at least an engaging Brothers-Grimm-style grotesque coda. But there is no hope for our animals. They are as doomed under the pigs as they were under Farmer Jones.

As well as escapism, a furry book will often employ a literary device where species is shorthand for behaviour. (Cheetahs are fast; foxes are vain; bulls are strong.) This does occur in *Animal Farm* to an extent – for example we have a strong horse, a lazy cat, and a grumpy donkey – however like the characterization of the pigs, this is meant allegorically. That is, Orwell explores the fates of the Russian people against their (respectively for my three examples) loyalty, work ethic, and cynicism.

To put it more directly: *Animal Farm* doesn't explore speciation as a philosophical idea in the way that a furry book does.

I wrote about Gulliver's Travels a few weeks ago using this as the key "furry" idea. Swift's rational horses and animalistic humans and are intended to disconnect our rational nature from our

atavistic selves. In doing so, he asks us to consider what it means to be human, a question close to the heart of many furries (and, of course, [adjective][species]). I'd recommend *Gulliver's Travels* to any furry interested in exploring the idea of identity.

Another example: *The First Book of Lapism* by Phil Geusz deals with the philosophical aspects of identity and species. Geusz imagines a world where people voluntarily transform themselves into bunny-people in the hope of creating a pacifist and highly-socialized race. Geusz's books explore the consequences of this new race in an accessible alternate-universe manner. Speculative fiction isn't personally my cup of furry tea, but Geusz's works are well written and beloved by many.

Animal Farm is a work of genius and was a very important book when it was published in 1945. History is important, but the Russian Revolution is less relevant in our post cold-war world. And if a version of *Animal Farm* were published today as an allegory for conflict between the Western and Islamic worlds, I still wouldn't recommend it as a furry book.

- *Animal Farm* by George Orwell is widely available for around 7. It is not available for download in the US. Recommended for furry European history buffs.
- *The First Book of Lapism* by Phil Geusz is available for 11.30 paperback / 3.22 pdf ebook. Recommended for furries who enjoy speculative fiction and/or bunnies.
- *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift is available to download for free from Project Gutenberg. Recommended for everyone.
- *The Master & Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov is widely available in every format for around 5 or less. Recommended for anyone who has read the complete works of Fyodor Dostoevsky.

5.2 Doxa

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Im sure Ive gone on before about the benefits of working within a community, but Ill say it again: you guys are ace.

While running the [a][s] Twitter account, I do my best to follow back everyone who follows the account. This isnt simply a nice-guy type thing to do; some of the best inspiration comes from all you fuzzies out there. After all, the articles here would get pretty boring if they were solely about what it was like to be a furry without being a member of the furry subculture. This weeks article comes from a recommendation and brief conversation with Drenthe, a raccoon of quality, about a book he had seen a review of which I subsequently purchased. The book was Hanne Blanks *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality*. I think its fairly obvious by now how much gender and sexuality interest me.

One of the early chapters of the book brings up an interesting concept that I only recently thought to apply to the fandom, and thats the concept of doxa.

Doxa, from the Greek meaning “popular belief”, has come to mean something very specific in sociology today. Doxa is everything that goes without saying in a society. In Blanks book, she uses it to describe the fact that, for the majority of our western society, it goes without saying that heterosexuality is the norm, that homosexuality has to do with two people in a binary gender system engaging in sexual activity or feeling romantically attracted to each other, when, on close inspection, neither sexuality nor gender are quite so simple. This is part of our doxa, part of what we just assume is the case via popular belief. It is rarely taught explicitly, and in fact rarely ever mentioned out loud because it is so common a belief.

This concept shows itself primarily in language and communication, though its also visible in many of the social structures of the society. One of the most common linguistic elements surrounding doxa, Blank asserts, is markedness, or marked categories. That is, two categories related by a rule and an exception, or a general category and a specific category. For a pertinent example, one might consider the unmarked term “marriage” and the marked term “gay marriage”. Or perhaps in the language of media, this could be “advertisements” and “girls advertisements”, which in Chandlers “Semiotics for Beginners” is marked by “significantly longer shots, significantly more dissolves (fade out/fade in of shot over shot), less long shots and more close-ups, less low shots, more level shots and less overhead shots”.

All of this, of course, got me wondering about what sort of doxa and marked categories we have within the fandom. Culture as whole has the givens and the goes-without-sayings, and individual subcultures, as parts of that whole, are just as susceptible to their own specific doxa. Ive written before about some of the stages of growth of an individual within western gay popular culture, and

those, in their own way, are a sort of doxa, if it goes without saying that younger members of that culture go through their phases of discovery.

One of the big problems with discerning doxa amid that noisy channel of communication that is language and media is difficult, and it is most often found when it is challenged, such as when one notices a marked category. After all, doxa is not a static thing: it changes and grows or fades as the society around it advances or declines. Here are just a few of the things I've noticed within the fandom that could be called doxa, though as they're all either currently being challenged or have already been challenged, they may sound a little dated. To be sure, finding any sort of doxa that is currently well-entrenched is nearly impossible – it's difficult to ask oneself what one takes for granted, after all.

Everyone has a personal character When I first started getting into the fandom and learning more about furry, it seemed as though the first thing you did was choose a species and attributes that fit your personality and did your level best to let that character become you. Everyone I knew had a character that fit them well and only a few I knew had alts, which were mainly used to either sneak around or separate adult aspects of their interactions from more general aspects. However, over time, I noticed that many of my friends (and me, for that matter) started to create different characters or at least different morphs to correspond to different aspects of their personality. It wasn't so much that one was just a foxman anymore; one was a foxman when chatting with friends, a foxgirl when questioning one's gender identity, a wolverineman to roleplay stronger emotions, and so on.

While this was likely the case even when I was still in my “fursona” stage, I think that things have become more clearly separated now as we get into such things as character auctions and “adoptables”, where one creating a character no longer has much to do with the personal aspect of *having* a character. Now that the doxa of having a personal character is being challenged, you see more and more people on FA having journals listing their many characters, only a few of which they may have a personal connection with beyond simply “this is mine”.

Furry is dramatic As I mentioned in my previous post, it seems as though a meme will move in a certain arc shape that has become familiar. That post was about the larger meme of drama within the fandom, but even that one can be seen to be moving in certain ways. Whereas before it was considered implicit that furies were going to be dramatic people, now it is something that we hang lampshades on nearly constantly – heck, some of us even write introspective meta-furry articles about the subject – and it seems that a lot of that default-to-drama attitude is starting to fade away. Just like all of the smaller bits of strife within the

larger world of drama, the drama itself is starting to move in that same arc. It is a doxa that is being challenged by the very fact that we were so willing to point it out and name it.

Furry is unpopular or uncool Kathleen Gerbasi, referencing the infamous *Vanity Fair* article, mentions, “The furry stereotype promoted by [the article’s author] indicated that furries were predominantly male, liked cartoons as children, enjoyed science fiction, were homosexual, wore glasses and had beards (male furries only), were employed as scientists or in computer-related fields, and their most common totem animals were wolves and foxes”, which does seem to fit in nicely with our own exploration of what might be the default furry in the fandom. Needless to say, it doesn’t paint the picture of what one might call a cool or popular guy.

However, as the fandom has grown and changed, it has entered into a marketing feedback loop: the more furs there are out there with purchasing power, the more money is to be made on them by creating products to suit their tastes, which in turn, helps to broaden the audience of furries out there. At some point, it became cool and hip to adopt some items that could be seen as related to our fandom, if not necessarily to be furry oneself. Spirit hoods, tails, and kigurumi pajamas are some examples of how this doxa has been challenged even from outside the fandom itself.

It’s important to note, here that there is a blurry line between doxa and opinion. One can hold an opinion as a belief and even believe in it quite strongly, but doxa are things that we implicitly believe are true about the society in which we are embedded, things that we take as fact. The reason that the line is blurry is that, not only is it sometimes difficult to disentangle opinion from perceived fact, but that as doxa shifts and changes over time, it can veer closer or farther away from opinion.

Watching the shift and change of what we take as given within the fandom is a good way to watch the way our subculture grows and changes, itself. As we watch these ideas shift from doxa to a division between orthodoxy and heterodoxy – that which is accepted as normal, and that which is seen as going against the norm – to an accepted variety, we can see the way that new members influence the fandom and how external factors can change our social interaction. The perceived sexualization of furry and the consequent backlash from both older and newer members can be seen as part of this, for example, and there are even visible artifacts such as the numerous not yiffy and no RP groups on FA being tagged on artists and watchers’ profiles alike. That is just one example, however, of a shorter change that has shown how the fandom is shifting along with its members’ participation.

So is doxa good or bad? That’s a tough question to answer. Doxa may be one of those things that “just is”. It’s an artifact of the way we work as individuals as well as the way our societies are built. Certainly, some doxa cause harm to individuals and minorities, and even within those

minorities, sub-doxa of a sort can cause additional problems in the form of backlash, but commonly held beliefs and ideas are part of the glue that holds us together in cultures. Even within our own fandom, there are several currents and ideas that form the shifting background of whatever furry *is*. Equally difficult to ask, then, is what is the next doxa? What new ideas will we find out we are taking for granted when they're challenged? What commonly held beliefs will lead to contention in the future of our small group of animal-people? While it is difficult to look within ourselves and figure these things out now beyond searching for marked categories, it certainly bears exploration once they come to light.

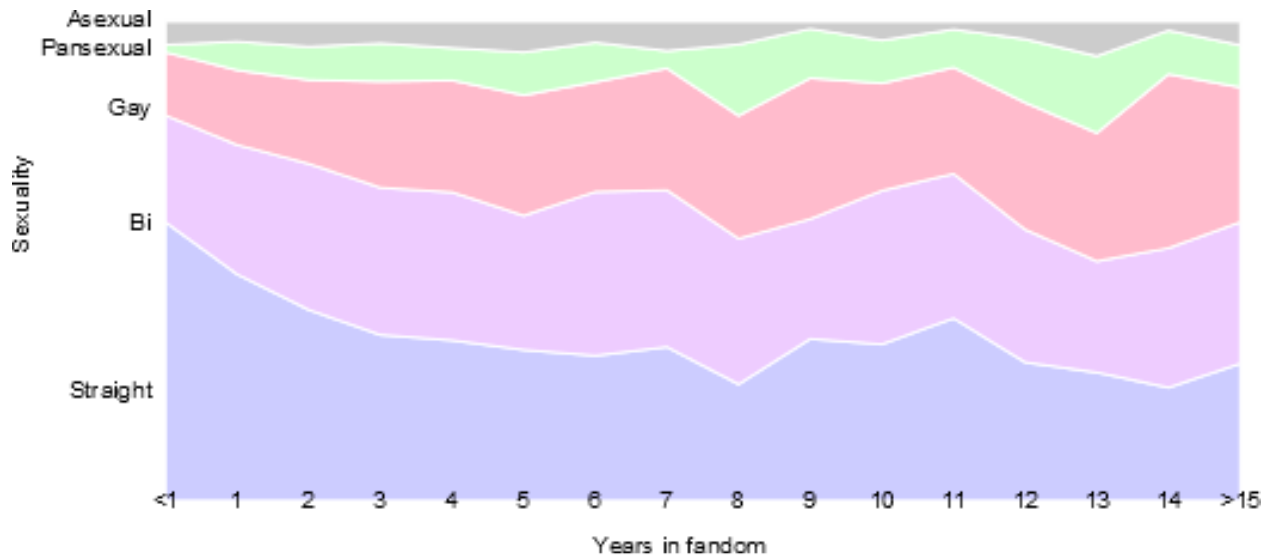


Figure 5.1: Years in the fandom vs. sexual orientation

5.3 Re-Evaluation Your Sexual Preference

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There is a widely-held belief that new furries often re-evaluate their sexual preference after discovering the community.

Stereotypically, a young heterosexual male will begin socializing with furries – either online or in person – and will shortly re-evaluate himself as gay (or bi). Our young stereotype may think that furry helped him realize this about himself, and the experience will probably be a very positive one.

Confession time: my name is JM Horse and I am a stereotype.

I first heard about this phenomenon while reading about the community online. The then-popular Furvey, a long furry survey that people would fill in and post to alt.lifestyle.furry on Usenet, had this question (which I have lightly edited for clarity):

It is common for many furries to live as a heterosexual, and then through furry to discover their attraction to the same sex – is this the case with you?

This question has been asked since the mid-1990s. But is it true?

I asked Klisoura, who runs the Furry Survey. The chart below shows Klisouras data (visualized by Makyo), and its remarkable.

The trend is almost certainly starker than the chart shows. Our first datapoint is based on furies who have been in the community for up to one year. Some of these furies will have already re-evaluated their sexual preference.

Its safe to conclude that more than half of the heterosexual furies coming into the community will change their sexual preference.

The big question: why is this happening? I have some ideas.

Does furry make you gay?

No. Furry is no more making people gay than Christian gay-rehabilitation camps are making people straight.

There will, of course, be some heterosexual furies who experiment with gay sex. This happens in every environment: homosexuals often experiment with straight sex when theyre younger; young men brought up in a rural environment often experiment with bestiality. You cant change, or choose, your sexuality.

Are most people bisexual, and perhaps furry behaviour just a representation of that?

The idea that most people are bisexual comes from the research of Kinsey and the philosophies of Freud. Both Kinsey and Freud, while very important, have been discredited on this point: Kinsey wildly overestimated the numbers of non-heterosexuals, and Freud believed that homosexuality was a curable mental illness.

Around 2% of people identify as bisexual, declining with age. Most bisexuals eventually re-classify themselves as straight or gay. However its impossible to read much into this as bisexuality is a slippery concept: the ex-bisexuals may be in committed relationships and simply reclassify themselves for clarity.

Its an interesting and controversial idea, and one that I cannot do justice to here. Suffice to say that there is no evidence for a silent bisexual majority.

The idea, at least in the furry world, can be dismissed by looking at the data. The straight furies who change their sexual preference are much more likely to move from straight to gay, rather than bisexual (or pansexual).

Are furies, to some degree, all zoophiles?

I suggested in a previous post that furry is a half-step towards zoophilia. However I meant this only from an external perspective – people unfamiliar with furry may look at all these animal people

and jump to a conclusion.

More pertinently, only about 1 in 6 furies identify as zoophiles. Thats a lot but its still a small minority.

Is furry a gateway to understanding your true sexuality?

Possibly.

For most people, its not easy growing up gay. Its assumed that you are straight – this reference point colours your life as you grow up. Any behaviour that might be homosexual stands out as being different, and nobody wants to be different when theyre an adolescent. You might not meet any openly gay people and if you do, their status as “gay” often defines them.

This reference point – that straight is normal, therefore not-straight is abnormal – is easy to internalize. A child quickly learns that some thoughts and feelings are acceptable to express out loud, and that some should be hidden. If it feels like you shouldnt talk about being attracted to the same sex, it can be easy to focus on only those thoughts that reinforce normality. Its easy to be gay and not know it. Its easy to be in denial. Its easy to be gay and homophobic.

Anyone coming out as a gay person has to deal with these two problems – internalized homophobia and homophobia in society. The first must be overcome to admit to yourself that you are gay.

Perhaps furry is a gateway to accepting your true sexuality. For a gay person in denial, it might be easier to enjoy non-human homoerotica without threatening that internalized homophobia.

Furry erotica is stylized. If sex seems a bit smelly or hairy or icky, then furry porn is glossy, neat, and elegant. For a gay furry in denial, its a lot easier to fantasize about your furry avatar in a sexual situation compared to imagining yourself in an entanglement with a member of the same sex.

For many furies, consumption of furry erotica is a stepping stone towards becoming a sexually active adult. Furry porn can lead to typesex with an online friend (or stranger), which can lead to flirting and friendly physical contact with furies in real life, which can lead to sex with a likeminded furry. In the best case, this can all occur in an enjoyable, satisfying, low-stress, low-expectation environment.

You dont have to be a gay furry in denial for this progression to work. There is a preponderance of furies who dont naturally have a way of expressing their sexuality in the context of normal society. Perhaps the furry community is just a gateway: a way for us to take babysteps to realization of our true sexual identity, whatever that might be.

If this is the case, then furry may simply be a convenient construct. It might be no more than a vehicle that we subconsciously commandeer, taking our conscious mind on a journey to the point

where it can accept our sexual needs. To stretch the metaphor, perhaps we can abandon this vehicle once weve reached our destination.

(Aside to furies who are currently on the journey: you will get there. You will accept and embrace who you are. You will feel comfortable with yourself and amongst your peers. You will, one day, say out loud “I am ___” and itll feel great.)

Perhaps the only reason we stay with the furry group – once the porn and the community have helped us reach actualization of our true sexuality – is for our friends, and the fellowship, and the flirtatiousness or sex within the group. Perhaps this explains why 60% of furies are single; perhaps this explains why furry is so young – most people move on once they find a long-term relationship.

This is an idea worth exploring in more detail. As a committed furry “lifestyler” – someone who strongly identifies with his furry self and likes to write philosophical articles about the community here on [a][s] – its easy for me to disregard this hypothesis (and, dont worry, I will in a moment). Im not an impartial voice: you dont ask a priest for evidence that god doesnt exist; you dont ask a trekkie for an impartial review of William Shatners oeuvre.

I think its worth entertaining the idea for a moment. If furry were simply a convenient vehicle for each of us to accept and express our true sexuality, we wouldnt know. The human mind can, and does, keep secrets from itself: a gay person in denial is not aware of something utterly fundamental. We could similarly be non-furies in denial.

Self-deception is a well known phenomenon in cognitive psychology circles, supported by a lot of research and scientific evidence. The basic theory boils down to this: we create a version of the world that is consistent with what we already think. If we see evidence that is contrary to our version of the world, we disregard it in such a way that reinforces our existing belief. This is counterintuitive but true.

So what follows is either my false internal justification for the reality of myself as a furry and the importance of the furry community, or my objective reasoning for such. With that caveat, you may make up your own mind.

My conclusions

If furry pornography is just a stepping-stone to acceptance of ones real sexuality, then we would eventually lose interest in furry pornography. We would move on to regular pornography.

Its not uncommon for pornography to be a gateway. Lets consider someone with a relatively extreme fetish: a bit of /ah roulette on Fchan has given me castration.

Someone with a fetish for castration is unlikely to leap straight into /ah – their developing adolescent mind will know that this is not normal, and so will reject the idea. So our castration-

fetishist will find stepping-stones that arent too challenging when taken one-at-a-time. Maybe they will start with porn featuring a power imbalance, then maybe knives will come into it, then maybe violence and disfigurement, then maybe slavery and eunuchs, then eventually good-old consensual castration.

Once our castration-lover has accepted their fetish, they will discard the stepping stones and head straight to /ah every time.

Every furry with whom Ive ever broached the topic is an enthusiastic consumer of furry erotica. For those of us who have accepted our true sexuality, were usually consuming regular porn as well. But were not discarding the furry stuff.

Id also argue that all pornography is stylized, not just furry pornography. Regular pornography features people with impossibly little body hair, perfect tans and bleached anuses. For those of you who like body hair: have lots. Like large people? Have really large people. Pornography is always stylized to push our buttons, and its evolved this way because thats what people are demanding. Its social Darwinism.

More to the point, furry isnt defined by sex or sexual orientation. Furry is about identity, and thats what separates it from other fandoms and hobbyist groups. People who identify as a furry usually consider themselves, internally, as a sort of animal-person. And external expression of that internal reality within the furry community can be very rewarding.

I mentioned at the beginning of this article that I am one of those people who re-evaluated their sexual preference after discovering furry. Id like to share the short version of my story with you.

When I discovered the furry community, I was in a long-term heterosexual relationship with a fantastic person. She and I were great friends and had an active sex life. After a year or so into furry, something new happened: I fell in love with a nominally bisexual furry guy. I broke up with my girlfriend and attempted a new relationship. It didnt work: the experience made it clear to me that I am gay, and clear to him that he is straight. It was hard on all of us but our friendship trumped the heartbreak. The three of us are still very close friends. A few years ago, I was best man at his wedding.

My story is unique but typical. I would love to hear your own stories, either in the comments below or elsewhere (jm@furrynet.com).

The furry community is, I think, a great environment for people to get to know themselves. Its introspective but social; it encourages tolerance and personal growth; its trivial and important. I cant explain why so many furies have unusual sexual and gender identities – perhaps the heterosexual furies find enough acceptance in the non-furry world, happy enough as Lion King fans, or playing as Khajiit on Skyrim.

I think that there are many people who live as a heterosexual with the subconscious knowledge that they are not being true to themselves. These are people who are not lucky enough to grow up in an environment where sexuality is a preference rather than a potential abnormality, and people who don't have something like the furry community to help them accept who they really are.

An acquaintance of mine is a palliative care nurse, who provides comfort and dignity to people who are dying. She once told me the biggest regret people have: *"I wish I had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me."*

I feel very lucky to be a stereotype.

5.4 Makyo's Kaddish

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The about page mentions as much but I'll restate it more in-depth here. I wound up at Colorado State University for college, starting in biochemistry but quickly moving to music. I wound up spending longer than usual in the program for a few reasons. First of all, I started off in music education. That lasted for a few years, until I got far enough in the degree to start taking education classes, which didn't sit well for me. They were all about obeying the law and not getting sued by parents, rather than teaching children effectively. After that, I switched to music composition.

Unfortunately, there wasn't really a music composition program at my school, since there wasn't really a music composition professor. There was an adjunct professor that taught orchestration, improvisation, and jazz theory classes, though, and he wound up being my main professor for about a year. However, I wasn't the only one switching into the program at the time, so the university began the search for a composition chair. I was lucky enough to be in on the selection process and helped to pick CSU's current composition professor, and we wound up with a wonderful guy to head the department. One of the first things he nudged me towards after listening to some of my composition assignments was Leonard Bernstein's symphonies, and the one I fell in love with immediately was the third, Kaddish.

Kaddish, specifically the Mourner's Kaddish, is a Jewish prayer singing the praises of God. In his symphony, Bernstein mingles the text of the Kaddish, sung in the choir, with a narration that I feel describes an important transition that many people go through, both individually and as societies and cultures.

The piece opens with an introduction from the narrator describing God as "lonely, disappointed father" and "angry, wrinkled old majesty". The tone is immediately set, and not simply by the words. The first sounds the listener hears are actually the entire choir humming an indeterminate pitch sotto voce. The effect is close to a science fiction movie's depiction of space, but gives the impression of a vast and frightening expanse. As the piece progresses and the choir starts to sing the words of the Kaddish, chaos breaks out with loud percussion and bright brass. This isn't a happy song singing the virtues of the Lord.

On the return of the narrator, one hears why: "you [...] who cause the dawn to know its place, surely you can cause and command a touch of order here below on this one dazed speck." The narrator isn't pleased about his relationship with his God (who never replies in the piece, except perhaps through music). As the piece continues, the confrontation between the narrator and God escalating to a climax as the narrator accuses God of breaking his covenant to man after the flooding of the earth. "Tin God," he screams, "Your bargain is tin! It crumples in my hand! And where is faith now, Yours or mine?!"

As the symphony winds on, the narrator compares and contrasts the idyllic world of God's creation of the Kingdom of Heaven with the reality that man has created, all in the guise of a dream. The Kingdom of Heaven is "just as You planned it, every immortal cliché intact" where as the world of man is filled with "Real-life marvels! Genuine wonders! Dazzling miracles!" As the narrator and God awaken, the narrator proposes a new covenant, "not quite the covenant we bargained for so long ago," and pledges that the two shall always "Suffer and recreate each other." On this new agreement, the piece comes to a crashing end.

I know I need to tie this back to my own experiences with furry, but it requires a bit of explanation first. First, I have to admit that if I'm unschooled in the ways of sociology and anthropology, I'm even more ignorant in theology and apologetics. From the little I've read, though I've come to understand that the relationship between the both Christians and Jews and God is not a static thing, beyond the base definition of Creator and Created. The relationship changed when Abraham obeyed God's command to sacrifice Isaac; it changed after the biblical flood with the aforementioned covenant; it changed with Moses, with David, and with Jesus. It's still changing.



Figure 5.2: 'Jesus' vs. 'Christ'

The chart to the side displays uses of the terms "Jesus" and "Christ" between the years 1900 and 2000. During the late '80s and into the '90s, you can see how the trend shifts away from "Christ" and toward "Jesus". I believe, and this is only a gut-reaction, that this is largely due to the more personal relationship with one's God being preached in the last few decades with the growth of large evangelical and liberal Christian churches. Clearly, the change is still coming within something as established as western religion.

So what does this have to do with furry?. There's been a lot of my own path through the fandom that matches up closely with the narrator's growth in his relationship with God. Most importantly, the similarities are evident when, at the end of Bernstein's Kaddish, the narrator and God come to a new covenant wherein they suffer and recreate each other.

This is something I spend a lot of time thinking about. I've been chugging along in the fandom for about twelve years now. I was initially pretty happy to just go along with whatever everyone else was doing, and even after I stopped doing that, I was still pretty happy to just say I was a part of it. I was a furry and pretty cool with it. I couldn't draw, didn't have much money to buy commissions, didn't have a fursuit, and talked almost exclusively with my own little group of friends. Then I got bitter.

Around my second or third year of college, after I'd been going to the local meets for a while, I found that, more often than not, I wasn't really happy with the fandom. It's not that I didn't like where it was going, so much that I didn't like that I was in it. I was occasionally ashamed by the fact that I was a fur, and that made me feel sort of sarcastic about the whole thing. Of course,

that worked pretty well as a feedback loop, and I started to sort of wind down my life within the fandom. I talked to fewer and fewer people, I went to less and less meets. I still went to cons, but I stopped going to panels. I started making money, but never really used it to buy commissions. I wound up changing my name to distance myself from the past – whereas before I was Ranna, the red fox who stole a cool sounding name from a book, now I was Makyo, the arctic fox whose name meant a demon that distracts from the path to enlightenment (I thought it was witty for a future teacher).

It wasn't necessarily that I wanted to get out of the fandom. With the few friends I still interacted closely with, including one wonderful partner, I was still a fox guy. I still kept up on enough of the goings on to have intelligent conversations with the people I did talk to. Even so, I felt like I was going to what I thought was the standard thing: stick around furry for five to ten years, then leave it once real life took over. It stung, at first, but I figured I was growing up.

Eventually, the snarky attitude calmed down and I settled into a routine with those around me. It took me accidentally embedding myself in a portion of the Colorado furs, a chance invitation to a party, a few more people showing up at the local meets, and moving to an apartment building that hosted other furs. It was the deeper sense of meaningful communication that I got from my furry friends that seemed to be missing from my music friends that got me thinking that I needed to renegotiate my membership within the fandom. I wasn't content to just be a listless member anymore, I wanted to be an active participant.

This was, of course, still a few years ago. At the time, I began by trying to post more to my FA account. I posted my music, which garnered little to no attention. I commissioned some more art, which got a little more. That attention felt good. It was good to be known, to some (very) small extent by the art that I commissioned. I can understand individuals who get a lot of art of their characters done, now: it just feels good. It's the visible affirmation of our character, and the affirmation of our social worth when the work is appreciated.

Even so, I wanted more. I wanted to be on more even ground with the subculture of which I was a part. I don't think I'm the only one to experience this, either. Sites such as The Furry Agenda, SoFurry, and so many others all aim to give back the fandom, yet are the products of their creators. The same could be said vis--vis conventions and their chairs and board-members. For me, the next part happened by accident.

My rather furry boss (hey boss, promise I'm writing this at home!) and I were joking around one day just after Halloween. On the holiday, there was a party – small convention, even – and a friend of mine mentioned that there sure were a lot of people who were named ColorSpecies or some variant. I don't know who it was that my friend had talked to, but I brought it up to my boss and we wound up coming up with an idea to make some goofy automatic textual description generator that would fill in a template a-la the roadtrip game Ad-Libs.

I registered adjectivespecies.com that afternoon.

I'm not really sure how I got from the idea of ad-libbing descriptions to this loose amalgam of meta-furriness that we have now. It happened quickly, of course. I registered the domain that afternoon, and wrote the first article that night. It probably had much to do with the drive home (my commute is about an hour long). During the drive, I think I realized that what I was originally planning was much closer to my more sarcastic days than what I was aiming for. I didn't want to just wind up as some snarky, burned fur blogger making a snarky, burned fur website.

What was I aiming for? I'm still not sure. The recognition, a little bit; I did want to make a bit of a name for myself within the fandom, but it wasn't just that (there certainly are easier ways about it, too). To create a resource of introspection, too; I think that introspection is an important tool for anyone, especially when it comes to intangibles, and many of my previous projects reflected that. More than anything, though, I wanted to, like the narrator and God within *Kaddish*, work with the fandom, dream with it, understand it. Nothing so grandiose as changing furry to fit my whims, of course, it's not my place to do so; simply to explore and grow along with it. This was my new covenant with myself as an individual and myself as a member of the subculture: that we should continuously suffer and recreate each other.

5.5 Death in the Fandom

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If we accept the fact that the furry subculture, the fandom as a cohesive group of somewhat like-minded individuals, has only existed for about thirty years, then we have available to us a growing and expanding membership at the beginning of what I hope to be a long thread of human society. We're still in that bright, almost expansionist era of our creation where we are doing our level best to create more than we can consume. We bring in new members not only through the shared interest in anthropomorphics, but also through both the vibrancy of our existence and the social currency of our creative output. Furry, such as it is, is on the rise.

We are still young though, there's no getting around that.

Thirty years, in the grand scheme of things isn't really all that long of a time. The United States has lasted eight times that long, Christianity approaching 70 times, and, according to some, the universe almost 200 times that long, and that number is considered very, very small by many others. Our vibrancy and social currency is strong, but we are not the only group on the rise out there. In western culture, the anime fan base is taking a similar track, as have countless other subcultures and fandoms before it. Our output is copious and so, in turn, is our social currency, but they are not out of proportion.

Our fandom is young, and given the median age of about twenty years old, we are a fandom made up of many, many young people. Really, then, it's no surprise that a single death among our ranks affects so many of us so greatly.

As I mentioned last week this article was one that has been in the works for a bit, and was intended to go live last week. I, like JM, like to get the article done a day or so ahead of time in order to make sure everything is set to go off without a hitch. Unfortunately, while I had this article halfway done, I heard the distressing news of the loss of two furies via several posts on FA. I waffled for a few days about whether to continue on with the publication of this post in tribute or to hold off out of respect, and, at the last minute, wound up coming to this compromise of a weeks delay for a respectful entry.

Death and the larger concept of mortality have been our fixation for almost all of recorded history. It's arguable, really, that death and mortality have been the fixation of life for its entire existence here on earth. It's something of a milestone in life when we start to realize that we're mortal, that we will end and that at that point, something fundamental about our existence will change, whether it's entering into heaven or simply the same unknown we return to that we were a part of before birth. For me, it was about the time I turned eight or nine and, leaning against my mother's front while watching TV, I heard her heartbeat and it hit me, in a very logical fashion, that at some point that heartbeat would stop and my mom would be no more. I suppose it happens

to everyone now and then, but from an individual's perspective, the idea that life will eventually come to a stop is something that focuses the mind and all but forces introspection.

Death is always a tricky subject, but especially so in a societal context. Death has become an industry in Western culture; not just dealing with the remains of our loved ones respectfully, but also the industry of delaying death and the industry dedicated to bereavement. Whether or not the concept of the end of one's life is cause for introspection, it's something that society has grown up to deal with. There are arguments to be made for the fact that death – or at least protection from early death – is at the center of society and governance. The sharp contrast between life and death is often at the center of much of religion and art as well, both social concepts. It makes sense, then, that a subset of society (and of religion and art, if you look at furry that way) would also have its collective mind so focused by loss.

We have at least two benefits within furry, however. First of all, we're still relatively small. The Tucholsky quip that "The death of one man: that is a catastrophe. One hundred thousand deaths: that is a statistic!" would be difficult to hold true in our subculture of one or two hundreds of thousands (an arguable point, I'm sure). For us, one death is a tragedy, but given our small size, any number of deaths would likely be as much a tragedy. Much of the basis for this quote has to do with Dunbar's number, the suggested limit of stable relationships one individual can maintain; with a community of our size and a rough estimate of perhaps 150 for Dunbar's number, that means that, no matter what, in the event of a catastrophe, the chances of one being directly affected, either through personal involvement or a personal relationship, are much, much higher.

The second, and perhaps more important benefit is that furry is based around a willful membership. We identify as furries, whether or not the interest in anthropomorphics is innate, whether or not we feel a connection with animals. It is a choice, much more than skin color or biological sex could ever be. Our membership in the subculture comes primarily with the benefits of social currency and standing within the smaller group, and in a limited setting with such a friendly group, it's hardly surprising to see loosely connected people paying their respects to the dead and the bereaved. On the FA profile page of any deceased or grieving member of the fandom, one is likely to see that nearly every shout or comment on a journal is another fur offering their sympathies.

The interesting side of this is that many, if not most of those leaving their shouts and comments do not actually know either the bereaved or the deceased. They have found out about it through their own social networks. In our socially oriented fandom with a relatively small mean degree of separation between individuals, news about anything travels fast. If one sees a friend grieving over a loss, and makes one mention of it, chances are good that someone not even involved will feel moved and may even leave their own note.

Nothing is ever quite so simple, of course, and there are a few downsides and negative aspects to our relationship with death. Primarily, just because we know or know of someone does not

necessarily mean that we like them. Many simply keep their peace in such situations, but some have noticed that individuals will occasionally create puppet-accounts on social sites in order to post a negative comment or two, or even use their own account to rail against the deceased or their loved ones. I feel that much of this is likely due to the anonymity provided by interactions on the Internet, but I could be wrong. Perhaps there is an additional aspect to our social nature or our tightly-knit web of relationships that makes it easier for one to express their views, both positive and negative, but that said, I hear far, far less about this happening in person than online.

An additional factor to take into account is that the fandom is growing, and at quite a clip. There seems to be hundreds of new furies each day. Dragoneer, the owner of FurAffinity, recently mentioned that, in 2011, there were anywhere between 300-500 new accounts created per day for a total of 145,787 new accounts in that year alone, most of which were estimated to be unique, non-group accounts. Along with the growth of the fandom comes a greater chance of losing one's individuality in life and not being noticed quite as much in death. However, even if the number of random strangers comforting us in our grief declines or the number of shouts from those who didn't know the dead starts to decrease, our membership still gets us a caring family and many ready friends.

In the end, however, death within the fandom is still something that strikes us strongly. Perhaps it's due to our small size, or our tightly-woven net of interpersonal relationships, or even due to the online nature of much of our interaction, but no matter what, it's comforting to know that there are those out there who, whether or not they knew us, would feel our loss. So let this article stand in memoriam of FirePyro and Athus, Waarhorse and Randomonlooker, Ponybird and Loki, and all the others who have entered into our lives through furry and then gone.

Chapter 6

April

6.1 Geeks

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The regular Londonfurs (londonfurs.org.uk) meets are a great environment for getting to know furry friends, old and new. The meets are held in a City bar on Saturday afternoons and are attended by upwards of 100 furies. They have an easygoing vibe, fuelled by the sort of bonhomie that's engendered by drinking with friends in the afternoon.

I was chatting at the bar with a couple of furry friends at a recent meet when we were approached by a geeky furry acquaintance of mine. Most furies will be able to guess what happened next. Our geek delivered a deadpan anecdote, describing a workmate who had become confused about two different types of barcode. His story – which was incomprehensible to anyone not intimately familiar with the ins and outs of barcodes – had nothing to do with the topic at hand.

Everyone in the conversation immediately understood that we had been geeked'. We tried to steer our geek away from his topic and predictably failed: our geek paid no heed to the usual social cues of conversation. Everyone else managed to escape and I was left with my geek, doomed to listen on in feigned interest and rising annoyance.

Every socially active furry will be able to identify with my experience. Why, I asked another furry following my eventual escape, am I socializing with these infuriating geeks?

Another question struck me later in the day: why are there so many geeks in the furry community?

There are definitely a lot of geeks. I asked Klisoura, [adjective][species] contributor and curator of the Furry Survey. We found three questions that, if hardly authoritative, help us guess at the proportion of geeks in the furry community:

Would you describe yourself as:

- a fan of RPGs? (Yes 55%)
- a fan of science fiction (Yes 61%)
- a fan of anime (Yes 49%)

This data suggests that around half of the furry community might be considered geeky, although that's really just informed speculation. Suffice to say that there are plenty of geeks out there. (Further data mining suggests that geeks and non-geeks have different experiences within the furry community, but that's fodder for a future post. It's interesting stuff though.)

The furry community has always had strong connections with geek culture. Geek culture informs a large number of furies from a political, social and personal point of view. And, most perti-

nently, the fledgling furry community of the 1980s and 1990s was essentially a geek phenomenon. Most furries, especially pre-internet, discovered furry through a variety of geek fandoms.

The furry community of 2012 is not an exclusively geek phenomenon. Conversations about (say) programming languages may be common amongst furries, but these are not furry conversations per se. Such conversations occur because a lot of furries care about programming languages. I might chat about music with furry friends, but that – like that lively exchange of ideas on programming languages – is just two people discussing a common interest.

A full disclosure: I am not a geek, at least by furry standards. I have a science-based qualification but I don't work in IT. I don't frequent geek culture websites (like xkcd). I don't read speculative fiction and I don't watch animated TV programmes that are designed for children. I do, on the other hand, enjoy many non-geeky activities such as playing and watching sport.

I'm not anti-geek. I think geeks are great. My partner of some six years is a geek. Geeks can be frustrating, but they are also rather amazing.

My experience with the barcode geek is a common one, and a hazard for anyone socializing with furries. But geeks aren't all about derailed low-empathy conversation topics, there are big upsides.

I think the thing that most amazes me is the ability of geeks to intensely focus on some logical or mechanical problem. That single-minded intensity, which geeks often glibly refer to as “the zone” (without realizing the rare genius that seems to result from it), astounds those of us who don't work that way. Geeks are also direct and honest, have a knack for seeing unexpected solutions to complicated problems, and are rather charming to boot.

As it turns out, a combination of personal introspection, fierce intellectual pride, and charm is downright sexy.

Geeks are not always the most self-aware people. The unfortunate downside is, like my barcode-loving friend, they don't always meet the nebulous and ever-shifting rules and expectations of society. Examples, all of which will be in bold display at every furry gathering all over the world:

- Geeks often have poor personal hygiene.
- Geeks often fail to read social cues that suggest they're acting inappropriately.
- Geeks often have poor interpersonal skills.
- Geeks often dress very poorly.

The good news is that geeks are open-minded. Geeks can, and do, get better at their shortcomings because they are open to change. If the stereotypical teenage geek is a smelly escapee from their parents' basement, then the stereotypical middle-aged geek is beardy, wise and all smiles.

The furry community is good for geeks who don't feel comfortable in a social environment, because it is welcoming and tolerant. Furry accepts all comers, regardless of social skill, but also provides a template for improved behaviour. Any new furry will meet a wide range of people and learn more about society's confounding rules through observation and experience. And everyone is improved by chatting with the wise bearded man.

The Londonfurs meets are good example of this. The geeks are welcomed and able to socialize amongst their peers, but they are also required to abide by society's rules in a large public space.

Regardless of furry's geeky genesis, it's logical that the community would attract a preponderance of geeks. Geeks are less likely to find an appealing mainstream societal norm, so they are more likely to be looking for somewhere to belong. Geeks also tend to be introspective and imaginative, ideally suited to our ultra-personal version of unreality.

It's difficult to be respected and considered sexy if you're a geek. Furry is a community that accepts geekiness, as well as providing a framework for geeks to have a positive self-image. Furry's acceptance of alternate anthropomorphic identities allows geeks to be accepted in that wonderfully counterintuitive furry way, where the most real version of someone is their imaginary avatar. Geeks can be sexy, confident, respected, and human.

6.2 Meaning Within a Subculture

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This is an idea that has been tumbling around in my head ever since I started this site. In fact, I suppose you could call a lot of my earlier posts a sort of fumbling around as I tried to articulate this idea. The idea that I'm talking about is the concept of what furry is. That is, not only what makes a furry a furry, but how is furry a thing, and where did we all come from. A lot of the articles on this site have come at this idea from different angles, but usually focusing on a single aspect or in a stream-of-consciousness manner.

When I write posts for [a][s], I do so in what's called the "watercolor strategy", as named by Daniel Chandler in *The Act of Writing*. That is, for the most part, I start at the beginning, and when I get to the end, I stop. It's a strategy that, to my mind, would work almost solely for the introspective writer, one who internalizes a subject, then blasts it out on to paper (or screen). The idea is that one works as one does with watercolor, where there is no real way to correct a mistake or change what one has done – one must simply start at the beginning and continue until one feels that the work is done, then stop. There is no editing along the way, as there would be in the "oil painting strategy"; with oils, one has the ability to paint over the paint already in place without worrying about muddying the painting or ruining the paper. As Chandler quotes in the section on the watercolor strategy, "rewrite in process interferes with flow and rhythm, which can only come from a kind of unconscious association with the material" (Plimpton, 1989, quoted in Chandler)[1].

In a lot of posts, this has worked well. I think that I often work in short enough sections that I can hold most of the article in my head with only the barest of sketches taken down mostly as reminders to what I had already planned rather than a true outline (which would be the "architectural" or "bricklaying" strategies).

My process has occasionally come back to haunt me in that I've incompletely captured an idea. It happened very early on when I wrote about the default furry, which eventually turned into the post about doxa: what I was trying to name in the "default furry" post wasn't so much trends in character creation as the fact that there is a factual basis for much of what we take for granted within the fandom.

One of the big things that keeps me coming back to these subjects is the standard artist's complaint that I'm never really satisfied with the product. I can barely even call myself an artist, here – so much of what I've done with [a][s] is rehashing ideas I've heard of or learned about in a non-furry context within the context of furry, and this piece here is no exception. Rather, I'm one with artistic habits.

I was unhappy with both of my posts on "participation mystique". It's such a wonderful concept and fits so perfectly with the contiguous fandom that I couldn't get it out of my head. All the same,

I couldn't seem to get down exactly what I wanted to with it. The first post turned into an idea of how members identify with the fandom, which is close to, but not exactly participation mystique. The second post veered off course and into (still related) waters of the definition of our subculture.

That those posts feel as though they inadequately captured what I wanted to grates on me, so I feel that, as the person best in a position to correct my mistakes, I probably ought to. In order to do that, however, I'm going to have to start with a little bit of background that I've picked up over the last few weeks of study and years of background on the subject even if it isn't immediately applicable to this furry site, and I'm going to have to abandon the watercolor strategy and at least work toward the architectural strategy. It may be a bit of a long travel, and I'm sorry if I wind up coming off as boring, but I believe that a lot of these ideas are pertinent to figuring out what is going on with the fandom, and why the concept of membership is important. If nothing else, I find the concepts very interesting, and I think that many others will as well.

A Linguistic Introduction

I'd like to begin here with a basic introduction on some of the linguistics that are involved in exploring meaning in the fandom. There's a very important reason for this which I'll go into more depth on later, but for now, it will suffice to say that language is important to us because our fandom is wrapped up in it. We describe our characters, we write stories about furies, and, above all, we communicate; we are a social fandom. Language is always important to subcultures such as ours which subsist on social interaction.

There is an argument to be made that language, rather than being a defined entity, is simply a collection of idiolects. Dialect is a commonly known word, of course, but language can be broken down further to the speech patterns used by an individual. Each person's pattern of language use is unique to them, just as their handwriting and fingerprints are unique. This is their idiolect. The argument here is that, despite prevailing attitudes within the United States and elsewhere, a language is made up of its mutually comprehensible dialects, which are spoken by individuals with all of their unique idiolects.

I bring this up not only because it's fascinating (to me, at least), but because there is another step in there that's missing between idiolect and dialect, and that is the sociolect. A sociolect is the subset of a language that is shared among a social group. While this may have started with the difference between the language spoken by different social classes, with the growth of the middle class, particularly of skilled workers, the number of recognized sociolects has grown. My partner, a machinist by trade, is able to share this language within the social group of other machinists. When they go on "thou", "scrap", "tombstones", "jobshops," and "print-to-part," they can understand each other within the context of their social group.

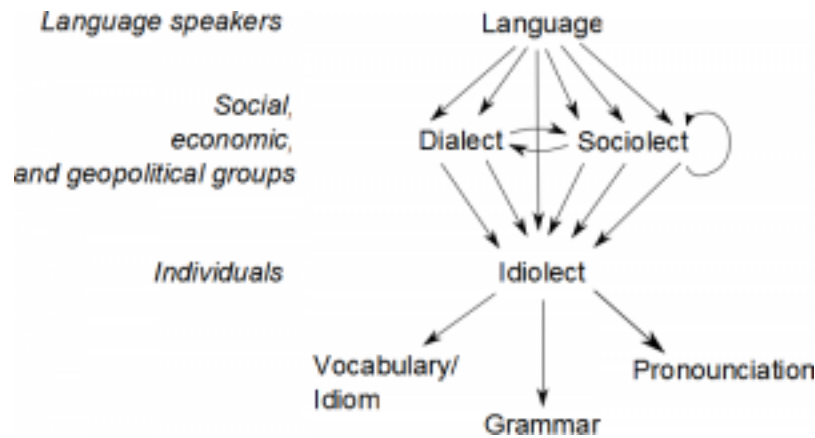


Figure 6.1: Language hierarchy

Similarly, the fandom has started to pull together its own sociolect formed of the collected idiolects of its members. That we have our own “jargon” with words like “fursona”, “hybrid”, and “taur”[2] that goes along with our membership to this nebulous group helps to define the fact that we have become a more well-defined subculture, or, to put it better, a community. A community, in this sense, is a coherent group composed of multiple actors, and that is just what we are within the fandom: we act within and upon it, both taking from and adding to it by way of our membership. It works to say it either way: our sociolect is a combination of our idiolects because we are a community composed of members, and we are a community composed of members because we have our sociolect as a combination of our idiolects – our ways of communicating made up of those who communicate with each other.

Put this way, we can come up with a sort of hierarchy of language. A language is comprised of dialects and sociolects, subsets of the overall language based around social, economic, or geopolitical groups. The dialects and sociolects, in turn, are made up of the individual idiolects of their members. There, of course, some mixing due to new speakers of the language and borrowed terms, but also due to the fact that individuals often belong to more than one social group, and thus may take part in more than one sociolect or dialect – my partner is a machinist, but he is also a furry, for instance. A good example might be the apparent dichotomy between “realistic” and “toony” furry art, perhaps due to the overlap between the furry subculture and the art world (whereas “realism” isn’t something I hear much at my own job as a programmer).

Much of this focus on our means of communication ties into the Internet and the prominence of its role within the fandom. There’s really no doubting that a good portion of the fandom “grew up” on the net. The ways in which it facilitates communication between individuals or groups regardless of geographic location fits in so well with a fandom that bases so much of its existence around social interaction. There are a few terms that become important due to this fact, namely

“text”, “corpus”, “medium”, and “modality”. A “text” is a unit of communication, whether it’s a journal post, an image and all of its associated discussion, such as comments, or a webpage like this. A “corpus” is a collection of related texts – this post would be a text, but [adjective][species] would be a corpus – though it can be taken in broader terms, such as the collection of all different texts on FurAffinity – images, journals, comments, user pages – or simply the collection of all texts within our subculture: the furry corpus, if you will.

“Medium” and “modality” are similarly intertwined. The “medium” is, obviously enough, the way in which a text reaches us, and the “modality” is what the text is constructed of. For instance, words and language would be the modality, whereas that can be divided into written words read off a screen on a webpage, or spoken words shared among a group of friends at a convention. The reason I’m bringing up these terms is that, taken together, they form our social interaction within the fandom, and the reason that it’s /important/ is because, in particular, our choices of media and corpi are language in and of themselves: that is, that we rely on the Internet for so much of our communication, whether out of necessity or desire, and allow the idiolects that we’ve formed on the ‘net to creep into our verbal communications with each other is something of a statement in and of itself.

Put another way, our medium is important because it involves the concepts of human-computer interaction (HCI) and computer (or, more specifically, Internet) mediated communication (IMC). The first, HCI, is important because computers are not free-form entities through which we may communicate however we want. Instead, we communicate through the specific media of SecondLife, through comments on submissions on FA, through MUCKs, MUDs, IRC, and IMs. The actual means of interreaction within each is different from each other, and certainly different than other media. For instance, posing actions, and thus role-playing, are quite simple on MU*s and IRC, and thus more common, whereas the same is not true of instant messages and the less-immediate form of comment threads and forums. The latter concept of IMC becomes particularly evident in SecondLife, where the action taken by your character on the screen is distanced from reality by necessity. Shooting a gun, turning a cartwheel, or doing a dance are all usually thought of physical activities offline, but on SecondLife, they are all the result of commands typed in by the user or accessed via the mouse on a head up display.

It’s an easy thing to say that communication is the basis of our subculture, but more difficult to express it in terms of the source and result of a sociolect comprised of the colliding idiolects of its members. While that is far from the only thing that furry has going for it, it’s a definite signifier of our being a society in our own right, and one of the easiest to perceive, once one takes a step back. We have settled our concentration certain media for a variety of reasons – the ease of constructing an avatar on the Internet, the mediated sharing of texts through different websites and services, and the ‘net’s way of connecting individuals across distance. Our choice of media is a form of

communication in a way, though not simply due to the benefits to be gained from it. There is more, though, to be sure.

On Semiotics

When I first heard about the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, I rejected it immediately. It states, in brief, that the way we conceive of the world around us, the way we assign meaning to things, is shaped entirely by the language that we use to describe that meaning. I think that part of the reason that I had such a negative reaction to the idea right off the bat was that I learned about the hypothesis via the constructed language *lojban*. The idea behind *lojban* (always written with a lower-case ‘l’) is that, if the way we think is shaped by the language we use, then a language that is totally and completely “logical” ought to help one to think totally and completely logically.

That idea really grated on me for a few reasons. First of all, I was in a Madrigal choir at the time, and while the Madrigal came from the Renaissance period, much of the words to the songs spend time evoking romantic imagery. That, and much of the songs we performed weren’t exactly Madrigals in their own right, but composed later in the Romantic or Neo-romantic eras. Put simply, I was a teenager inundated in romanticism – the concept of being able to explain everything only with logical terms and without the metaphor inherent in romanticism didn’t jive with me. Additionally, having been brought up by two atheist parents, I was going through my own spiritual renaissance at the time, and so I was always finding these neat, non-spatiotemporal, sometimes ineffable ideas around myself, whether it be religion or something more new-agey.

I was a non-Whorfian, basically. I believed, at the time, that we fit words entirely to the meanings that exist independently of those words. There is certainly an argument to be made for that, as well. We all, in one way or another, are able to perceive what a “tree” is. There’s a way for us to scientifically define it, and there isn’t necessarily a way for us to claim that a tree is only a tree because we have all conceived of the language for defining what a tree is.

I’m no longer fifteen, though, and things have changed. I have had my own experience with the way that meaning comes to us through language or signs of some sort, not least of all with my attempts at such things with these articles. I think that I might now call myself a believer in Moderate Whorfianism. In his book *The Act of Writing*, Daniel Chandler explains that many linguists would find extreme Whorfianism hard to swallow, but may accept a weak version of it as defined in the following way:

- the emphasis is on the potential for thinking to be ‘influenced’ rather than unavoidably ‘determined’ by language;
- it is a two-way process, so that ‘the kind of language we use’ is also influenced by ‘the way we see the world’

- any influence is ascribed not to ‘Language’ as such or to one language as compared with another, but to the use within a language of one variety rather than another (typically a sociolect – the language used primarily by members of a particular social group)
- emphasis is given to the social context of language use rather than to purely linguistic considerations, such as the social pressure in particular contexts to use language in one way rather than another.[1]

This leads us to the next topic of discussion: semiotics. There is argument as to whether or not linguistics is a subset of semiotics, or vice versa. Whereas linguistics aims to tackle the use and meaning of language, semiotics aims to tackle the use and language of meaning. They are certainly closely related – given that language, written language specifically, but also speech, provides a measureable, non-objective metric to study, much of semiotics deals with the use of words within a certain context to either ascribe or convey meaning, as well as the additional meaning conveyed via word choice.

Beyond that, however, semiotics also takes into account such things as the medium and modality of communication, regardless of whether it has to do with words. Semiotics is just as comfortable looking at body language and posture, meaning conveyed through the layout of a webpage, or even additional meanings conveyed through art, which most definitely has something to with our own subculture. That is, rather than focusing on language itself, semiotics focuses on the meanings conveyed between actors within a community. It is not that linguistics has nothing to do with meaning, nor that it doesn’t take the social context into account, simply that that focusing specifically on those areas is the realm of semiotics, instead.

The process of ascribing meaning to a sign – be it a word, a gesture, music, or some aspect of a piece of visual art – is known as semiosis. Semiosis isn’t something that happens on it’s own, we don’t ascribe meaning to the word “tree” without having some framework in which to ascribe that meaning. Signs are parts in the whole of sign systems or “codes”. A code could be a language, but using that word in particular is a poor choice, because language always takes place within some context and carries additional signifiers along with it. “Tree” said calmly, for instance, carries different connotations than “TREE!” shouted fearfully. Even in a text-only environment such as this, the punctuation and capitalization are signs in and of themselves. All of this is taking place within a cultural context, as well. With language in particular, the sign (a word) is a portion of a code that is shared among actors in a community, whether it’s the community of English-speakers (a language) or the community of people interested in anthropomorphics interacting online (the sociolect of furies on the Internet).

This all goes to show that semiotics goes beyond the individual. The webcomic xkcd recently performed quite a feat[3] by displaying a different comic to different viewers. The comic that was

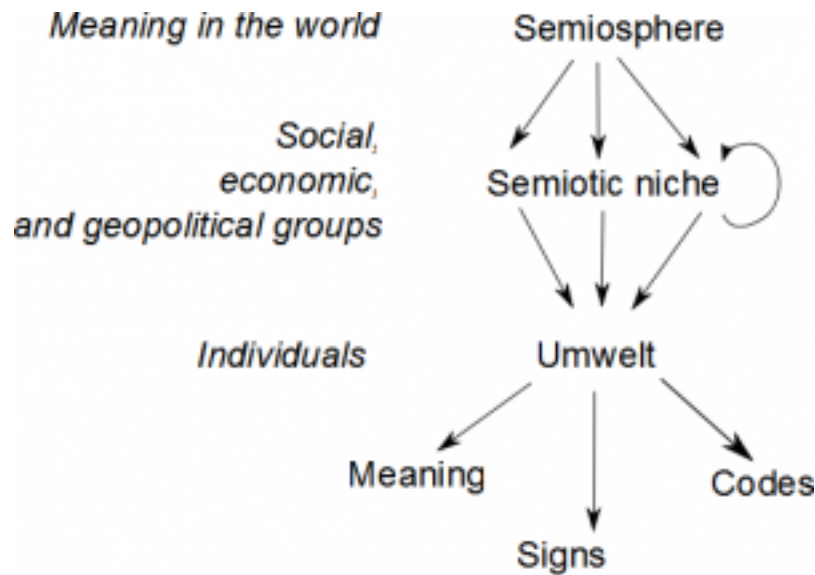


Figure 6.2: Semiotic hierarchy

chosen depended not only on the viewer's choice of browser, but also on their location and even the size of their browser window. The title of the comic was "Umwelt", which is the collection of sign-relations (briefly, the pair of sign-meaning, or the triad of sign-interpretant-meaning) that make up one's perception of the world. We cannot help to do anything outside our umwelt, other than to assimilate new meanings into it through semiosis.

We aren't nearly so solipsistic, though, and so every time our umwelt collides with another through interpersonal relationships, we influence each other. When umwelten group together naturally through an attractor such as a mutual interest, we wind up with a semiotic niche. That is, when a social group forms, a sociolect can form with them due to the way the group steers semiosis, the way it finds meaning.

These semiotic niches work much the same way as umwelten, in that they can converge and share boundaries – they all, after all, take part in the world of meaning around them, known as the semiosphere. That is, something like furry will share its meaning not only with Internet culture, but also western culture, anime culture to some extent, and, as a whole, belongs to this whole perceived world around us. Beyond the semiosphere, "language not only does not function, it does not exist." [4] Without some framework for meaning, be it words, visual art, music, or anything, there is only formless thought.

If we were to modify our language hierarchy to be about semiotics (helpfully done in advance), it would look something like this, then. Similar to the idea that languages are made up of sociolects and dialects, which are in turn made up of idiolects, so too is the semiosphere made up of semiotic niches, which are in turn made up of the umwelten of individual members, the combined basis

for creating meaning in the world around us. This is, of course, a necessary gloss over the field of semiotics, which is quite large. The goal of this article isn't to go into commutation tests and syntactic analysis of furry works, though, just to provide a groundwork of the concepts of language and semiotics in the fandom.

It is within this construct of signs and meaning that we not only form our ideas of what means “tree”, what an image of a tree is and what it represents, but what abstract concepts such as our subculture are and what they're made up of. As individuals and members, or even as outsiders looking in, we build the sign-relations, we come up with the meaning of what is and is not furry, each to our own. It is where those interpretations meet and generate a coherent idea of furry within more than just the individual's point of view that we wind up with the furry fandom itself.

Tying it all together

At some point, the furry fandom started to coalesce. Some would put it in the 1980s – a reader and friend posits that the fandom really got started September 1st, 1980 at Noreascon with Steve Gallacci[5] – some would put it much, much earlier, and some perhaps later, into the '90s when the Internet became truly accessible. For the sake of this article and much of this site in general, we'd probably go with some time in the mid to late '80s for the source of the fandom. This was the time when the *umwelten*, the spheres of meaning for individuals, began to collide in enough numbers to form that critical mass that led to the formation of a subculture rather than a collection of enthusiasts. Furies doubtless existed before, as is certainly evident even within our own readership, but the furry fandom as a culture phenomenon, the basis of study for much of this site (rather than individual furies themselves), relied upon this interest being actively shared among ur-members.

It was a sort of participatory semiosis that helps to define the exploratory beginnings of any new social group. It wasn't so much that individuals hadn't come up with the idea of fox-people before, as that now they were in the process of finding meaning in the fact that there was a cultural identity to be had, and assigning it to the signs of “funny animal” and furry, to foxes and cats leading extraordinary or banal lives, to the very feeling of membership. In her book *Straight*, Hanne Blank makes a similar argument that the growth of heterosexuality (and its complement, homosexuality) was due in part to the process of self identification, the semiosis among individuals that reached a critical mass after a few influential authors such as Freud became widely read.

In short, I tend to focus on what I'm calling the “contiguous fandom”. That is, a fandom made of members which share the borders of their *umwelten*, the meanings attached to the sign that is ‘furry’, in order to create a coherent whole of a fandom. This is the importance of membership; it is the act of being actors in a community that helps to define the community as an entity.

Another way to think of it is that this is our participation mystique. By basing part of one's identity on one's membership to an idea or community, one helps to define both oneself and the thing of which one is a member. To put it in the terms of linguistics above, we readily adopt our sociolect. Remember here that we're taking into account all of the signs available to us. Not only are we taking in this social interaction using words in a furry context, but we're always taking in the visual aspect of furry art and the participatory aspect of conventions, fursuiting, and so on.

Beyond just adopting the sociolect, however, we're continuously adding to it. We aren't just passive observers, but we are actively participating in the creation of new texts, whether it's voicing our appreciation of art, taking part in role-playing, or even running a silly meta-furry blog where one talks about the semiotics of the furry subculture.

Given the contiguous fandom, I can't continue without providing some thoughts on what's "outside" that mostly coherent group of individuals that make up furry. There is also importance in not being a member, in not having that participation mystique. When it comes to signs in semiotics, there is a loose division into dyadic and triadic signs. With dyadic signs, you simply have one entity assigning the meaning of what a tree is to the sign "tree", but in triadic signs, one has the additional context of just who it is that is doing the assigning alongside what is that is being assigned. This is the interpretant sign the one to whom "I" and "you" hold meaning as opposed to one and the other, and, although it's abstract, it becomes very important when it comes to membership.

When someone says "I am a furry", they are using a dyadic sign to signify that a portion of themselves is defined as a member of the furry community. However, when someone says "that person is a furry", then the sign shifts to being triadic: the interpretant is taking an active role in specifying that a sign ("furry") signifies an object ("that person"). Someone can always construct their own sign relations at any time, but when it involves a third party, it has the tendency of muddying the waters of the semiotic niche (after all, if it were straight-forward, there wouldn't be much discussion to have).

What this means is that someone can certainly contribute to the sociolect without necessarily becoming a member of the society which owns it. There are more than enough examples of this to go around: Watership Down and "Robin Hood", or perhaps Coyote or Raven or Jackal. The creators of these signs and contexts did not necessarily take up membership in the furry social group, but they certainly did add to the niche of language and meaning that has been carved out over the last thirty years or so. This is complicated even further by the fact that the niche is made up of a community of actors rather than just one: something like Coyote as trickster may seem plenty furry to one member of the community, but only tangentially so, if at all, to another.

There are a few problems surrounding this concept of furry as a semiotic niche, and they have to do with the depth at which one analyzes the fandom, or the distance from it one stands. If, for example, one were to step back from furry a little ways, one can look at it a different way and see

it in the context of a related field: genre theory.

Furry as a genre is, on the surface, not a surprising concept. One can think of furry literature just as easily as one considers fantasy literature, or perhaps historical fiction. There is an underlying topic that lays beneath the corpi of all three genres. However, as Chandler puts it, “The classification and hierarchical taxonomy of genres is not a neutral and ‘objective’ procedure.”[6] The important point here is that the difference between objective and subjective interpretation is, in the terms of semiotics, the act of subjective interpretation is a sign in and of itself. That so many furries today would consider Disney’s “Robin Hood” to be a furry movie holds meaning both in regards to the object of the film and the fuzzy interpretants themselves. It is difficult even for me to interpret the movie outside of a furry context – I saw it first in Elementary school, and even then spent time drawing foxes afterwards. Needless to say, genre’s a difficult thing to determine from within.

This leads us to the second issue of determining a definition from within or without. If we bring back the concept of Moderate Whorfianism, this becomes more evident. In that context, language influences thinking, but if the thinking is the process of defining either one’s membership within the community, or, more dangerously, defining the community as a whole as we are here, then a feedback loop is started. If our contributions to the sociolect modify the sociolect that we’re in the process of studying, even individually, then it becomes even more difficult to pin down. This is quite the problem when studying the fandom from within.

Studying the fandom from outside introduces other related risks, however. It’s difficult to study something like this from the outside, as well, without having some concept of the use of the texts involved within their context. That is, it seems like studying a participatory corpus such as that of the output of our subculture without participating as well has the risk of coming up with an incomplete mental map of what all is going on. A good example of this (and I do mean good – the studies are well worth reading) would be the work of Kathleen Gerbasi, such as her study *Furries A to Z (Anthropomorphism to Zoomorphism)*[7]. While the study is well conducted and provides a good, in-depth look at the fandom, entries to her livejournal page indicate an involvement with the fandom not quite at the level of membership, but perhaps above simple scientific observation.

There is, it seems, a bit of indeterminacy when it comes to studying something such as a social phenomenon. By investigating or defining, we change, or at least risk changing that which is investigated or defined. It’s part of the aforementioned feedback loop, as certainly the goal of the investigator is to be changed in some way by the thing being investigated. That’s what gaining knowledge is all about.

Finally, the furry corpus in particular is extremely difficult to analyze. This is mostly due to the proliferation of texts, media, and modalities. We produce a lot. It is to the point where it’s even difficult to break the corpus down beyond lines other than simply different media. Even those

lines are blurred by the profuse cross-sharing of information across media, such as the reposting on twitter of FA journals that link to one or several images, potentially hosted on other sites.

There is, of course, plenty of writing to go by within the fandom. It's not simply writing for the sake of adding to the furry genre, such as it is, though, but writing in the form of image descriptions, journals, and rants on twitter. The idea is carried further to social interaction with written language, through twitter conversations, comments on images, role-playing, and instant messaging. Beyond the word, however, there is our focus on visual art; whether or not visual art is the primary draw to the fandom is certainly up for debate, but there is a reason that one of the primary social hubs online is an art website and one of the big draws at conventions is the art-show and dealers den.

There are more complex forms of communication than static text and images, though, and here is where things become quite difficult to analyze in any meaningful way. Fursuits, for instance, provide communication in a visual medium similar to that as art – they are pleasing to look at and express the meaning of the character they are intended to embody – but they are also an interactive medium. A medium that can move and talk, can hug and bounce and stalk and take on a life of its own.

And beyond even the concept of extending one's character into a costume one can don, there is our social interaction that happens on a more mundane basis, yet still within the boundaries of "furry interaction". There is an acceptable behavior, however ill-defined, that goes along with being a furry. It's difficult to speak of beyond tendencies and social cues, as many such social customs that come with membership in a subculture or fandom. It has been noted before, though, that one can tell the furries at a furry convention and a furmeet apart from the non-furs. There's a way that we act, which likely has much more to do with the idea of shared membership and social status than an interest in animals. JM, for instance, writes about the prevalence of geekiness and the behavioral norms that go along with it as they pertain to our fandom[8].

There are subtle cues and portions of our sociolect all over the place, though, and it doesn't always have to do with direct communication between actors in the community. The subtler things such as structures in websites (Flickr and DeviantArt, for instance, don't have a category option specifically for species) and conventions (the previously mentioned focus on dissemination of texts through the artshow and dealers areas), or even in media already geared toward social interaction such as MUCKs (again with a species flag) and SecondLife (where one can purchase a skin not only of the species of one's character, but of the exact color required).

Furry is a heady mix of a full slice of human society that somehow seems to remain topical. We have the glue of our mutual interest in anthropomorphics, but beyond that, we have spread our corpus across several different texts in our own personal ways of generating meaning within the context of our subculture. By the interaction of our own spheres of meaning we have gen-

erated our own semiotic niche, however fuzzy around the edges, and come up with this idea of “furry”. There’s no real easy way to pull it apart, even given as broad a topic as semiotics, but by investigating and participating, we always seem to expand it all the further.

Conclusion

This thing we call “furry” is clearly more difficult to pin down than one simple article or even a whole website will cover. It’s something that I’d tried before in a few different ways. In fact, it seems to be something that everyone tries as part of their membership dues. Every now and then, once a month or so, I’ll come across a journal post of someone else’s take on the whole fandom, and the beautiful (and yes, a little frustrating) part of it is that they’re all totally different.

We can make at least one statement, having taken all of this into account, though. Furry is a complex interaction of actors within a social community surrounding an already complex sign-meaning relationship. Beyond that, though, the issue grows complex by our reliance on two main modalities: natural language, which is always prone to misinterpretation; and visual art, which is only barely analyzable, and limited further, anyhow, by the medium of primarily hand-drawn images. Both of these are inherently ambiguous, and often based on aesthetics and identification on a per-member basis. That is, what is furry to one is not necessarily furry to another, or even the creator. The final level of obfuscation comes through the means with which so many interact with the fandom, via a willfully constructed avatar, something which does not match the individual themselves out of necessity.

This article and any like it will have it’s necessary downsides. We didn’t really get anywhere, all told – we defined some terms in order to help us understand the ways in which we interact with our subculture, both through the linguistic concept of a sociolect, a language used among our co-fans, and the semiotic concept of a niche, a set of meanings and sign relations shared by the members of the niche. It’s hard to get anywhere with either, though, especially in such a loose-weaved community. Semiotics and linguistics are all about statements of subtle facts made out in the open. There are concrete tests and analyses to be done (if one could port the commutation test to our visual art in order to find the “graphemes” of muzzles and tails, that could lead to interesting results), but they’re difficult to really do well, and even if they were, it’s not guaranteed that they would lead to any results, nor if any of the results would even be welcome.

There are positives to be had as well, though. I hope that the article has provided more insight into the the linguistics and semiotics of the fandom. The ideas of sociolects and genres are a good way to think about this broad base of which we are a part, because they provide a foundation of words on which we can base our own explanations of what it means to be a furry. And, beyond the definitions, it’s nice to maintain a certain sort of disputability. It allows for a greater membership

through greater self identification – more people can become furry because the definition of what furry is can accomodate them. And hey, that sense of mystery about the fandom is always nice, as well. It's a hook for bringing in new members, and for keeping the old ones interested, too.

I know this has been a little out of the norm, but I wanted to actually take my time to research an article and provide a more coherent look at the reasons for studying the fandom, and for this site in general. These things are important to us, too. The meanings we create determine our interactions within the fandom and how they take place. Beyond that, though, by participating in our community as members, we contribute to it. This is how we grow, explore, and find meaning,

Where to go from here? Well, I hope that the cognizance of the signs around us is helpful in a way. Every word, every piece of art, and every interaction between members is a sign from which we can glean a message and to which we can attach our own individual meanings, however mundane. The meanings inherent in these relations surround us and help define our membership, and we're certainly always creating more. If nothing else, there's always more work to go when it comes to exploring the furry subculture.

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6.3 The Geek Experience

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I received some fairly strong reactions to the short article I wrote about geeks a couple of weeks ago. The article is probably the slightest and most trivial contribution I've made to [adjective][species] in my ten or so articles to date, so I was expecting some criticism about its glib tone and sweeping statements. But I didn't expect that it would be read so differently by geeks, compared to non-geeks.

The geeks thought I was being unfair by connecting positive geeky behaviour to anti-social behaviour. Several people pointed out that geekiness is sexy and mainstream, whereas the anti-social behaviour I attributed to many geeks might be considered 'nerdy'.

On the other hand, the non-geeks felt the opposite: they thought the article was an over-the-top love letter to geeks and geekiness everywhere.

As an aside, I'm happy to report that the geeks all responded to me on the internet; the non-geeks all commented as part of a 'real life' conversation. (Stereotypes: confirmed.)

In this article, I want to explore the geeks in a bit more detail.

Geekiness is a big part of the furry experience. It's the most obvious, and accordingly laziest, way to characterize the community from the outside. For a new furry (or perhaps a journalist), it's a bit overwhelming – and it's easy to come away slightly shell-shocked after exposure to those geeks who can be low-empathy and unsocial.

For those people who exist in a geeky world – perhaps a programmer who plays tabletop RPGs with her friends – the geekiness of furry is not going to be so pronounced. I was recently shown a Livejournal post by Kuddlepup, talking about how furry is seen by people inside geeky fandoms.

Visiting a steampunk convention, Kuddlepup reported that furies are seen as being anti-social. But not because of poor personal hygiene or unsocial behaviour, but because furies at conventions *only go to see their friends*.

KP suggests that furies are being exclusive and vaguely cliquey, and I understand how it could be seen that way. However I'd argue that furry is fundamentally different from geek fandoms – it's about personal identity. Furies are spending time with their friends because they can explore their identity beyond the superficial *I'm just a wolf in a turtle-neck and glasses*.

Comparing the reactions to KP's post with those encountering the community from outside geekdom, I think there is a parallel with the contradictory reactions I received to my previous article. The different points of view are easy enough to explain, I think: there are many geeks in furry, but it's not a geek phenomenon. Our geeks and non-geeks just have different reference points. Everything, as always, is relative. (KP goes on to make a few other interesting observations and I'd encourage you to read his post in full.)

Regardless of how furry is seen through the lens of geekdom, it doesn't help us understand why we have so many geeks.

One thing we can say for sure: there is a preponderance of furies with non-traditional sexuality and gender identities. We've established that a very large number of furies re-evaluate their sexual preference after they discover the community; the full spectrum of gender identities are well-represented; furies exhibit a lot of unusual sexual behaviour (like the zoophiles, for example).

The breadth of humanity seen within furry is one of its great traits, because exposure to different people helps us all to become more understanding and tolerant. Furry is great for those people with unusual sexual and/or gender identity: furies can roleplay these parts of themselves, online or even in person.

Roleplaying as an animal person allows many furies to slowly accept and ultimately embrace their unusual gender and/or sexual identity. This 'baby-steps' approach is healthy and low risk from a physical and mental point of view. It's one of the ways that furry provides a positive environment for personal change, and it allows us to enjoy the irony of furies using an imaginary animal person as a vehicle to acceptance of their true self.

This virtue of the furry community is why, I think, that furry attracts so many (male) geeks. Geeks are often perceived to be weak, and this doesn't mesh well with a society that conflates 'masculinity' with 'strength'. Geeks are often bullied because they don't meet society's assumed roles.

Disclaimer time: I'm aware that geek culture has become more mainstream in recent years. However 'geek chic' is still very marginal. Looking into the most important reflector of mainstream human society: geeky TV characters are still, for the most part, held up as figures of fun. There is not a significant difference between the characterization displayed in *The Big Bang Theory* and, say, *Steve Urkel*.

At the risk of making a serious philosophical point using *Urkel*, it's telling that SU would sometimes transform into a masculine, suave, James Bondian alter ego, named Stephan Urquelle. The contrast between our nerd and his masculine alter ego – like Superman & Clark Kent, *Urkel* & Urquelle, and many other similar examples – clearly delineates society's position on what it means to be a man. The opposite of a man?: the geek.

There are parallels here with many furry geeks, who present as a furry self with a very different outward attitude, in mind and body. Furry avatars often bear little relation to the human behind them and this is particularly prevalent amongst the geeks. There are very few overtly geeky furry avatars.

Happily, we furies are accepted as the animal person that we purport to represent. This means that our geek can present as Lord HyperDragon and be accepted on those terms. Just like someone can experiment with gender online, our geek can mentally test-drive Lord HD's body and attitude.

Such roleplay often leads to change: it may be that our geek starts to become more like Lord HD over time – maybe in attitude, maybe in sexual behaviour, maybe by hitting the gym.

Now, before I get castigated (again) for lazily stereotyping geeks as unsocial and unwashed, I want to be clear that this isn't my intent. Geeks may be the single most obvious feature of the furry community, but the definition of 'geek' is slippery. I can't discuss the geeks without making some broad statements that will be fundamentally wrong in some way. But the geeks are different from the non-geeks – and there is some evidence that the two groups have different experiences within furry.

In my previous post, I tried to assess the number of geeks by looking at the response rate to three questions from the Furry Survey:

Would you describe yourself as:

- a fan of RPGs? (Yes 55)
- a fan of science fiction (Yes 61)
- a fan of anime (Yes 49)

I'm going to use the response to 'science fiction' to explore survey data from those that answered 'yes' or 'no', two groups that are respectively more or less likely to be geeks. I chose 'science fiction' because I think it's the least ambiguous question of the three. However the trends are similar for the other two questions.

With Klisoura's help, I compared new furries with furries who have been in the community for at least 5 years. I looked at the decline in heterosexuality, which is the clearest statistic for the phenomenon of furries re-evaluating their sexual preference.

- for science fiction fans, the decline in heterosexuality is 42% (over 5 years)
- for everyone else, the decline in heterosexuality is 54% (over 5 years)

Statistics alert: this data is of very low quality. There are many reasons why it is statistically and logically flawed beyond all reasonable use. I present it because I expected to see this pattern before Klisoura and I performed the data mining – it supports my hypothesis about the geeks.

To summarize, my totally unscientific hypothesis and data analysis suggests that furry disproportionately attracts people who don't fit into mainstream society.

- many people are attracted to furry because of unusual sexual and/or gender identity
- many (male) geeks are attracted to furry because they are not traditionally masculine

The obvious question raised by this theory:

- Does furry exist simply as a mental stepping-stone for people to understand and accept their true selves?
- Or do people within furry learn to love themselves because the community is such a positive environment for introspection and real change?

It's difficult to say which premise is the cart, and which is the horse. It's a question that, I think, is fundamental to exploration of furriness itself. So as a horse, I'm going to continue to pull this philosophical cart, exploring the question within the pages of [adjective][species]. (I'm also going to continue to torture equine-themed metaphors.)

But the cart can wait for future articles.

For now, I'm happy to reflect on all the positive things that furry brings. We all know people who, through furry, have improved their lives. This might be through re-evaluation of sexual preference or gender identity, or maybe they've lost weight, or improved their job situation, or maybe just gotten a little better at dealing with the difficult job of being human.

I think that the abstraction of one's self into an anthropomorphic avatar is what makes furry so personal and rewardingly social. Hopefully we're all better people for this weird and wonderful furry experience.

Chapter 7

May

7.1 The Haters

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In the April 2012 Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, there is an interesting piece of research that presents evidence that “homophobia can result, at least in part, from the suppression of same-sex desire”.

There are two ways that this conclusion might be perceived:

One: hypertolerant types might think this provides a bit of scientific ammunition against the bigoted. We can take the logical next step and apply this idea to haters within furry, which reframes them as closeted versions of the object of their hatred.

Two: skeptical types might think that psychological experiments are never statistically sound, and that academics are pre-disposed to presenting conclusions that match up with their pre-existing beliefs.

Both of these perspectives are valid if extreme. As always, the truth is somewhere in the middle. I’m going to explore this, and how this is reflected within the furry community, but first I’m going to talk about cognitive psychology and chronobiology.

The research on homophobia used the phenomenon known as priming, a common tool in psychological experiments. The classic priming example is as follows:

Fill in the blank to create a word. Answer with the first word that comes to mind.

For example: W_SH becomes WASH

Create a word from: SO_P

Presented with this question, a very large majority of people will answer SOAP. If you remove the example from the question, the most likely response is SOUP. The responder is “primed” with the word WASH, so SOAP comes to mind first.

This well-understood phenomenon can be combined with a tool used in the study of chronobiology, which is the science of how we perceive time.

It has been shown that, if you flash a word or phrase on a screen quickly enough, it will not be consciously registered by the part of the brain that deals with language. However it will be read and understood on an unconscious level.

As long as the word is flashed up quickly enough – typically less than 50 ms – it will not be consciously registered. The threshold at which messages are not consciously registered is key to chronobiological experiments, which study how time is experienced under different circumstances. This word-flashing technique is used in experiments testing the phenomenon of “slow time”, commonly experienced in stressful situations. Scientists measure the change in message-recognition threshold for subjects under extreme stress.

(My favourite experiment: subjects lie face-up on a net at the top of an old silo. The net is dropped, and a word is flashed on a screen for the subject to read while in free-fall.)

Words flashed in such a fashion are known as subliminal messages. And subliminal messages can act as a “prime”. Someone can be primed with WASH subliminally, and will be very likely to choose SOAP.

This technique isn’t restricted to word-association games. Priming also affects reaction time to certain tasks. In psychological experiments, this is often a simple sorting task where a person will be asked to categorize an item.

In our homophobia experiment, subjects were asked to categorize images as being “gay” or “straight”. The subject would be presented with a homo- or hetero-normative image or word (e.g. pictures of same-sex or straight couples) and asked to press a button associated with the appropriate category. The computer measured reaction time.

The catch? Subjects were subliminally primed with a word – either “ME” or “OTHERS” – before each test. Previous experiments have shown that this technique will reliably distinguish between self-identified heterosexuals and self-identified homosexuals.

A gay person would, in general:

- React quickly when presented with a gay image after being primed with ME, or when presented with a straight image after being primed with OTHERS.
- React slowly when a gay image was primed with OTHERS, or when a straight image was primed with ME.

A straight person will usually react in the opposite way.

This particular experiment was designed to test the effect of upbringing. The participants were asked a series of questions about their childhood and family. Among these questions, each participant was asked about their own attitude to homosexuals (for example: would you feel comfortable if your roommate was gay?).

Based on these responses, participants with intolerant attitudes were lumped into a group loosely termed homophobes’. (As you might expect, this group was mostly populated with people who grew up in a homophobic environment.) The experimenters compared the results for three groups:

1. Self-identified homosexuals
2. Homophobes
3. Everyone else

Surprise, surprise: the experimenters discovered that a significant proportion of the homophobic group reacted the same as the homosexual group.

The scientists concluded that there is “a discrepancy between self-reported sexual orientation and implicit sexual orientation” because “given the [parental] stigmatization of homosexuality, individuals may be especially motivated to conceal same-sex sexual attraction”.

To put it another way: they concluded that about 20

The leap of logic from “reacts the same way as a homosexual” to “is a homosexual” is questionable and difficult to prove. This technique is classically used to test covert inclinations such as racial prejudice. Our homophobia tests are going a step further: they’re not just measuring attitude. A potential counter-hypothesis might be that our homophobic subject becomes unconsciously enraged, thereby improving reaction time, after having “ME” linked with homosexual images. I’m not aware of work that has tested the validity of this idea.

However, it’s compelling to conclude that someone closeted with an unusual sexuality might exhibit hatred towards that sexuality. If someone is hostile towards a certain sexuality, it may help them feel as if they are internally proving’ that the sexuality doesn’t personally apply. What manifests as negativity towards others is actually self-hatred.

In the furry community, we don’t have a significant problem with homophobia. But we do have a problem with hatred towards some of the more unusual sexual orientations and interests, such as transexuals, babyfurs, zoophiles, and more. In all cases, people are being attacked for things that are innate.

Here is a high-profile example of hatred, which was linked to me by a babyfur friend of mine. Back in the salad days of Livejournal, furry humourist 2 The Ranting Gryphon posted an offensive rant aimed at babyfurs. It’s particularly egregious for several reasons:

- 2’s high profile means that his article is easy to find – it appears if you google babyfurs’.
- The events that 2 relates are almost certainly apocryphal. (In the comments, FWA security staff claim that they never heard about the events described.)
- Even if true, 2 takes one anti-social act and blames all babyfurs for it. He is being hostile towards an innocent group of people, whose only crime is having an unusual sexual interest.
- Plus, of course, the direct threat of violence.

2 posted a partial apology for his outburst a few days later.

I can’t say whether 2 is a closeted babyfur but his behaviour is certainly consistent with someone struggling with self-hatred. It’s safe to say that at least some of the haters are closeted versions of their target.

This means that our haters are not just angry: they are struggling with self-acceptance. It's unfair to take a hater to task for his position. Our hater is just reacting in a natural fashion to his own sexual interests or orientation: the anti-zoophile is very often a zoophile himself.

This is a natural, and unconscious, coping strategy. If you hate the hater, you're making the same mistake that he is: you're castigating him for something he has no control over.

Nor is it helpful to try to show our hater that he is wrong. As I have mentioned in previous articles, self-deception is a powerful force. If we see evidence that is contrary to our version of the world, we disregard it in a way that reinforces our existing belief.

It is far better, I think, to treat everyone – even the haters – with respect and nonjudgemental curiosity. Furry is a great environment for people to grow, and learn about themselves. There are many examples of ex-haters out there and none of them have changed their ways by being shouted down. Furry fellowship and understanding is a powerful force for good.

Personally, I recommend this is best done in person over a beer. But given that we're furies, I assume it would also work while engaging in a statistically unlikely sexual act on FurryMUCK. It's worth a try.

7.2 Three Meditations

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Process in Furry

When I was working my way through my music composition degree, I wound up fixating on one particular style of composition that has stuck with me to this day. There are as many ways of writing music as there are composers (many more, really), but one can discern general trends in the process of creation. I've mentioned this before, actually, in the introduction to the article on meaning within the fandom. There is the watercolor method of writing, which I'm going through now: starting at the top and writing until you're finished. In contrast to that, there is the carefully sculpted architectural method of writing, where one creates a blueprint then writes an article to match.

It's similar within music composition, and the style that I latched onto was process music, which is something of a synthesis of the strictness of form so important only a few hundred years ago and the freedom implicit in the postmodernist ideal. Within process music or process composition, one doesn't necessarily work with a form, but with a defined transformation. One of the most common ways of enacting the process is to come up with a set musical idea, a motive, and applies the transformation to it over time in order to help construct the piece of music. The use of the word 'help' is key there; the idea of a transformation in music is not a new one.

In the early-mid twentieth century, the idea of a transformation was extended to the twelve-tone row (where one sets the twelve tones of the western scale in a certain order and makes that a primary motive to be used in the piece). One transformation is to simply shift the piece over some number n where n is less than twelve (as a twelve-tone row is a mode of limited transposition – more on this later), but one may also take every instance where one tone in the row goes up to the next tone and make it go down the same number of steps instead, and vice versa; or to play the row backwards. Of course, these are just transformations working on the same set of material; a very strict process, as it were.

The process music that I found myself working with in my career follows a much looser standard, playing with the motive much more freely, while still applying a process to it over time. This was explained to me in terms of music that I had already written, however, and as with most all retrospection, it was something which I found applicable in many aspects of my life, such as when one learns about archetypes and, on looking back over their life, finds such scattered throughout, almost exactly where one would expect them.

The way in which I found myself thinking about processes in furry was within the context of conventions. When I interact with my furry friends online, when I interact with my furry friends in

person, and when I interact with furries at a convention, I'm often struck by the how we continue the wayss in which we socialize within the constraints of the medium. Put differently, I feel that I interact with furries in much the same way, no matter the medium, and all that happens is that I tend to put the interactions through a transformative process in order to fit them to the setting. The ways that I talk and move within the fandom, and the shifting settings and participants aren't mere pixels in some rasterized picture of my life, but more like vectors, something purer that traces tracks through time (and I freely admit that that is an enormously nerdy analogy).

I suppose a lot of this is fairly obvious stuff, but I find it all very interesting, because of the correlation to music, another very important aspect of my life. Indeed, the parallel can be drawn through most aspects of my life, or even through trends in history. Mostly, though, I've been thinking a lot about the idea of processes recently, though, due to the recent familial conflagration that took place at our house during the marriage, and all that lead up to it. It was easy to see it as a single event, a goal. Then I started remembering the similar gathering that took place at graduation, at various birthdays, and so on, and it became a little clearer that life is more of a process that we experience over time, rather than simple events taken out of time.

In the long run, I suppose we all deal with transformations of a motive throughout our lives. We're bound, whether consciously or not, to certain themes present in the world, and it's only the passage of time that helps us to change or be changed by them. It's a little bit of the old "there is nothing new under the sun," to be sure, but it's also heartening to think of the paths we make through each other's lives as we live out the processes of our lives in proximity with each other.

Evolution Within a Subculture

If one were to take a step back from the individual paths that we make in life and look at humanity as a species, it becomes clearly that we've really got a good thing going on with tool use. We've been at this whole "living on Earth" thing for quite a while now, and we seem to have grown accustomed to our surroundings, or, failing that, grown accustomed to making our surroundings fit our needs and wants. Sure, we started small with simple knives of stone and bone, then moved up through hammers and thongs to hammers and tongs, through stone to wood and bronze, iron, steel, titanium. We've surpassed many other species in a great many ways, arguably right up to species primacy. This is the process taken to the utmost extreme.

Similar things happen within societies, when one takes a step back inwards: civilizations rise and fall, and change with the times. The Romans, they did great! Certainly a gold star for the republic, and then the empire gets special marks for effort, to be sure. But they aren't alone, of course. The Greeks, the Tsardom of Russia, the various monarchies of Europe, and so on, have all striven forward and achieved primacy in their own times. America did likewise, and even believed

strongly in its own exceptionalism for quite a while, and we shall see where that leads. Needless to say, the same sort of evolution and process holds true on a cultural level, as well as a species level. Neal Stephenson discusses this in many of his books – whether it's the Chinese ti in his book *The Diamond Age* or the struggle of societies in *The Cryptonomicon*.

All of these struggles also surround tool use, in a way. The members of cultures are tools of the culture, as are the things they create. Not only did the individuals of the Revolutionary War help cement American exceptionalism in the cultural mindset of the times, but the use of inventions such as the atomic bomb helped to solidify them during times of stress. I'm being a little glib, of course, but the point stands: the use of what we're given in order to build with what we've got better than the others describes much of human civilization, in the macro or micro sense.

There was, however, one invention that, at least to some extent, changed up the order a little bit, simply by virtue of ignoring the previous geopolitical boundaries already in place. The Internet's a great and grand thing – where would [a][s] be without it? – but it's shifted the race to primacy, at least in terms of social stability, one step closer to the individual from species and culture. The subculture is something that surely existed before the Internet, of course, as one had such things within occupations and hobbies, but without necessarily the same ease of communication. With the advent of the communications age, the subculture gained a greater deal of prominence within the lives of those so enabled. A hobby moved beyond something one might do with close local friends and by oneself in the basement, and into something one shared with like-minded individuals with a fervency that was magnified by a technology that mostly just aided in communication using written language for a good deal of its existence.

Taken that way, the contiguous furry fandom these days has a lot going for it. We know our tools very, very well.

Furry fits in nicely on the web: by virtue of having much of the primary purpose of its existence based around socialization, role playing, and communication, a medium that lends itself particularly well to such things was quite the opportunity for the growing fandom. It's not simply that we're all tech-savvy individuals, as that's demonstrably not the case, there are weekly journals in my own watch-list on FA and daily statuses on Twitter made by furries requesting tech-help. Simply being savvy with the underlying technology isn't what makes all of this so useful to us, no, it's tied into something deeper, something which will help to ensure the stability of our subculture in many ways. Furries are savvy, instead, in the concept of social currency within the context of their fandom.

The whole idea of social currency suddenly became much more important with the invention of the 'net. One could have all the money in the world, or only enough to afford the means with which to communicate on the 'net effectively, and one could become rich in social currency: the sharing of ideas and words with those seeking them out. It's a little bit cynical, perhaps, and not very

flattering for us, but [adjective][species] acts in its own way within that structure, bolstering its own social currency by providing the ideas contained by the authors, both of articles and comments, to a wider audience – not simply forcing it on them by way of intrusive advertisements, but by making it a genuine resource available to those in search of it. We do our best to earn our social revenue, but we are, when it comes down to it, actively seeking it out.

Furries seem to be all about this, too: there are paid sites with limited-distribution furry images and stories, comics available only in hard-bound format, and countless individuals seeking profit in the more standard sense. However, for every image that's available only in a paid format, there are tens, hundreds, perhaps even thousands of images freely available to a wide audience through venues provided free of charge. And just as some form of man grew and rose to some form of species primacy, just how some forms of government grow and rise to some form of primacy in their respective times, the fandom is growing and rising into a space that sometimes seems made for it (avatars in SecondLife, anyone?). We're evolving to fit the environs and growing in stability as we do so.

The Self-Aware Fandom

I know that I have written about the idea of the contiguous fandom before, as that which is made up of those who identify as members of the fandom such that a semi-coherent group is formed. It's worth mentioning that in many cases, the idea of 'identity' is used to describe something that is pathological, or differing from the norm. For instance, I brought up the idea of basing a portion of my identity on my successes with my psychologist, and we wound up spending the next several weeks talking about what exactly could be causing such a problem. It's not so much that we have identities, of course, we all do, but that when we are conscious of our identities, it's indicative of some pathology, something differing from the norm, or some dis-ease; we may always identify as male, but when the idea of gender identity rises to the surface and occupies one's thoughts unbidden, then we start thinking of gender identity disorder.

Doubly interesting, then, that furry has become a matter of identity. It's been brought up on twitter, at least, that many within the fandom may feel some sort of species dysphoria, or dissatisfaction or depression associated with the feeling of being the wrong species. While I went through a period wherein I would have agreed to that, I don't think that's the case for myself anymore, and I'm not sure that describes a majority of the fandom, either. I think we have something subtler and more interesting going on with the fandom. It seems a simple thing for us to say that we are furries, and yet [a][s] is only the most blatant instance of furries exploring or attempting to explain furries, even to other furries, never mind the world at large. Perhaps it's a symptom of the participation mystique I've brought up before, and perhaps not, but it's worth exploring either way.

The idea of a furry identity is consistent with even a cursory observation of the contiguous fandom. The two examples that seem to show themselves most clearly is the combination of apologetic and defensive attitudes in regards to adult content, and the self deprecation that takes place in so many of the social outlets as favored by members of the fandom.

The first of these, I believe, is due in part to a sense of just how loose-weaved the fandom is perceived to be by its adherents. What appears to be a split between those who are avid consumers and producers of adult content and those reject that it is a large part of the experience of being furry may in fact be so visible because of the simple perception that there is great diversity in the membership of the subculture, and the whole gamut between porn-obsessed freaks and those who are either most innocent of or staunchly opposed to the adult content that exists within the fandom. This site is not the only outlet of meta-furry content out there – I see fairly regular journals and mention of many of the topics we’ve covered and will cover here. Furry is something we obviously spend a lot of time thinking about, it’s an identity that doesn’t necessarily always sit naturally within our concepts of self and how we interact with the rest of the (non-furry) world, and perhaps that’s due to the social nature of what much of furry has become.

As for the second example of self deprecation, I’ve been watching waves of the hashtag #furriesruineverything wash over twitter over the last year or so. It began as simple snark, implying that furries really did take everything, turn it terrible, and set it loose on the Internet, but it’s since gained additional layers of meaning. It’s been inverted to add some sarcasm to the mix – furries “ruin” everything, by making it better – and it’s been reverted back to the idea that furries can ruin even things that aren’t necessarily furry in the first place, such as Twitter, kids shows, and so on. This is only the simplest and one of the most blatant examples of the self-deprecation that seems to move through the fandom, and it’s occasionally found itself tied to the first example through off-color remarks about how most furries are sexaholics, but we love them anyway.

What does it mean that we are all occasionally a little uncomfortable in our membership with this subculture? It’s one of those questions that, yes, is another sort of process, the type of question we’re continually finding new and better answers to, the type of process that continues to define who we are, hopefully toward the more healthy end of the ‘identity’ spectrum. It seems that, for a majority of those involved, the fandom has at least provided a positive influence on life, whether or not it makes us a little too conscious of the portion of our identities we’ve based on it. I know I wouldn’t trade myself now for who I might be without the fandom, ever.

7.3 It's Raining Men

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Its common for furries to look within the community for potential long-term partners. For many people who are serious about furry, like me and presumably many of the readers of this article, a potential partner is required to be furry.

Its logical that furries will form relationships together, because furry is about identity. If your identity as a virtual animal-person is internally important, youre going to want to share that with your partner and express that within your relationship. I cant think of a better example than [adjective][species]s own Makyo, who was married last week and posted a thoroughly charming picture of him and his partner in suit.

Furry is a very social group and its easy to meet new people, so there are a lot of opportunities for relationships. That is, unless you are heterosexual and male.

If youre a heterosexual male and you want to find a partner within the furry community, your odds arent good. The ratio of eligible men to eligible women is about 3:1. And thats being optimistic.

Heres how I arrived at this ratio. Anyone not interested in the maths may wish to look away now.

Firstly, some assumptions and simplifications:

- All my data comes from the 2011 furry survey.
- Ive lumped the pansexuals in with the bisexuals for convenience.
- Ive excluded asexuals.

And the base statistics:

- Men make up about 80% of the furry population; women 20% – this split is pretty consistent if you look at biological sex or self-reported gender.
- The proportion of straight:bi:gay men in the furry community is 37:34:25%.
- For women, its 46:41:8%

And the maths:

- I exclude gay men and gay women.

- I assume that bisexual men and women can end up with opposite-sex or same-sex partners based on availability. (So bisexual men end up with mostly other men, simply because there are more gay/bi men available than straight/bi women.)
- Based on this calculation, I exclude the proportion of bisexuals who end up with same-sex partners.
- This leaves us with just those men (straight or bisexual) who are competing for available women (straight or bisexual).

The results:

- 46% of furries are men available for a female partner.
- 16% of furries are women available for a male partner.

In all likelihood, this is optimistic for men seeking heterosexual relationships within furry. Women are a small minority, but they also tend to identify less strongly as furries (according to the furry survey, although this isn't reported anywhere public). So I'm guessing that this means that furry women are less likely to look inside the community for a partner, which will further deplete the available women.

A further problem is that the furry community is not very welcoming to the small number of women that do socialize. I am aware of several occasions where women have had trouble with unwelcome attention from guys within furry. This annoyance has crossed the line into sexual harassment and sexual abuse all too regularly. Of the furry women I know, a very high proportion have suffered. I have no doubt that this is a contributing factor to the small number of furry women, and their lack of engagement with the community.

There is also a sizeable minority of gay male furries who exhibit a less aggressive antipathy towards women. Their attitude might be described as Calvinesque, as in Hobbes. While there is often a lighthearted element to an "ew girls gross" attitude, it is still unwelcoming.

This problem is not restricted to the furry community. Inherent sexism is a problem in many male-dominated geek fandoms, an issue that is starting to be addressed in some circles.

Last year, a Texan gamer group decided to ban women from attending a LAN event. The bigotry was punctuated by irony: organizers decided the event should be male-only because they were worried that women attending the event would be subject to sexist comments.

Happily, the group was widely attacked for their sexism. It's about time that sexism within furry was addressed as well.

A quick caveat: acceptance that the furry community is inherently sexist does not necessarily imply that furries are sexist. It is a norm – there are patterns of behaviour within the group that

make it unwelcoming for many furry women. As standards with the community change, furries will adjust and act accordingly.

The best, and easiest, step towards change is to start talking about how women are treated within the furry community. Its important. More happy furry women will make the group better for everyone.

7.4 Relationships Within Furry

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Last week I wrote about one of the great inequalities within furry, the gender imbalance. Furry, measured by self-reported gender or by biological sex, is around 80% male and 20% female.

I talked about how the community can be unwelcoming for women, and how the dearth of furry women has a negative effect on some heterosexual furry men. When it comes to furies available for heterosexual relationships, the guys outnumber the girls by around three to one. This is a problem for those heterosexual male furies who feel that their partner needs to be a furry too.

In my article, I assumed that a relationship is defined as something exclusively shared between two people. But it's wrong to characterize furry relationships as an exercise in 'coupling up'.

Many furry relationships are non-monogamous, non-exclusive and/or only involve more than two people. I don't have any data to draw upon, but it's possible that exclusive monogamous couples are in the minority. Furry relationships, in my experience, can cover a very wide range of potential arrangements.

Online relationships within furry are relatively common. We think of online relationships as routine, but the entire concept is a new one. The relatively recent advent of the internet has brought about these relationships: it allows the sort of intimate communication necessary for the formation of a close emotional bond.

The boundaries of online-only relationships are being explored within furry. Owing to the international nature of the furry community, we tend to congregate online. This has inevitably led to the concept of an "online partner", where someone will consider themselves to be in a relationship – even virtually married – with someone they interact with online (and sometimes solely online).

This is an inevitable direction for society, outside furry, as the world moves online and becomes more virtual. We furies, with our virtual animal-person alter-egos, are testing the possibilities of online relationships. We live a kind of virtual ghost life where our furry character lives inside a collective imagination as a real-but-not-real apparition. We're taking the virtualization of life to a new, but logical, level.

Virtual lives and virtual relationships will become more common outside furry as time goes on. Society will adapt to the changes, with furies at the vanguard, just as society is adapting to the radical changes in relationships over the past 60 years or so.

Since the 1950s and 1960, society has moved away from a patriarchal relationship model. Thanks mostly to advances brought about by the second wave of feminism, we live in a more equal society where a relationship is not based on the assumption that one gender is superior. This has benefitted women but also gay couples: a relationship of equals provides a great model for a

monogamous gay relationship, because society no longer expects a couple to respectively occupy the roles of “man” and “woman”.

This is not to say that there are no opponents to these changes. In conservative parts of the world, there is a natural resistance to the way that relationships have changed – see this Queensland, Australia election ad (from 2012!) (link updated) – which assumes a gay relationship must involve gender roles.

That advert and the attitudes it embodies are fundamentally sexist and homophobic. Many people are anti-gay-marriage, however I don’t think they are necessarily bigots. In many cases, people are anti-gay-marriage because they see it as another step in the wrong direction: another step away from a 1950s-style marriage.

The change in relationships towards a gender-neutral model is a positive step, but there have inevitably been some negative outcomes. The clearest is a ballooning divorce rate. Divorce is always difficult, for the couple and any children, as many people reading this will know. The previous model, where a woman had limited power within a marriage, was more stable – much as slaves are more stable than employees.

There are always growing pains during times of rapid change. Society’s shift towards the virtual world – as explored by furies – is also fraught. Many furies reading this will have learned that non-traditional relationships, whatever their flavour, are difficult to maintain over a long period of time.

There are a few reasons for this:

- There are limited role-models for unusual relationships, which means that the participants must learn by making mistakes, with limited experience and wisdom to draw upon.
- Unusual relationships don’t mesh well with society, which can cause friction with the outside world, perhaps when dealing with family or workmates.
- There may be a lack of legal recognition.
- If more than two people are involved, jealousy issues can become more significant.
- Communication, which is the cornerstone of any relationship, may become more difficult.

Because of these problems, and others, unusual relationship structures will fail more regularly. Relationships that most closely match the norms of society are more likely to be successful.

Regardless of your own preferences, aspiring to be in a healthy relationship is a good thing. But that doesn’t mean you need to be in a rush.

The average age of marriage for men is close to 30 in the US. For furies looking to enter a long-term commitment, whatever that might be, age is less important.

In the furry world, it's easy to meet new people. This doesn't always happen in the non-furry world – people often find their social circles shrink in their 20s and 30s. This is the opposite of the furry experience.

Single furries may also find it easier, compared to non-furries, to find rewarding intimacy and sexual contact within the context of a friendship. I think that the intimacy of many furry friendships puts us in a good position to learn about ourselves, and what we desire from a partner. Most good relationships can only work when all parties are fully-formed adults. People who get married young often find themselves yearning to explore life when they get older. This phenomenon is common enough to be almost stereotypical – a midlife crisis or a seven-year itch.

Anyone in a relationship or seeking a relationship – which covers almost all of us – is most likely to be successful if they are introspective and autonomous. Fortunately we are furries, which is all about exploration of identity.

I'd love to hear some stories – good and bad – from readers who have explored unusual relationship structures.

7.5 Spiritual Animals

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Spirituality is one of those slippery words that can be ridiculously hard to pin down. I've found that you can usually tell when one of those is coming up by looking at the length of it's Wikipedia article, as odd as that sounds. If the article can basically get right to the point and then spends the rest of the time exploring fine details such as history, examples, and important figures, then the topic is not likely very complex to define. If it wanders down a long path, peppered with links, is topped with a sidebar and tailed by a category boxwell, needless to say that Spirituality's Wikipedia article is a prime example of a "difficult topic".

It really seems to come down to the fact that spirituality means different things to different people, has to do with the search for meaning in things that we don't understand and don't seem to be explainable by science, and is self-referential: numinous things are spiritual, spirituality has to do with numinous things. While my gut instinct tells me that the concept of a spiritual fur has been on the decline in recent years, I still see and hear mention of it quite frequently, in some form or another. Us spiritual animals have rich histories to draw on, adopt, and appropriate, not to mention the ones we create for ourselves, and we seem to have done so with a will.

"Spiritual" can be used to describe many things, and means many different things to different people, of course. To some it's a way or means of exploring issues or answering questions to which they do not have an answer, and to others it's more of an adjective attached to things that are inexplicable, and yet to others it's a state of being they maintain throughout their lives. In general, though, it all seems to have to do with meaning. I've gone on (and on and on) about the importance of meaning as it pertains to furies, and, as part of my preparation for writing this article, I went back through my notes. As I did so, it became clear that this fixation on meaning involved with spirituality is thoroughly tangled up with furry. After all, what would be more obvious as we investigate the meaning of creating an avatar of ourselves as some other species than to consider the spiritual side?

I must add the caveat that spirituality is by no means a universal with those that identify or are interested in furies and anthropomorphics. In fact, atheists and agnostics seem to outnumber those who identify with a particular spiritual path such as Christianity or paganism. This is, of course, referring only to responses on a survey to a question utilizing the word 'religion' rather than spirituality, and in this respect, my gut feeling is that it's fairly accurate. However, I do get the feeling that many who may have responded with 'atheist' or 'agnostic' might still feel, in some way, spiritual. I, for example, fall within the agnostic slice of that pie (or, well, doughnut), yet still can't deny experiences that I could only call spiritual, at least at the time. This, along with similar sentiments held by several friends, is harder to quantify, yet still a valid point to make: our

reactions to the unknown and our explorations of meaning go beyond simply the actions taken to explore those things, touching also our emotional and intellectual outlook on life.

Of all of the spiritual influences within the furry fandom, two seem to be far, far more prevalent than any others: the loose-weaved generalization of “Native American” spirituality and some aspects of Japanese spirituality. The former may well have been a product of the ’80s and ’90s, when many of those who responded to Klisoura’s survey were born, and which featured, among other things, a spike or resurgence of interest in Native American spirituality. The reason that I mentioned this as a loose-weaved generalization and then put “Native American” in quotes is that it is difficult to pin down “Native American” spirituality to just one tribe; rather, it seems to be a collection of influences from several North and South American tribes (some notable ones being the Chippewa, from whence came much of the writings on Totemism; many tribes more focused on shamanism as it’s traditionally described through central America, with a focus on Power or Spirit Animals; and down into the South American continent, which provides art and architecture from the Inca and the like). Many furies who incorporate elements of these spiritual origins into their own lives seem to do so because of the draw provided by the very concept of Totemism: the fact that one might have a power animal, that one might share aspects of that animal’s personality or physical attributes, and that one might draw personal or spiritual power from such a totem provides a clear draw for those interested in anthropomorphics.

On the other side of the world, however, the Japanese have amassed a large amount of folklore surrounding many different animals. The tales that surround foxes and the native raccoon dogs (N. *procyonoides*) in the most pertinent forms of kitsune and tanuki are those that are most familiar to the western-dominated furry subculture. These two in particular, but other supernatural beings (*yukai*) related to animals such as the Beckoning Cat (*maneki neko*) have crept into western culture through various media outlets, and specifically into the popular furry fandom through the crossover links with the anime fandom. With their connotations of shapeshifting, of being in a relationship, and of animals interacting with the world around them in supernatural ways, it’s unsurprising that the fandom would draw much from these.

These, of course, are only two examples of the way spirituality and folklore have influenced the furry fandom and woven ties deep into our subculture, influencing everything from the ways we feel about our connection to animals to something as simple (well, “simple”) as character creation. Many of the most popular species out there are related in some way to a species that is important to at least one culture in a spiritual way. Wolves have their legends in both North America and Europe, horses have their adherents in Scandinavia and throughout Eurasia, foxes and coyotes have their trickster backgrounds (not to mention jackals and many other such canids), and even kangaroos have their own legends to go with them, not to mention the spirituality that goes along with big cats all over the world.

It seems that part of what draws us to the idea of anthropomorphism is the meaning attached to an animal. Whether that means that an individual is influenced in their character by the spiritual associations or that their spiritual associations are influenced by their subconscious choice of character likely varies by the individual, but the important aspect seems to be that it adds intensity to the choice. When one person elects to create a character of a fox, they may do so because that species offers the intensity of meaning, that certain “it just fits” *je ne sais quoi* that helps to complete the process of character creation. It’s a powerful sensation, one supposes, and just as often leads to a proliferation of characters in order to fit all those intense moments in life, or one character locked down forever that provides the best fit in all scenarios.

This is evident beyond just the spiritual associations that are attached to certain species, though “spiritual” being such a difficult word to pin down, that’s a broad statement in itself. Many individuals may find that intensity of meaning provided by the social connotations of species that are not necessarily considered spiritual, in the traditional sense of the word (though I should note that the Wikipedia page for “tradition” is nearly as complex as that for “spirituality”). Dogs, for instance, carry significance in the society beyond the legendary, though many contemporary works have started to include some of that in their status. Specifically, dogs seem to be drifting toward some apotheosis of animal companionship, as evidenced by works such as *Shiloh*, *Old Yeller*, *Lassie*, *Where the Red Fern Grows*, and countless others. Dogs are only one example, however; house cats, race and work horses, and many others all have built up their own social significance that adds to the meaning of the character one creates.

The thing that got me thinking about this in the first place was a hashtag that floats around twitter once a week: #TMITuesday. It’s really no secret that people change throughout their lives around adolescence, and I am no different. I have, on one of my bookshelves, books that range from the Bible to the Quran, the Celestine Prophecy to books on tarot cards (not to mention a modest collection of decks). I was very, very much into the concept of spirituality, specifically the introspective aspects of it (as if that wasn’t obvious), and amassed quite a collection of materials related to that interest. My choice of characters, then, was not mere consequence. As I was first getting into the fandom, I began as a red fox, taking from the species many spiritual aspects both learned and imagined. I created my character based around the intensity of meaning surrounding a supposed slyness, a dash of mystery, and a generous helping of playfulness that I gleaned from outside sources and my own thoughts.

As time went on, that shifted toward arctic fox after sifting through vague correlations in much the same way that I learned to read tarot cards; I felt snarky, arctic foxes looked snarky stealing bits of food from polar bears, thus a correlation was demonstrated. Another example was the way in which I changed with the seasons. What might be called Seasonal Affective Disorder in others, I deemed in a hazy way a correlation between the way the arctic fox’s coat goes from a fluffy white

to a scraggly salt-and-pepper. Even as my interest in spirituality waned over time, I still felt the need for that intensity.

Other species choices were much more, well, specious. I created a wolverine character meant mostly to get different reactions in places I frequented on MUCKs, and the whole otter thing was due mostly to wanting to get a fursuit, but finding out that white fur can be hard to make look how you want. This intensity of meaning became evident in the different ways I felt interacting as each of the characters in turn. There was something distinctly lacking from my interactions as a wolverine and an otter, and making them “mine”, as it were, took a force of effort, rather than being a consequence of my selection, having some sort of spiritual or social meaning behind their creation. I failed with Happenstance, the wolverine character, and I succeeded only through force of will (and money well spent on a fursuit) with Macchi, the otter character.

In many bookstores, there is a certain area, usually just a shelf or section of a shelf, sometimes an entire room dedicated to the act of the practical, personal application of spiritual ideas. Many focus on meditation practices, prayer, research, manipulation of certain objects, or even diets and other practical matters. Others provide descriptions and hint at exercises intended to guide one down their own exploratory spiritual path rather than provide clear directions of one sort or another. I prowled my way through this section often through at least one period in my life. Many members of our subculture, and countless more outside the contiguous fandom, whether they identify more with therians, weres, some other subculture, or none at all, have found a way to integrate many aspects of what is called spirituality readily into their lives, however. We seem to have done well by ourselves in that respect, making something as important as identification of a personal spirit animal, totemic guide, or other spiritual-animal connection a part of our day-to-day lives.

I know that this is a large topic, and I know that I have not done it justice, due to my incomplete knowledge. I know, for example, that I was unable to provide adequate words to the Totemism topic that is so dear to many of my friends, and I deliberately skirted the topic of more conventional, more organized religions on the grounds that I have very little experience with such things, and don't know too much of how furry interacts with the social aspect of spirituality as structured in religion beyond a few conversations I've had with a very kind [a][s] reader. I know that many of you feel a spiritual connection with furry, and I invite you to leave comments with your own stories, thoughts, and words on the subject here, or, if such things are too personal and you still wish to share, to email me at makyo@adjectivespecies.com.

7.6 Dimensions of Character

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One of the things I've noticed more and more as I continue to grow up – not sure I'd call myself a grown-up, yet – is the way in which the divisions in our life become both less clear and more profuse as time goes on. I think my first intimation of this came at about the time I was finishing up middle school (8th grade, in my district), and started secretly reading up on this whole “gay” thing, on the suspicion that I might fall into that category.

It wasn't a really easy thing for me to accept about myself at the time, as I suppose it rarely is for a kid in the southwest States. Colorado is a unique state in that, while much of its area is of a more conservative, Christian character and not generally accepting of homosexuality, there is a stretch that goes from about Fort Collins on down south of Denver along the front range that tends to be more socially liberal and less religiously oriented overall, and certainly more open to differences in sexual orientation than the surrounding areas. I spent a lot of time growing up in that front-range area where most of those around me likely would've been okay if I had come out, and some of them would have probably rushed to tell me just how okay it is to be gay: Boulder, as a town, is almost intrusively cool with it. Even so, there was this sensation that if I were to leave the Denver-Boulder area, I would be immediately be set upon by both protesters and perpetrators of hate crimes both.

What can I say, I was a dramatic kid.

That's why I started reading about it more and more. I started to look into my preconception that there was this line drawn around my home cities in fat sharpie on the map, with the insides colored pink, and the outsides a horrible, soul-sucking blackness. That sense didn't jive with what I started to experience at school, middle school being a particularly difficult portion of life to deal with. There were kids in school would would, it seemed, readily beat me up for being gay, and there were people whom I met from outside of Boulder that seemed perfectly reasonable and nice about the whole thing. Of course, the whole concept didn't stand up to the slightest bit of scrutiny as soon as I started to look outside of my personal experience.

My big breaking point, however, came when I found the Kinsey scale, which divides sexual orientation into seven degrees, from 0 – Completely Heterosexual to 6 – Completely Homosexual. Before then, bisexuals were something of a myth to me, and much of that was due to the way I originally came out when I frequented forums as a kid. One started bi as a way to test the waters, see if everything was alright, and then one jumped in with a big “ha ha oh just kidding I was gay the whole time”. Anyone who stayed bisexual, I was told, just wanted to have sex with guys, whether they were male or female. Such was life in the middle of America as a pre-teen, I guess.

Once I had found the Kinsey scale, though, things changed drastically. It wasn't just that the scale had been named after and promoted by a man with a Dr.' in front of his name, though that certainly helped, and it wasn't just that the scale was built so that there was a number in the center without having the maximum value be an odd number (as a child, I had an irrational hatred of odd numbers). Rather, it was that there was such a thing as a non-binary aspect to this portion of my existence. I had been, until then, convinced through the doxa I was immersed in and my own lucubration that there really were only two choices in life: male and female, gay and straight, hamburger and cheeseburger.

After that, my interest only grew. I can't honestly say that I jumped directly into the study of non-binary modes expression and identification, but as I continued on to high school and even beyond, into college, I kept finding things that were not as simple as I had previously imagined them to be. I suppose everyone goes through such a period in their life, but for me, it always seemed to come back to that original "discovery" that much of which we assume to be binary through the workings of social doxa or our own incomplete comprehension of the matter is, in fact, a gradient, a cline, a continuum.

The next big stepping stone for me, in terms of comprehension, came after I started to read up more and more about gender disparity and transgender issues, for even though I dated a wonderful trans guy in high school, I still had little to go on in terms of really trying to understand those issues. I understood the whole concept of gender identity versus biological sex, and I even had some inkling to there being some sense of non-duality through my scant interactions (at that point), with intersex and hermaphroditic individuals; however, some portion of my mind kept catching on the snag that there really were only two sexes and two gender identities, and that transgender folk simply had a mismatch somewhere in there.

The actual moment came when I found a funny looking poster of a stick figure (which I wasn't able to find, exactly, but here is the closest I came up with) which described not only biological sex and gender identity as gradients, but also gender expression, along with the familiar sexual orientation. "Whoa," I thought, "Here I was going about this all wrong, and in much the same way as before!". It wasn't so much that I had rediscovered gradients in life, as that I really started to comprehend the multidimensional nature of what is often taken for granted, if not declared outright to be the norm. Gender, when I was growing up, meant boy and girl, penis and vagina, the simplest explanation. When I started to get older, I started to understand that there was such a thing as gender separate from biological sex, but only in a psychopathological context, when they did not match up and it caused identity issues. It took a goofy stick figure poster to knock me into the sense that there were multifarious dimensions to what had previously been a relatively simple concept for me to understand, insofar as I was capable of doing so. I was A. Square finally comprehending that there was a third, possibly even a fourth dimension.

In both of these instances – discovering gradients and discovering new dimension in definition – I found myself applying these new-found ways of looking at things to the world around me. I was lucky, though, in that the world around me took place largely online in the form of interacting with animal people. The benefits of interacting online so much are myriad, but the two most pertinent ones are that I was a) able to do research quickly and easily and b) able to investigate the “paper trail” that I and so many others had left behind. In short, my almost subconscious reaction to learning these new things was to immediately try to apply them to furry.

Like all such slippery concepts, I wound up going down quite a few blind alleys, barking up a quite a few empty trees, and several other appropriate metaphors too numerous to list here. I tried to apply these concepts either too liberally, or not liberally enough, to the world around me and found some ways in which they were more helpful than not in explaining the ways in which I and others interacted with the fandom and with our own understandings of or identifications with anthropomorphics.

In fact, in the last paragraph, I touch on at least two very important gradients and dimensions of character that have come up time and time again: anthropomorphics and, for many, identification with a subculture built off this interest in anthropomorphic art, role playing, and character creation. Within those, as within all aspects of membership and identity, are at least three different dimensions making up one’s association: interest, participation, and creation. Interest, of course, is how much one is interested in such a thing, how much they read up on it, how much they take in. Participation, on the other hand, is how much that person actively integrates themselves into the thing they are interested in: creating an account on FA, browsing art, favoriting images, watching artists, leaving comments. Finally, there’s the aspect of creation. Beyond simple participation, this is the means by which someone can contribute, give back, post to FA, and gain the participation of others in turn. All of these may be thought of as gradients, where the levels with which one may show interest, participate, and offer up unique creations.

These are, of course, just simple examples of the varying dimensions and gradients with which one can interact with the fandom, of course, and there are just as many, if not more ways to identify with anthropomorphic animals outside of just the furry fandom. As I was writing all this, I started to think that, in at least one way, it all sounded familiar. It took me a moment to place where, but the further back I looked in my past, the closer it seemed to get until finally, I remembered. FurCodes.

With how much time I spent thinking about those things, it’s remarkable that I was unable to really internalize the whole concept of gradients and dimensions in so many aspects of my life (no one ever accused me of having an over-abundance of intelligence). These simple, one-line codes of letters and symbols are an accurate summary of much of what I was talking about just a few paragraphs up. For every thing in our life that we take to be black or white, true or false, totally

binary, there is a good chance that it is not nearly so simple, but embodies a full spectrum of hues, saturations, and values. I plowed through the process of creating a code again and came up with the following, answering relatively truthfully:

```
FCA3amr A- C++ D+ H+ M++ P R T W+ Z Sm+ RLCT a cl+++ d! e++ f+ h+++  
iwf+++ j+ p+ sm+
```

None of this should really be of any surprise, of course, but a few things caught my eye and offer a good example to prove my final point. It feels as though it has been a really long time since Zines and Doom have felt pertinent, and the division of age into entire decades seems almost quaint these days. Age, it seems, has not exactly treated the FurCode very well. That is the final, most important of gradients or dimensions out there to take into account: time. All of the things I have mentioned so far in this post – sexuality, gender, association with the fandom and anthropomorphics – and really most everything out there has this aspect of time tied to it that is so rarely thought about. All of the things that we hold to be solid and true in life are tied to time in one way or another (some of which seem a little surprising).

I was dead-set, utterly convinced that I was straight, then that I was gay, and for a period after that, that I was bi. I was totally comfortable in my gender in terms of how it matched up with my biological sex, and then I was thrown into a whirlwind of confusion. I was definitely sure that I would always have a Zine or two pertaining to the fandom, that I would always be a wizard on a MUCK, that I would always be FCFp3dwa.

Clearly, this isn't the case. Time is a tricky thing, and yet, if I take a step back and take a look at the trajectory of my membership to the fandom and my association with anthropomorphics, I have no trouble in understanding or even appreciating that time is just another dimension of character, whether literally in the sense that my character is constituted of various different aspects of myself at a particular time, or more metaphorically, that time is a part of defining my sense of character.

There are so many different dimensions and gradients in character, and within association to the fandom and to one's personal character or characters. I've listed a few, such as species and time, or the means of interaction that we have with the fandom, whether it's interest, participation, or creation. What other aspects are there? Are any of these particularly pertinent in your own situation? I'd like to see some comments with some of your own stories as to what dimensions you've found important in your lives, and what things have surprised you by being a sliding scale instead of a duality.

Chapter 8

June

8.1 Furry Art in Depth

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When a non-fur asks for an example of what the “furry fandom” is, you show them convention websites or furry social sites. When a non-fur asks what a furry is, you show them a picture of an anthropomorphic animal. The most integral and fundamental part of the fandom is its artwork. Furry artwork serves many purposes within the fandom, and for every purpose there are artists focused on that form of design. Convention posters, story illustrations, popular media, and personal art, both custom and non-custom, are just some of the uses for which “furry” artwork is created.

Within the realm of personal anthropomorphic pics, there are plenty of ways to acquire your own artwork. All you have to do is consider what sort of art you’re interested in, where it will be shown, and a budget. Most furries nosing around the art-o-sphere are searching for custom commissions. They can start by considering whether they’re looking for traditional or digital art. Traditional art is created with physical media like colored pencils, watercolors, and even oil paint. Digital art is created using any number of the digital art suites available on the Internet.

There’s a separation between two different kinds of artistic production: functional and aesthetic. The distinction is more important than the fandom might consider. In order to explore this idea, let me give a quick run-down on the history of creative art during arguably the most important artistic era of all time: the Renaissance.

In pre-Renaissance Italy “artists” as we know of it were virtually unheard of. The creators of “art” were artisans, members of a low social class. Artisans were purely craftsmen. They were highly skilled and experienced in their work, which was either functional or decorative: furniture, jewelry, tools, and the like. As a sort of retaliation from the stagnation during the dark ages, painters and sculptors began gaining social status as the general populace finally gained the ability to fund art for their own use. A scientific examination of artistic creation flourished during this time, as optics, geometry, and anatomy were all explored, and “art” finally became an intellectual, theoretical practice.

As a result of the new-found esteem of art for art’s sake, the upper class of Renaissance Italy began funding portraits as a show of their wealth and nobility. The Catholic Church was also a heavy patron of art in this era, notably the work of Michelangelo. Finally, artists and artisans were a separate group. Those who were skilled in smaller, functional work were a different social class than those who were creating aesthetic pieces for a higher nobility.

Why the historical ramble? The results of the artist/artisan divide echoes in the furry fandom. Consider what function furry artwork fulfills. Badges seem to be the best example of functional artwork. Every badge is a new work, in its own right, but they’re generally smaller and less intricate



Figure 8.1: Ginevra de' Benci“Ginevra de' Benci” by Leonardo da Vinci, c. 1474.15 x 15 inches, oil on panel. Ginevra was an intelligent aristocrat born in Florence in 1458.

than what one would consider an art piece. They're also geared towards utility: they're something you use to identify yourself in a crowd.

Conventions prominently feature work commissioned from individuals for promotion. Posters, convention book covers, fliers, even custom name tags have been created for conventions as both decoration and to serve a purpose. Some conventions even have mascots which are drawn by new artists each year. Custom t-shirt designs are created for many larger cons. Reference sheets are also significantly functional. While they commonly express a good artistic pose and view or two of a single character, they are above all designed to give viewers a better idea of the character.

As a contrast, consider personal artistic commissions. While badges are usually from \$5-\$30, digital commissions can go upwards of \$100. In addition, physical sketches and original works can cost up to hundreds of dollars. Custom commissions of physical media have run just as high. “Furry” has also branched out into the world of actual crafts. A quick lap around the furry marketplace will yield tons of creative craftwork: tails, ears, hats and accessories, embroidery, plushies, even custom pottery. Many furries are finding innovative ways to use different crafts to express animal anthropomorphism.

As an artist, you have to consider the same question writers consider: Who is my audience? Or, better yet, a more philosophical: “Why am I creating this?” The furry consumer, so to speak, will often settle into a creative need on their own. A badge to use at conventions? A reference



Figure 8.2: Eyes of the Night“Eyes of the Night” by GoldenWolfen. 22 x 40 inches, acrylic on illustration board. Sold at auction at Further Confusion in 2004 for \$10,000. Said to be the highest selling furry media in the fandom to date.

sheet to use in roleplay? A tasteful piece to hang in your living room? A motif you want to see your character interacting with? The consumer comes up with an idea. This translates to a need, and the artist has to consider what sort of consumer need they’ll be working towards.

Are all furry artists created equal? Not necessarily. Some will create valuable and intricate artwork that takes dozens of hours and some will create simple doodles. All is labeled “art”, and all creators are labeled “artists”. However, for the sake of our own insight, consideration of the “artisan” might still be relevant. It adds to our understanding of the furry art dynamic. The end result of the Renaissance art movement is a great model for how furries create arts and crafts today.

8.2 On Money

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Like many of those who identify as members of the furry fandom, I joined at a relatively young age. I was reminded of this, recently, when a friend from years ago came out to visit, this last weekend. When he and I were talking most frequently, that was eleven or twelve years ago, which would've made me (gulp) fourteen or fifteen. I've been dwelling on that point for the last few days, as I worked up the outline of the rest of this article, and things finally fell into place when I consider who I was and where I was in life at that time. I was young, for sure, and just getting into the whole furry thing, watching artists on Yerf and VCL (and Side7 and Elfwood, oh man...) create these awesome drawings, most of which seemed to be spur of the moment things, or works of art created for the sake of creating art. Some, however, were commissions, and that was something I just could not fathom.

An artist – someone I didn't even know – would draw whatever I told them. For money!

It boggled the mind, to be sure. I found the concept amazing, and spent all of thirty seconds researching the idea before noticing the price of a commission: \$50. At the time, I made that much in two months of allowance. Once I could drive, my allowance went up, but then I was expected to pay for my own gas as I drove back and forth a few times a week between my mom's and dad's houses in the decidedly fuel inefficient junker I had been lent. It wouldn't be until I was a few years into college that I paid an artist for a commission of my character.

Money plays a not insignificant part in our fandom. While art was, for a while, the thing that everyone tried, there was still a growing, core group of artists that provided much of the output and garnered much of the attention by offering a steady stream of commissions and filling our VCL feeds, at first, and then our FA watch lists. For those who are unable to draw their characters to their own satisfaction, all it took was a few bucks, or a few hundred, dropped on a commission, a short, or long, wait, et voila, your character in a visible format to share with the world. The financial transactions became more pronounced as fursuiting began to gain in popularity, as the core group manufacturing some of the most visible fursuits was even smaller, and the price point higher. Finally, conventions offer their own unique financial burden for those involved, whether it's simply the cost of attending one's local convention or the price of airfare halfway around the world to attend a con in another country.

However, there seems to be some additional doxa surrounding money within the furry fandom. The “poor fur versus the rich fur”, for example, is a trope that plays itself out regularly in the comments on images and journals on FurAffinity, particularly on the post of an artist offering commissions. It usually begins with an “I would, but I can't afford it” comment, and can often spiral into an argument from there. Much has been written on this in the past, as this seems to stem

from the idea of the poor envying the rich and the lifestyle that they represent, but in this case, the leisure either perceived or imagined, takes the format of numerous commissions, a fursuit, and regular attendance at popular conventions.

This ties into another example of the layers of meaning around money within the fandom: being judged on the amount and status of one's material possessions, usually in the form of commissions. A good example would be the non-artist who commissions countless pieces and reposts them all to FA, garnering followers and social status by spending money. That is, of course, a cynical way of looking at it, and perhaps a more kind-hearted explanation is that the individual is very much into the visual representation of their character, and has the money to spend to make that happen. Either way, the fact that the idea of a member of the fandom gaining social standing by purchasing drawings of themselves, as it were, points to the fact that this is something we take into account on some level when interacting with those around us. After all, if someone has plentiful drawings of their character in a myriad of styles, it's certainly easier to picture interacting with them in some sort of furry world during RP, to name only one perceived benefit.

The idea goes beyond just the consumers, however, and extends even to the creators. We all know the overextended artist, ever taking more commissions without finishing the previous batch, their work-load piling up as they offer reassurances with one hand and sketch-stream commissions with the other. Or there is also the under-priced artist, who has decided on \$5 as a good price for a sketch, \$10 for color, \$15 for shaded despite the obvious quality of their work and the time spent on it. There are countless additional tropes involving the artist and the role they play with the audience and their patrons, however, and many surround the idea of money within the fandom.

“So what, you ridiculously wordy fox?” I hear you saying. “What's the big deal? We're a subculture dominated by westerners, and those western types tend to be capitalists; is it really so surprising that money would play a large factor in our fandom?”

Well, no, it's not surprising in and of itself. Within a western capitalist society, money is exchanged for goods or services in order to represent a fair trade for work performed. To extend that into our own social group is only second nature: we offer money in return for the work of rendering our characters visually, for a costume that we can put on in order to act the part, or for the chance to go visit hundreds (or thousands – hey folks at AC!) of like-minded individuals in one spot for a wonderful weekend or two a year.

What is interesting, however, is the complex interaction between cash-money and social currency, which features prominently in our interactions. I'm not kidding when I say “complex”, either. Social currency and financial currency are two topics that are, on the surface, linked: by creating something worth buying, you are, in effect, making something which has improved your social standing. Capitalist societies don't necessarily work this way, of course, and so the relationship between the two exists in a sort of tension revolving around worth: “is this worth something?”,

“am I worth what I’m paid?”, “what worth would I gain by having more images of a fox-man I claim is me?”. Rather, it’s likely more instructive to examine the ways in which money aids and hinders social currency within the fandom.

The number one way in which having more money would aid one’s social standing is by being a party to the act of creation. The root concept of a commission is that of two parties, the artist and the patron, working together to create an item worth something by each contributing something of worth. For the artist, this is their talent, skill, and time; and for the patron, it is their ideas and character or characters – the subject matter. Money changes hands, here, and social currency is boosted. The purpose of the money is to offer something in exchange for the patron’s boost in social currency; the artist can create their own by producing works that are not commissions, such as their own personal art or art to sell in one form or another.

Perhaps a more simple example, however, is the convention. For a convention, the attendee is willing to exchange money for social interaction. Social interaction of any kind works into one’s social standing, and increasing the outlets and venues for that interaction helps to diversify one’s standing. It always helps to prove that one is not simply some sort of program on the Internet, nor a meat popsicle incapable of interacting with others.

Where does money hinder social currency, then? Well, one of the primary ways in which the two oppose each other is the increased divisiveness that is inherently part of a financial class-structure. The whole rich/poor distinction can be taken on an individual basis and split further into richer-than-me/poorer-than-me and does play a factor in our lives no matter how much we intend to keep it at bay. Being able to interact effectively across perceived financial boundaries is part of learning to live within a hierarchy, after all. Within the fandom, this shows its face in myriad ways: the artist who takes on several inexpensive commissions to make rent, the fan who overspends in order to be able to attend a convention, or even the aforementioned comments on commission posts about not having enough money and the wrangles that ensue.

Beyond that, however, financial and social currency do not map exactly onto each other. That is, a monetary expenditure is not correlated one hundred percent with a social currency gain. At times, it can seem to be the opposite – when one first gets a commission from an artist of some renown, the number of page-views skyrockets, new faves, new watches, and new comments all seem to come in a flood. However, comparing that with the faves, comments, and views of some other commissioners, even of the renowned artist’s post of the same image, can be a little disheartening. It’s in our nature to compare, as was mentioned, and noting that our own meager following seem to be the only ones appreciating our post as compared to that of the artist shows what appears to be a disparity in gain: we gained our social status through our financial contribution, and it’s up to us to ensure that the gain was worth the money we spent.

This division of worth is a complex and difficult one to understand, of course, and I know

that I am oversimplifying greatly here by leaving out aspects such as personal and aesthetic worth gained from things such as commissioned art and fursuits, not to mention the intensely personal gain experienced from seeing a loved one at a convention felt by many. However, it was enough to broach the subject: money is one of those strangely simple ideas that has grown strangely complex ancillary meanings over time, and the concept is not made any simpler by pitting it against the nuances of social standing and currency that are so important within our subculture.

There is still room to explore, of course. Without spoiling too much of what I have planned, I would like to explore both the concept of business and its interaction with our subculture – whether it's a furry business or a non-furry business targeting furies – as well as more from the creator's side of the trade, and what all it means to take money in order to produce a representation of someone else's character. An exchange, whether of trust and social standing or of simple monetary funds, is a complicated thing, and we are continually carving out our own niche, making our own markets, and coming across our own problems in that arena.

8.3 Eating Your Spirit Animal

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Food, like sex, sometimes has a complex political subtext.

The politics of food made from animals can be especially complex. There are ethical, environmental, moral, and health arguments for and against the consumption of meat.

There are also gender issues associated with meat consumption: why is meat, particularly red meat, associated with masculinity? For example, check out these adverts from Australia, the UK, and the US: all satirical, and all accept the premise that masculinity is inexorably connected with meat consumption. Some feminists believe this connection reinforces objectification of women, arguing that it casts women as the passive supplier of flesh, and men as the active devourer.

Regardless of your own point of view, this seemingly simple basic need for the sustenance of life the need to eat has become a complex political subject.

And it's complicated further if you're a furry. If you identify as an animal person, it's impossible to ignore that we live in a world where animals are commodities.

Furries tend to celebrate their animal identity in varied and creative ways. Most furries create an alternate personality an anthropomorphic animal avatar and accept this identity as a version of themselves. We furries 'become' this identity, because we act like we genuinely are our avatar. This belief in our alternate self makes our furry identity real.

Our day-to-day actions are often interpreted through the lens of our furry identity. This extends to the food we eat. So a furry who identifies as a carnivore might enjoy eating meat. Or perhaps a meat-lover might choose to identify as a carnivorous species.

The arguments for and against meat consumption can be summed up succinctly: meat eating is bad because it causes suffering; meat eating is good because it's tasty and a societal norm.

These points of view (both of which are valid and true) can be given a furry twist. A carnivore furry might be drawn towards eating the natural prey of his species, such as a cheetah with a taste for venison. Or a vegetarian might make a connection with their herbivorous avatar. And if your furry species is available for human consumption it gets complicated.

The four most common furry species available for human consumption are listed below. This data, as ever, comes from the Furry Survey.

- dog, 8.4% of furries
- rabbit, 2.7% of furries
- horse, 1.4% of furries
- kangaroo, 1.0% of furries

All other species commonly consumed by humans are chosen by less than 1% of furies. The full league table can be found on an old Livejournal post of mine, [here](#).

Some of these furies go out of their way to eat their spirit animal. I can personally think of two examples: a friend of mine once species-hopped to kangaroo largely because of his affinity for roo meat; and a deer friend who was thrilled to find venison ham for sale.

But for other furies, eating their spirit animal is taboo. In many cases, the reason for their revulsion is closely tied to their choice of species in the first place. For people who work or live with animals, and feel a strong affinity for them based on that social experience, the idea of eating those animals can be akin to cannibalism.

It's also common for the taboo meat to be one that is not normally culturally considered to be food. It's especially likely where the species in question is normally thought of as a pet or companion animal. In western-centric furry circles, this often applies to dog meat and horse meat.

Horse is a common meat in France and Japan, among other places around the world. Dog is a common meat in parts of Asia and Africa.

The ethics of raising dogs or horses for meat is no different from other animals. Whenever an animal is raised as a commercial enterprise, there will sometimes be a conflict between the best interests of the animal and the greatest profit. Sometimes the best interests of the animal will come second. This is true even where the animals are not being raised for meat: it's true whenever there is a profit motive, including work animals (such sheepdogs) and animals raised for sport (such racehorses).

This ethical argument does not apply when there is no commercial interest, such as raising a pet.

There is suffering involved in the raising and slaughtering of any animal. There is no reasonable argument that raising horses or dogs for meat is 'bad', but raising, say, cows or pigs is 'okay'. Horses and dogs are domesticable and intelligent, but so are pigs: pigs can be domesticated as pets or as work animals (truffle farming for example).

The commonly-held taboo on whale meat is similarly flawed. Whale is eaten in Japan, Norway, Iceland, and elsewhere. The arguments against whale hunting and consumption are hypocritical unless you are applying the same arguments to mainstream meats.

The arguments against whale meat can be roughly condensed into:

- Whales are intelligent creatures who suffer during the hunt. (It's likely that more suffering is caused by pig farming, as they are very intelligent and often subject to poor conditions during life.)
- Whales are endangered due to overfishing. (Much like many fish species around the globe.)

I've always thought that arguments against consuming whale, much like arguments against consuming dog (or horse), often smack of racism. Firstly, I don't think people would hold such opinions if they lived in a culture where whale or dog meat is the norm. Secondly, the argument is often framed such that the target (eg Japanese for whale; Koreans for dog) is presented as a barbaric 'other', a subtle dehumanizing practice common to much racist hatespeak.

That said, there is no problem with having an aversion to the idea of eating a particular type of animal. The emotional response associated with eating your spirit animal can be particularly strong. For many people, this is an important part of being a furry.

There is no requirement for any personal choice to be irrefutably logical, be it religion or politics or attitude towards food. It's natural to think of one's self as rational, but this is wrong: we are animals and therefore driven by basic survival instincts. There is only one requirement for a personal choice: don't try to enforce your choice on other people.

8.4 I Am a Furry

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I wrote a blog post recently about how we shouldn't be afraid to tell our friends that we're furries, and I got a thoughtful question on FA. Namely, why bother? It's just a hobby, right? Do we "come out" as a stamp collector, or a Man United fan, or a Jane Austen fan?

I said in the original post that I didn't necessarily want to compare coming out as gay with coming out as furry. The first is a preference coded into us at birth which dictates many aspects of how we live if we choose to live with a partner. The second is a not-fully-understood aesthetic appreciation for animal-people that can range in degree from a guy who likes to talk about Looney Tunes cartoons with his friends to a woman who makes a living designing fursuits and wears her own every chance she gets. But it's telling that when people talk about telling their friends and family that they're furries, that the phrase coming out is more and more commonly used.

It's understandable. It means "revealing a part of ourselves that was hidden," and because gay people were the ones most commonly hiding important parts of their lives well into adulthood, it's been associated with revealing one's sexuality. I think that its use in talking about furry is not so much connected to the "hidden" part as it is to the "important" part.

For a lot of people, furry is more than just a hobby; it's a home. Some people don't have any other homes; some people are perfectly happy with their family in one setting, with their office "home" in another, with furry in their spare time. What I mean by "home" is a place where you feel safe, where you feel sad to be away from, where some of the closest people in your life reside.

When I was first getting into the furry fandom, I had a friend who came out to his parents and was kicked out of his family. To a lot of guys in their early 20s, that would be devastating, and he was pretty broken up about it. But he had a boyfriend, and he had the furry fandom, a great support network that made sure he always had a friend around and an ear to listen to his troubles. That's what I mean by a home.

Right now, I have a family who aren't furries. But most of my closest friends are furries, and when Kit and I got married, the furry stuff was pretty much all over our wedding (because our wedding planner, a non-furry, fell in love with it). I have a furry image of myself as the lock screen on my phone, a furry pic of me and Kit as my phone background, so literally a day doesn't go by that I don't see some furry art, and now that I'm making my living from writing – largely in the furry fandom – most days I end up talking to other furries or talking about furries.

If your life is like that, if you have a group of close furry friends, and yet you're not sharing that part of your life with other people close to you, then you're hiding something from them. You're not sharing all of who you are. And that's fine, honestly; if anything, people these days tend to overshare. But if you want to tell them, and are simply not telling them out of fear that they'll

jump to conclusions, then you're doing them a disservice. More than that, you are hurting yourself. When you make choices in your life, such as to continue to be part of the furry fandom, and then hide those choices from other people who are important to you, you are telling yourself that you doubt your choices. You are telling yourself that those people would be right if they mocked you for being a furry. That's not a healthy way to live.

(And yes, there is adult stuff in the fandom. You don't have to talk about that. What do you do when you go to conventions? What do you talk about online with your furry friends? Are adult pictures and stories really the reason you continue to be part of this community? Or is it the people, the ones you feel you can really open up to, the ones who make you laugh and who talk video games, who have a costume like you or like the same movie/TV show/anime? That's what you want to talk about. Everyone understands "a group of friends who like the same thing I like." What you all like is also interesting, but secondary.)

That's who my original post was aimed at, people who cited the primary reason for hiding their furriness as "I don't want to be associated with those people in the news." If you're a casual furry, or if you're distant from your family and non-furry friends, then sure, they don't have to know. But if one of your family, your co-workers, or your friends is trying to get to know you better, and they ask "why'd you go to Pittsburgh?" well, before you automatically say, "just to see friends" and change the subject, pause for a second and think. Maybe that's a good time to "come out." Maybe that'll help you get closer to the other people in your life. You might have to take a little teasing, but take it with good humor, and it'll be fine. As I said before, as K.M. and I have said on the podcast and many people have said in many venues over and over: if you act like it's something to be ashamed of, people will pick up on that. If you act like it's a cool thing, fun, and a positive part of your life, which I think for most of us it is, then that's how your friends and family will view it. And isn't that what we all want?

Chapter 9

July

9.1 The Hypnotic Beast

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Hypnobeast is the cheery face of furry hypnotism. Best known for his retro FurAffinity banner ads, HB is a qualified hypnotist offering a service tailored to the furry community.

I enjoyed a long chat with him recently where we talked about the utility of hypnotism within furry, the trials of being a professional furry, and how to react when people ask you to rape them.

My reflections and some highlights follow in the article below.

Hypnotism is a natural pursuit for furries. The trance state is like a vivid waking dream: hyper-alert yet perfectly relaxed. This state, with guidance, is the closest that any of us will get to living and feeling our imaginary furry bodies.

It helps that furries usually have strong imaginations and vivid internal lives. Our furry alter egos are already well realized within the community: hypnotism allows us to take that a half-step further.

In a session with HB, he will ask you about your furry identity and your reasons for choosing their form. Given the premise that furries craft their avatar with great care, HB will reflect the language of that creation. So if you associate (say) your inner fox with intelligence and creativity, HB will use language during the session that reinforces those concepts.

The process itself is simple enough: a few minutes of relaxation, followed by some image-rich wordplay designed to engage your imagination, followed by exploration of your furry body as if you were inside it. The experience is different for everyone, but the biggest variable is the skill of the hypnotist.

HB is a proper old school furry. He started by lurking around alt.fan.dragons as a tween in the early 90s, eventually graduating into the growing furry world. Like a lot of furries who discover the community at a young age, HB found high school difficult and was drawn into the open-minded, respectful, and tolerant online furry community as his primary social outlet.

HB developed an interest in hypnosis and dabbled amongst other amateurs online. I suspect that HB's interest in hypnotism originated from a desire to draw away from life where he was an outcast, to feel closer to the virtual furry world where he was accepted and loved.

After school, HB earned a degree in psychology and, with no interest in becoming a therapist, underwent formal training as a hypnotist. Nowadays, he works as a hypnotist inside furry (as Hypnobeast) in combination with a more traditional practice out in the real world. He has an office but, curiously for a profession that requires a close connection between practitioner and client, prefers to use Skype.

Hypnobeast is his professional virtual furry hypnotist. The Hypnobeast identity allows HB to separate his furry work from his regular practice. It also provides distance from his personal furry

identity. This simple idea has proved surprisingly complex but more on that later.

The cheesy imagery of Hypnobeast – all swinging pendulums and mesmeric spirals – is probably a marketing masterstroke. HB is a little less sure because he only gets exposed to the extreme reactions: either prospective furry clients or those making fun of Hypnobeast's 1930s-travelling-mesmerist image. But it's attention-grabbing, fun, and unforgettable.

HB's marketing may suggest that his style is dazzling and demanding, yet this is not the reality. HB is an Ericksonian hypnotist, which means that his style is friendly and permissive. He will look for, and ask for, regular feedback during a hypnosis session.

He controls the rhythm of his voice and chooses carefully crafted phrases, delivered to guide you into a relaxed state. He does this while reflecting your own words and conversational style, noted during the getting-to-know you chat at the beginning of a session.

Craftsmanship is the value of a professional hypnotist, and HB is a true craftsman of words. HB understands the language of furry introspection.

Early in our chat, HB told me that he is shy, which he immediately disproved by happily chatting away with a relative stranger for the next hour or two. He might be better described as vulnerable, as he reveals a lot of himself in conversation. The rapport between hypnotist and client is all important, and HB's openness is charming and disarming.

While chatting about his path into becoming a hypnotist, HB was open about his difficult and relatively unhappy adolescence. Throughout school, he coped by disengaging from the world and spending a lot of time inside his own head. Like a lot of people who study psychology, I suspect that HB chose his degree because he was hoping to learn about himself.

Starting up as a professional hypnotist is a difficult task. There are set up costs – insurance, office space, union fees – and no client base. The task is especially difficult because hypnotists are usually focussed on treating a symptom rather than exploring a cause. Most clients will see a hypnotist two or three times. Regular clients (like a therapist might have) are rare.

HB is less interested in hypnotism as a cure. He sees his ideal role as providing relaxation sessions, on the premise that relaxation is good for long-term physical and mental health. And inside the furry community, HB hopes to build up a client base who appreciate the joy of an occasional walk inside their furry body.

It's tough for anyone looking to be a professional furry and HB is no different. He has found new clients to be rare, and last-minute cancellations to be common. He has found it difficult to market himself in person: he's attended cons in a professional capacity, but learned that a well-dressed professional hypnotist won't receive walk-up trade; he's performed free group hypnosis sessions at Further Confusion and Califur, for which he received positive feedback but little paid follow-up.

HB has had most success by advertising on FA directing people to hypnobeast.com. His current

offer – \$5 for a first session – is going well, drawing some new clients and increasing his visibility inside the community. But his business has not yet grown to a significant number of paid furry sessions.

And then there is the sex. The trope of hypnotist-as-rapist is common in furry erotica and pornography, and it tests HB's patience and ethics.

HB isn't anti-sex, and advocates hypnosis to enhance sex. Hypnosis is commonly used to treat sexual problems – erectile dysfunction, or management of vaginal pain during intercourse are probably the two most common – and also to broaden sexual horizons. This requires utmost professionalism from the hypnotist, to ensure a controlled environment for the client. This does not work well with furries.

One of the strengths of the furry community is its openness towards sex. Furries are okay talking about sex freely but this leads to problems in a therapeutic context. HB has found it challenging to maintain a professional bubble when dealing with sex-related issues: amongst furries, there is a fine line between discussing sex and flirting.

After a few clients who looked to inappropriately cross HB's professional boundaries, he has become wary of offering such services. Hypnobeast, the character, has been created to provide a professional identity. Professional conduct is important, not just for HB's integrity but also under the terms of his insurance.

It's nice to be considered an object of lust. Hypnobeast is such an object in the eyes of many furries, and some have been very direct in suggesting rape-fantasy roleplay. HB has asked me to keep details confidential, but suffice to say that some of the sexual offers he has received via Hypnobeast are surprising in their complexity, scope, and creativity.

HB is a professional and gives short shrift to anyone flirting with/at Hypnobeast. In a lighter moment, he expressed wry frustration that his personal furry characters rarely, if ever, receive such attention. Or, as he puts it: please, please, stop hitting on Hypnobeast.



JM Horse
@jmhorse

I've got a week in Kuala Lumpur with work, hoping to meet one or two of the AnthroAsia crew on my day off.

← Reply 🗑 Delete ★ Favorite

9:44 AM - 24 Jun 12 via Echofon · Embed this Tweet

Figure 9.1: Casting out

9.2 The Furry Accommodation Network

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The furry community is expanding worldwide. Here on [adjective][species], Zik has been chronicling all things international with his comprehensive survey of conventions outside of North America – Furry Cons of the World – and his insight into the growing Japanese community – Foreign Furry Fandoms: Japan. Both articles are required reading for anyone wanting evidence of furry’s global growth. I understand that there is more to come from Zik, who is rapidly becoming the go-to chronicler of internationalism in our community.

One of the frontiers of the furry community is South-East Asia, with the local furry group – AnthroAsia – loosely incorporating Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The group maintains an internet presence at www.anthroasia.com, which includes a fairly quiet forum with just over 400 registered members. The forums are quiet because most of the local furry chatter happens on Facebook, however the AA forums are heavily lurked and are therefore a great place for new furies to introduce themselves.

I recently visited Malaysia and wondered whether a local furry or two might be available to catch up during my stay. I’d met a few of the AA crew before, all Singaporeans, and guessed that they might know someone. I made the laziest possible attempt to make contact: a single tweet.

What happened next was predictable and simple and magical: a Singaporean furry saw my tweet and left a one-line public ‘shout’ at AnthroAsia.com; a Malaysian furry saw the note and

got in contact. Shortly afterwards, I found myself with a furry in a mamak – a 24-hour open-air food market – at 2am on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. My host, Hiro Husky, had decided that a night-time meal would be perfect given my jetlag.

The food and environment were new to me, and I'd never met Hiro before, but the fellowship and friendly connection was as comfortable and familiar as my favourite stuffed zebra. Amongst furries, there is an implied trust and closeness. It's never more evident than when you experience it with a stranger in an unfamiliar place.

Long-distance travel is central to the furry experience. For many furries, a trip to their first big convention is a pilgrimage of sorts: an important step in community engagement as they explore a large gathering for the first time. For those lucky enough to have experienced it, it's great standing at a check-in queue and scanning the crowd for discreet collars, or bags big enough to carry a fursuit, or people wearing slightly tragic wolf-howling-at-the-moon t-shirts.

Outside of trips to conventions, furries fly around the world for more modest events: meeting an online romantic partner for the first time, visiting old friends, or meeting new furries in a new location as a tourist.

Long-distance travel is especially important to us because so much of the furry experience takes place on the internet, which means we're less restricted by distance's tyranny. With friends around the world, we're more likely to get passports and catch planes or trains than our non-furry peers.

When you first meet a new furry in real life, there is an implicit level of trust. I think this is because of our common reliance on the community, a community that reinforces of our internal self-image, a club where the only requirement for membership is to decide you're a member. We're trusting because of our fellowship within the community: everyone wants to make a good impression.

The implied promise of trust and mutual respect means that furries are often willing to offer a visitor a place to sleep, perhaps a couch or a spare bed. Over the years I have offered a roof to dozens of furries, and have accepted as many offers when I have been travelling. I like to call this the Furry Accommodation Network.

To offer accommodation is a selfless act, but one that's paid back by the generosity of the community at large. Far more than an ad hoc couch-surfing network, staying with furries offers immediate company, probable friendship and – sometimes – the genesis of a relationship.

It's not all roses of course. I have had some bad experiences, both when travelling and when hosting, however these have all aged into amusing anecdotes. The friendships I have formed or reinforced through such arrangements remain strong and continue to grow today.

I stayed in a hotel in Kuala Lumpur but the advantages of the Furry Accommodation Network were all there, thanks to Hiro's selflessness and generosity. I experienced a side of KL I could

never have found as a mere tourist and I got to know a remarkable furry in Hiro.

Our conversation at the mamak started with furry and quickly spread to mutual passions: food, sex, and politics. Over flatbreads and dal soup, Hiro asked me about my relationship and the freedoms I enjoy as part of a gay couple in London. I responded that it's pretty good, and improving – that gay marriage isn't legal but it's on the way; that my partner and I can act as openly as a straight couple in much of the city; that I am openly gay amongst my friends and colleagues, and that anyone with a problem would be considered a bigot.

Hiro counterpointed this with his experience in Malaysia. If he were to express physical affection towards his boyfriend then he could find himself arrested and tried under Sharia law. (Sharia law technically only applies to Muslims in Malaysia – Hiro is of Chinese background – but a homosexuality case could be considered to be a Sharia 'issue'). Change in Malaysia is unlikely because there are laws in place that limit the ability for people to criticise the government, and the same party has been in power since Independence. Hiro is closeted amongst everyone outside of furry.

This is not to say that homosexuality doesn't exist in Malaysia. Hiro and I were shopping in the geek heaven that is Plaza Low Yat, a seven-level shopping mall dedicated to all things IT. On two separate occasions, Hiro was given overt come-ons by guys as we walked past. Hiro is an attractive guy but he's not effeminate or otherwise sending out gay vibes in any way that I noticed, so these couldn't have been one-off incidents. I think that Hiro tries to maintain an asexual mask when out in public, and he was apparently oblivious in both cases. Suffice to say that a gay person, if they were so inclined, would still be able to meet people in KL.

When we were chatting, I talked about how fortunate I feel to be a part of the furry community. We both share the common experience of being blown away by the mere existence of furries. Furry has also helped our personal growth – Hiro and I are both included amongst those who re-evaluated their sexual preference after joining the community. On reflection, Hiro is probably more fortunate than me to have found furry: furry is the only environment where he can be an honest version of himself.

This is mostly a product of the illiberal Malaysian culture, which is comparable to most of the countries in the region. Things are better in Singapore – Hiro visits regularly – but it's still much less permissive than countries like the UK.

For the AnthroAsia furries, participation in the furry group is very valuable. This is especially true for those furries with an unusual sexual orientation, gender identity or self-image. The AA group has grown quickly since its formal inception, and seems very likely to continue its growth as it is discovered by more young furries who might be lacking a rewarding social experience in mainstream circles.

My experience of getting to know Hiro and comparing our respective furry experiences rein-



Figure 9.2: Eurofurence stats

forced what I think is great about our community. The Furry Accommodation Network – with its implied trust and mutual respect – is a microcosm of the happiness and self-realization that furry can bring.

Later this year, Hiro is travelling to Eurofurence with a few fellow AnthroAsia furries. It'll be the first time he's travelled outside of Malaysia or Singapore. He's nervous about being around a large group, unsure of social norms in Germany, and concerned about language barriers. And he's excited to experience his first pilgrimage to a large convention.

The feeling of excitement is mutual.

He'll have a great time.

9.3 Art and Money

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The relationship between art and money is always tense. In fact, one of my favorite books that I read during my time in the music composition department at school was *Art and Fear* by David Bayles and Ted Orland (which I very highly recommend to any artist readers out there). They describe the relationship, in part, as “There’s one hell of a lot more to art than just making it.” The tension shifts in the world of ‘crafts’, functional art, and the like. The website *What The Craft* dissects the problem of working with money in craft in two excellent posts, one about why handmade is “so expensive” and another about how to price hand-made goods. In both cases, the author explains that “[h]andmade goods mean attention to detail, quality craftsmanship, and a significant amount of TIME and SKILL”, which can in turn lead to the higher price.

Furry art, then, fits in a strange place in the middle, what with the “traditional art” aspect of a commissioned artist creating a work, as well as the custom, attention-to-detail oriented aspect of handmade crafts providing a visual representation of our characters. I’ve written before about the how the connection between a visual representation of one’s character can affect the way one interacts with an artist, but I spent little time on how the financial aspect of the transaction plays in the scenario.

In order to gain some insight on the matter, I conducted interviews with various artists, asking questions suggested to me by a few others. The truth is, I simply have very little basis on this to work from in my own past. I have had exactly one piece of music commissioned of me, pro bono, and it went terribly. The work I do on my own in web design is a little more expansive, but still hardly worth much in the way of experience points. Having collected the answers into one place and read over them a few times, I started to notice a few points of tension that stick out beyond simply “drawing one’s character”. I asked questions about how the artists had come up with their pricing schemes and how they interacted with customers, and each showed that a good amount of thought went into their role as furry artists.

When it comes to pricing the work of a furry artist, there seem to be two main ways of going about it. The artist will either come up with a rough guideline as to how best to price their work on an hourly scale for example, given that a certain type of drawing takes x number of hours, they’ll come up with an estimated range for pieces of that type. The other way in which a commission price is determined is by checking prices against their peers and estimating from there. An artist of a certain style and perceived skill level can get a pretty good idea of how much they might charge for work by looking at their friends’ work and how much that goes for.

That said, the overwhelming response from those that I interviewed was that furry artists most definitely undercharge for their labor. One artist, Ten, mentions, “I’ve been to far too many artists

pages', even talked to friends of mine who do outstanding work, and they're all 'is fifty bucks too much? That sounds like too much', and it turns out they think fifty bucks is too much for a fully colored custom work." Another artist, who wished to remain anonymous, echoed the point clearly: "I have seen some very talented people charge very little for their work, and I try to point that out when I can. 'You could charge twice as much, you're so talented!' is what I usually say."

The question of why many artists charge as little as they do and why they don't often raise their prices is a fairly interesting one. Certainly one of the reasons that many do not charge more is that it isn't their primary source of income, but out of the five artists that I interviewed, only two of them had additional sources beyond their own art. So, if many artists are making art in order to support themselves, why is it that there is a general impression of undercharging art?

Part of it, I believe, is tied to the expected consumers of the art, the patrons who pay for the commissioned works. There is an expectation that furries simply will not have the money at hand in order to afford what would be full-price for a similar commission outside the fandom. Rhazafax mentions, "if it were possible to raise [prices] without losing a chunk of clients, I won't lie, my pocket book sure could use it," somewhat supporting that idea, while the anonymous artist mentioned that they "certainly charge furries less than what [they] would charge at a professional artist level."

There seems to be quite a bit of mental strife involved in valuing one's work in terms of dollars, pounds, or yen. In order to come up with a price point, not only does hourly wage need to be taken into account (the "am I making enough" aspect), but also how that relates to one's peers in style and skill level (the "am I asking the right amount" aspect). For those who do it for a living, the point is quite fine, there. The artist needs to pay for their rent and food, as does the client, and so their output needs to be high enough or of high enough quality; as Sigil puts it, "you can sell one picture for 100 *orten pictures* for 10 which would be more rewarding?".

But what about the client?

I should be honest that the impetus from this post came from seeing a rash of "wish I could afford it" or "those are cool but too expensive for me" comments on FurAffinity when an artist opened up for commissions. I understand the difficulty of finances first hand, having paid my way through three years of college, then going on to buy a house. Even many of the artists I asked sympathized on some level with these comments. However, many of those comments seemed to be implying that the artist should lower their prices, even if only for the one who posted the comment. Ten addresses this directly: "[I] wish I could cater to their price level, but then everyone would expect alterations for them, and it'd through off my whole point of having specific price points."

This leads to another mechanism of catering to many when it comes to commissions: target audiences. Sigil mentions that everyone can save up for a \$20 piece of art, though the sentiment is echoed by many that I interviewed, leading to varied price points for different levels of work for

the artist. These are often exemplified by the ubiquitous pricing sheet (Floe, Ten, Rhazafax, and Sigil the four named interviewees all have their own in their galleries). Another example of a targeted client base was provided by Floe: “My target audience is repeat customers. I tend to get better every time I draw them.” She mentions that her prices are structured around this idea.

All these financial reasons surround this tension, and yet one main economic factor is very much subdued in this market: competition. Most of the artists that I asked mentioned that competition plays a relatively small role in their interactions with others, often due to style. “Furries are going to commission the artists they like and the artists they can afford,” Ten explains, and Sigil echoes this: “if someone wants a Sigil picture, they will come to me.” Even though there may be competition within price range, Floe explains that this is why she strives to build a relationship with her customers. As a concrete example of this, Floe created our delightful RandomWolf banner for us at the top of the page, and I commissioned that from her last year after meeting hergoshfive years or so ago, and having received several pictures of my own characters from her.

In the end, some of the tension surrounding money and art may indeed be due to the “yes, but this is ME!” aspect of having one’s character drawn by another, but there are often simple and mundane reasons at work, as well. The artists need to make their money for their own reasons, whether to support themselves completely or simply to supplement their income, and the clients need (or want; I say need because I’m so terrible at drawing) art of their characters created by others if they want some sort of visual representation of the avatar into which they’ve poured so much of themselves. It’s economics at its (complicated, puzzling, sometimes hurtful) finest. And in the long run, well, we seem to do pretty well by ourselves.

I’d like to thank the artists who provided me with their input, and one of the best ways I can think to do so is to encourage you all to go check out their galleries, they’re really awesome! Their input was invaluable not only in constructing this post, but also increasing my own understanding of the other side of the trade. If youd like to check out their responses in full, I’ve posted four of the interviews here. I asked seven base questions, but, of two of the artists, I asked an eighth question that was put to me by a few friends. Sigil broke this down into two delightful sub-questions that anyone can answer in their own way; feel free to let us know what you think in the comments! Sigil’s in-depth response is available on the interview page mentioned above.

9.4 Growing Up

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It is generally considered that you become an adult at 21 years old. Anyone who is 21 years old or more knows that this is completely false.

We might be physically mature, but there is a big difference between physical and emotional maturity. An emotionally mature person likes and accepts themselves. This takes a lot more than 21 years.

Personal hygiene is hard. Getting up in the morning is hard. Feeling lonely is hard. Managing suicidal thoughts is hard. Holding down a job is hard. Looking in the mirror, and liking what you see, is hard. And pretending that you don't, deep down, consider yourself to be a failure is really hard.

Everyone feels like a failure at least some of the time. Society dictates that we must pretend that we're doing fine, so we hide how we really feel. Everyone else wears the same facade of competence, which means that it's easy to look around and see people apparently doing well. This reinforces our own feeling of isolation, unworthiness, and failure.

As you gain emotional maturity, you learn to take pride in your own self-improvement. You learn that everyone else is struggling too. You learn your real value and you gain empathy for all those other losers out there.

Ironically, for a group of people who identify as pretend animals, the furry community is a great vehicle for self-improvement. This is obvious through observation of our furry friends: seeing those pursuing education, weight loss, jobs, relationships, and other avenues to happiness. The science explains the value of furry as well, through clinical psychology and therapeutic experience.

Furries, unwittingly, act in ways that reflect psychological techniques for self-improvement and the pursuit of happiness. We have a healthy and effective method of managing our internal world, and of improving our relationship with the external world. The first helps us feel better about ourselves; the second helps us grow relationships.

The cornerstone of the furry world is roleplaying. Each of us creates an anthropomorphic animal alter-ego and acts as if this fiction were real. We routinely do this online but we also take this roleplaying into the real world. At conventions, or furmeets, or just among furry friends, we tend to act as our avatar. When you meet me in person, it's entirely clear that I am not a horse (and my passport says Matt rather than JM) however furries will treat me as if I were. I like to hang around with other horses and complain about My Little Pony; I get why-the-long-face jokes; carnivores eye me up in a slightly disturbing fashion. It's as if JM Horse were really there.

I, of course, return the favour and treat my fellow furries as if their avatar were real. (Hungry carnivores can be satisfied, I've learned, with candy. Or beer.) There is a mutual contract to

reinforce the fantasy of our furry world.

Through this roleplaying, we are following a common Cognitive Behavioural Therapy technique known as 'modelling'. Modelling is a self-improvement technique, usually applied to manage the internal criticism (from an inner voice) that we all struggle with when we are anxious.

A cognitive behavioural therapist will ask a client to identify a rolemodel. The rolemodel will be someone who is skilled at the behaviour provoking the client's anxiety. So if the client is nervous about public speaking, he will be asked to think of an excellent public speaker. The client will then be asked to imagine what it would be like to 'be' that person. They will be asked to imagine how that person's clothes might feel, see through that person's eyes, hear that person's internal dialogue.

Several things happen during this process. The first is that people become less self-focussed when they are roleplaying. When people are anxious, they tend to become more self-aware, which is usually counter-productive. The roleplaying exercise makes a connection between the new skill (public speaking) and a state of low self-awareness.

Pretending to be the rolemodel acts as mental mask, which has very similar effects to wearing a physical mask. A 2003 study from the Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin showed that people are significantly less self-aware when roleplaying (or wearing a physical mask). The effect is more than doubled when the subject is performing a task that makes them anxious.

Low self-awareness means that physical sensations pain, nausea, heat are felt less strongly. Awareness of the outer world is heightened. These effects from the mental mask of roleplaying make you feel more competent and confident.

The technique can also be used to try out new personality traits. Therapeutically, this is often used to treat depression or low confidence. The client will be asked to roleplay a happy person, which gives them experience as to how that might feel. Ideally, the client will draw some of the roleplayed traits into their normal lives.

Dr Robin Rosenberg is a clinical psychologist and editor of The Psychology of Superheroes. She believes that cosplaying is a form of self-administered mental health treatment. Dressing up as Batman, say, requires a client to practice acting like their rolemodel. At a sci-fi convention the stakes are low, so an insecure client feels safe to act brash and outgoing. This works as a practice run, giving the client some resources that may be summoned in times of stress.

There is more background on Dr Rosenberg's blog in Psychology Today <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/superheroes>

There are obvious parallels to fursuiting, where an otherwise shy suiter becomes confident and outgoing. The experience of being in suit is liberating, in that you lose much self-awareness and become more engaged with the outside world. The effect is also comparable to furry interaction online.

Online, we can test personality traits in a friendly and low-risk environment. For some furries, online interaction is a stepping-stone to becoming a more confident social animal in real life. Some will roleplay as a dominant individual, which will help them to be more assertive. Some will roleplay as a different gender, which helps gain self-acceptance of an unusual gender identity. And many furries will experiment and discard traits that don't fit.

The best example of the value of furry roleplaying is sexual preference. Many furries experiment with a gay or bisexual persona as a first step towards self-acceptance of their true sexual preference. Data from the furry survey, which forms the basis for an analysis here on [adjective][species] earlier this year, showed that around 50% of furries re-evaluate their sexual preference within their first five years in the community, typically from straight to gay.

The positive influence of furry extends beyond modelling. The value of 'play' towards self-improvement and maturation has been the subject of increasing research in recent times. It is understood that children develop social and cognitive skills through play, improving self-confidence and maturity. The benefits of play also continue into adulthood, in any areas where the subject is growing and learning new skills.

Social play, loosely defined as unstructured recreational time, helps improve social coordination and development of 'social scripts'. Social play includes anything where there are no formal rules and where the social experience is unconsciously negotiated by the parties involved. Examples include a conversation or a drawing circle (but not TV or most gaming sessions). This includes so-called 'parallel play', where two or more people will engage in separate activities without much formal interaction.

The most relevant form of social play amongst furries is probably 'pretend play', which covers the sort of roleplaying that forms the foundation of much furry interaction. Online or in person, playing the role of furry characters and exploring different ideas helps develop self-identity and empathy. This translates into self-confidence.

There are a few examples where furry 'play' may have a direct positive effect on self-confidence:

- A furry meeting others for the first time may find themselves less anxious if this takes place in a safe, furry-only environment. Success in such an environment may grow the confidence of our shy furry, and embolden him to socialize elsewhere.
- A furry who feels outcast may socialize online, where she can find kindred spirits. Being accepted will help her understand others, improving her empathetic skills.
- A furry lacking sexual confidence might roleplay a sexual situation over text. This might lead to a low-stress real-life meeting, where intimacy already exists and the sexual mechanics are pre-negotiated.

The standards set by the furry community are important to help people discover a realistic target for themselves. Be it professionally, personally, or sexually, a person exposed to a healthy and happy community will tend to be drawn along a positive path. (Conversely, someone exposed to a negative environment will find it very difficult to rise above the norms of their peers.)

Happily, the furry community is a broad school. Someone new to the community is likely to find a positive and realistic rolemodel. We have many ad hoc variations of the mentor/mentee, or big-brother/little-brother relationship. Furies who are struggling with self-acceptance can expect to be treated with care and respect.

Furies are unconsciously appropriating fun and using it for personal growth. The furry experience is externally enjoyable and internally rewarding. It's making us happier critters.

Chapter 10

August

Most people are familiar with feelings of isolation and loneliness. Loneliness can lead to feelings of depression.

It's worse if you are young. It takes a long time to become happy with yourself, if that is ever fully achievable. Most of us experience personal growth as we age. If you don't like yourself, which is much more likely if you are young, it's easy to assume that you're somehow at fault for being lonely.

It's worse if you are male. Men are more prone to depression and suicide. It's believed that this is biological.

It's worse if you have an unusual sexuality or gender identity. Someone who doesn't fit into society's mainstream will often find themselves marginalized. This adds stress to day-to-day activities, possibly a feeling of being judged or feeling outcast.

Furries fit the description of a high-risk group for depression. We're young (median age 22); male-dominated (80%); unusual sexualities (69% self-report as not heterosexual) and genders (26% self-report as neither completely male nor female).

Furries are more likely to be socially isolated than non-furries. Members of the furry community – our friends, peers and, in some cases, de facto family – are spread across the globe.

Non-furries are more likely to make friends amongst those they grew up with. It's common for people to make friends at school and keep them for life. Their friends and support groups tend to be located nearby, and they are more likely to find value in mainstream bonding activities, such as those you might see depicted on a billboard advertising cornflakes.

Much furry socializing, especially amongst the isolated, occurs online. Online contact can lack nuance and is often a poor cousin to face-to-face contact. Anyone listlessly lurking around social corners of the internet (like FA, Facebook, Twitter or IRC) can attest how easy it is to feel lonely online.

It's easy to become downhearted by loneliness. However loneliness, isolation, and depres-

sion are very normal feelings, familiar to everyone. There is nothing innately wrong with feeling disconnected from the world.

(There is a big difference between feeling lonely and being clinically depressed: the first is a negative feeling; the second is a mental illness. Just like feeling outcast in a social situation doesn't make you autistic, feeling lonely doesn't mean you're clinically depressed. Anyone with doubts should consult a doctor.)

There are effective ways to combat loneliness that are especially applicable to the furry community. Our online culture, our animal-person roleplaying, and our introspective assessment of ourselves and the world are all great tools.

Loneliness and depression is a common human trait. The problem – and a solution – is hinted at in Jonathan Swift's 1726 novel *Gulliver's Travels*. In this excerpt, the yahoo race is an analogue for humans, curiously regarded by a race of rational horses:

A fancy would sometimes take a Yahoo to retire into a corner, to lie down, and howl, and groan, and spurn away all that came near him, although he were young and fat, wanted neither food nor water, nor did the servant imagine what could possibly ail him. And the only remedy they found was, to set him to hard work, after which he would infallibly come to himself.

To use a more modern concept, consider Maslow's hierarchy of needs ([link](#)), a broad psychological theory. The hierarchy of needs is not used in serious psychological circles, but is a useful blunt instrument to frame the problem of isolation.

Maslow posits that we are fundamentally driven by (1) atavistic impulses, like sex and sleep. Once these needs are met, we require (2) personal safety. This is followed by (3) a need for social contact. When this is met, we are able to pursue further needs up towards "self-actualization".

If you are reading this article here on [adjective][species], it's likely that you live in a world where you are able to meet these first two basic needs, like food and shelter. For most furies, the need for social contact is the first real hurdle towards reaching self-actualization.

Swift identifies the occasional need for an external impetus to get us out of a funk. Maslow shows that social contact is a fundamental need. With this as a guide, we can take action to draw other people into our world such that we become more connected and engaged. The following suggestions are mine, tailored towards the furry experience – they are by no means exhaustive. Consider it a starting point.

Firstly, consider that happy people are the easiest to get to know and like. Unhappy or aggressive people are intimidating; happy people are welcoming.

It's very easy to be negative online. This is especially true if you are feeling lonely and depressed, and you're hoping to share your own experiences.

But there is great value in emulating the way that happy people express themselves: “act happy”, regardless of how you feel. There are three immediate positive effects:

- If you appear happy, you will be more approachable. This will help you make a connection because others will find you easier to chat with.
- Acting happy will give you some of the experience of being happy. You will learn the lexicon of happiness, and your body language will change as well (even if you are tapping away at a laptop). The words, expressions and feelings of happiness will then be available for you when you need them – feeling happy will feel normal, not alien.
- Acting happy changes your brain chemistry in much the same way as actually being happy, which means pretending to be happy will make you happier. The adage “fake it till you make it” implies a cause and effect that is very real.

Secondly, try to chat with people in ways that make them comfortable. This means chatting on their turf, and choosing a topic that is the favourite of your conversation partner(s). This might mean visiting someone’s house and asking about their day at work; in the furry world this is more likely to mean using IRC to chat about someone’s thoughts on operating systems.

You’re practising an valuable personal skill – that of empathy – but more importantly you’re helping your conversation partner. People are always more engaged when talking about things that are personally important. Even though it might be a topic with which you have no familiarity, ask questions and try to keep your own thoughts out of it. Your conversation partner is more likely to seek you out for future chats, and the range of topics will naturally broaden.

This technique has the added bonus of removing any personal pressure on the social experience. You don’t need to think of a topic or something clever to say, yet you can drive the conversation.

Thirdly, be active and risky in your conversation. Speak on a controversial topic, or be very direct. This will encourage other people to chime in. As they become engaged, switch to a passive role and ask for more information about their thoughts.

This can be a short route to a fun and active conversation. It’s especially useful in group situations, like IRC or in-person furmeets, where people often tend to idle quietly.

Fourthly, try out some “life hacks”, to trick yourself into doing things you know are good for you.

A 1999 study published in the Journal of Behavioural Decision Making asked people to participate in a (fake) experiment. They were asked to choose a DVD to watch while they waited for the “experiment” begin. They were given a choice between a popular highbrow film (like Schindler’s List) and a popular lowbrow film (like Mrs Doubtfire). Participants who made their selection three

days before the experiment were much more likely to select a highbrow film than those who made their selection on the day.

The participants knew that seeing a highbrow film would confer greater value over the long term, while the lowbrow film would be less challenging. People chose the lowbrow film on the day because they were, essentially, procrastinating. (We all want to improve ourselves, but right now we're listlessly lurking around social corners of the internet.)

The simplest way to overcome this natural procrastination is to plan things in advance. If you commit yourself to a social activity that you know is good for you – perhaps exercise, or webcam chat, or some tabletop gaming – you won't give yourself the option of procrastinating.

There are some excellent mind hacks, or productivity tools, available online for free. There are three geared towards geekier types that I'd recommend:

- Getting Things Done (GTD) (<http://www.43folders.com/2004/09/08/getting-started-with-getting-things-done>)
- The Pomodoro method (<http://www.pomodortechnique.com/>)
- The Hacker's Diet (<http://www.fourmilab.ch/hackdiet/>)

Finally, please allow yourself to good-naturedly fail from time to time. It's inevitable that we all feel like failures, or feel depressed, or feel lonely. It's normal and natural.

If we feel bad about something, we tend to use black-and-white language. We use words like "failure" or "fat" or "useless". These terms make the obstacles to success look insurmountable.

But if we feel good about something, we use relative language. We use words like "better" or "thinner" or "improved". These incremental terms make much more sense, because they reflect the way we change – slowly and steadily. When presented with a challenge, it's helpful to think of it using relative language.

This article is about loneliness but it also touches on depression and suicide. I encourage everyone to give themselves a free pass for depressive or suicidal thoughts, because they are a normal and common experience. But I'm not qualified to give advice to someone who is worried they may be suicidal.

Fortunately a furry friend of mine is a qualified medical doctor. (And a horse.) His advice follows – please heed it if you've read this article and are worried about yourself.

If at any point you don't feel safe within yourself, call emergency services. Don't hesitate or second-guess yourself. However you may have arrived at this point, it's not the kind of thing that gets better when you think about it. You can think about consequences when you feel you are safe.

Regardless of how you view hospitals (and possibly psychiatric wards), I cite the emergency services here partly because of my professional background, and partially because their role is to guarantee that your emergency is taken seriously. Somebody will respond and will be there for you.

If you don't like hospitals, or psychiatric wards, or doctors, to the point where you would rather die than see one, and you have a friend that is so good that they could guarantee you the above, then perhaps that's a viable alternative. They may not be equipped to deal with your crisis, but if you find yourself in this situation then it's pretty desperate, and may require desperate measures that you can only access in a hospital.

10.1 Furrries Are Awesome

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First of all, I'd like to apologize for the dearth of articles, recently. It really weighs on me, and I feel that I've been neglecting one of my favorite things ever: writing too-long articles about animal people. Not all of my time was just sitting, twiddling my thumbs, though. I did wind up with a cool new job, and that panel for RMFC took up quite a bit of my time, actually. Most of what has been going on, though, at least in my spare time over the last few weeks, has been dealing with a few health problems that had me a little down.

My general solution to the anxiety and emotional weirdness involved with those sorts of things, when they get bad, is to seek out as many positive (pawsitive, if you will) things. The usual method is to ask on Twitter "what's awesome right now?" I love getting the responses, hearing what people think is neat and cool, hearing all the wonderful things that are happening to people. "Exciting new development at work for me!" "Free bagels." "My coffee." As I poke my way through the replies, though, favoriting most of them, I notice that just about every icon has a muzzle and ears. So you know what's totally awesome to me? Furrries.

A lot of what this site focuses on is not really all that negative. Zik is exploring the world of furry, JM is peeking into specific aspects of our subculture, and Klisoura is being wonderful by pulling specific data for us. (Kyll is automatically awesome, because fox; and guest authors get a free in, here.) However, the topics tend to be obviously interesting, and I've noticed that we do tend to approach issues from both sides, even if we wind up more firmly on one side than the other. JM's articles on Zoophilia and cub porn both take this tack: they start with an exposition of both sides, even though they tend to come down on the positive side. It's definitely a successful method, and it seems that a lot of our readership does appreciate the more exploratory style articles.

I'm going to take a step back, though, and just spend a few words on some blatant positivity. I really like furrries. I really like being a furry. I think we are, all around, a great group of people focused on a few great core ideas, but with plenty of diversity thrown in to make sure that we lead interesting lives. We are awesome.

There's a rhetorical technique known as hendiatis, which is one of those things which you will spot everywhere once you know about it. It means making one point through three statements. I know that it figures prominently in my own writing, but I see it everywhere. Especially in this most political of (US) seasons, the hendiatis makes a comeback. I'm going to use that here, and the reason I'm even bothering to preface that is that I want to note that I try to fit all of my articles into three categories: participation mystique (how we base a portion of our identity off our membership with the fandom), character versus self (the concept of creating and interacting via an avatar), and interaction (what we gain by being a subculture, rather than being solipsistic).

Participation Mystique

Participation mystique is basing a portion of your identity off of membership to a group or participation in some sort of idea. I've written about it before, but it's worth bringing up again specifically for the benefits that it offers within the furry community. The idea that we can structure a portion of what we consider ourselves around our membership to this sometimes quite odd subculture is quite impressive. I know that, for myself. I feel that I would be a less complete individual without the fandom.

That's part of the issue with anything that uses the words identity, though. By their very nature, they are things that, without which, we would find it nearly impossible to picture ourselves. If I try to picture myself without furry, for instance, I come up with a blank for several parts of my day – checking Twitter, relaxing online with friends during some downtime, planning for a convention panel, or even right now, sitting and writing a meta-furry article for a blog with a giant wolf on the banner. Without furry, would I substitute that portion of my identity with something else? Would I have taken part in some other participation mystique that would have filled out the same spaces in the topology of my soul? I'm sure it's possible. There are a lot of things that I'm interested in besides furry, to be truthful. Would I be the same person, though? Of course not.

There are, as someone mentioned to me on Twitter, inherent ties between the fandom and identity. It's not just that I am experiencing this sort of participation mystique, many of us are. There is a certain sort of subconscious, unvoiced togetherness that we gain from sharing this mystical participation, this joining of ourselves with a group. It sounds a little cultish, when I write it out like that, but I do think it's true. I've noticed that, if you run into a furry that you have never met before, there's always at least one thing you can talk about: the ways in which you base a portion of your Self on your being a part of this larger group of animal people.

Character Versus Self

Character versus self is another theme that I've written on before. There are several ways in which we interact with the world around us, and one of the most important for us within the fandom is through our own characters, those avatars which stand for the core of our being tied with our interest in anthropomorphics, as well as our identity in the fandom. It came up during the RMFC panel that many furies can even have several different characters, as opposed to just one avatar that they keep. That we can hold that in our minds, that we can wear a mask to fit our moods and our desires, to be the type of individual we want to be, that is quite amazing, I think.

To paraphrase a friend, we put so much work and creativity into creating something that represents our most intimate of aspects, and then we wear it openly, making that the type of person with whom others should interact. You all know that I write and care about gender and all of the

complexities involved with it (I can think of at least two articles that have surrounded it that I've written, after all), and I think that this idea of taking a personal aspect, much more personal than might be normally shared outside of the fandom, and making it a core part of the character that we create is definitely useful. Gender can often be one of those things, where one can play a character of whatever biological sex, or even gender identity, that they want here in the fandom, and have it be just fine.

Another example, and a good way to tie into the next section, is the ways in which we benefit from having an avatar through which we interact. There are, of course, varying degrees of introvert and extrovert, and beyond that, varying degrees of social anxiety. These are things that just about everyone experiences, even if it's on the extreme far end. I can say for myself that, although I like to think of myself as reasonably extroverted, I have quite a bit of social anxiety, and it takes a lot of effort for me to have successful interactions in the world. If I'm pretending to be a fox or whatever, though, I can hide behind the fact that I'm doing just that, and the interactions go a lot smoother. Perhaps it's just the fact that I'm interacting with other furies, but I do feel that having that layer of Who I Really Feel I Am between me and my interlocutor does provide an additional level of comfort.

Interaction

The idea of a chosen family is not a new one. I know that, at the very least, it ties into the idea of being kicked out of one's home, and adopting a chosen family of sorts to help be the surrogates for those whom are no longer in one's lives. Even beyond that, however, I think that the idea holds true within furry. There is no one in my family with whom I am closer than some of my friends in the fandom. The fact that my chosen family here, outside of my normal family whom I still love, can continue to grow and change just tickles me pink, too. I can honestly say that, within the last two weeks, at least one additional member has been added to this family, someone with whom I am more comfortable talking to than most members of my blood-related family. This always amazes me: the mutability of who we consider family is odd enough, but within the fandom, just how quickly those relationships can grow.

I'm not alone in this at all, either. I asked on Twitter, before I started this article, what the most positive thing was that my followers could think of the fandom, and the majority of the answers revolved around the interconnectedness and relationships that spring from it. "Made so many good friends," "Given me [...] a husband," "that I am not being judged or ridiculed for who I am." These are all, to me, true signs of affection for the other members in our subculture. That we have not found, but created an area where all of these things can be the case is quite singular, to me. Of all the other subcultures to which I'd consider myself a member – programmers, musicians,

awkward people – I don't think that it's likely that I would be able to build a friendship quite as quickly. Sure, in programming, we can debate the (de)merits of PHP, or in music we can talk about preferences for music to perform versus music to listen to. Neither of those things (thankfully) take up much of my identity, however.

See, here in our subculture, we combine all three of these levels of participation. There's the utmost personal level of creating a part of our identity around it, there's the level wherein we create a front-stage mask that may, in some cases, more closely relate our back-stage personas, and there's the level where we actively participate in the little micro-world around us. So many of us have bought into the fandom (many in more ways than one) that it's become something greater than the sum of its parts. I challenge you all to do the same and imagine where you'd be without the fandom, try and figure out what theme, idea, culture, or group, or combination thereof, could take its place, and define the borders of furry in your own lives. We really are pretty awesome.

10.2 Fantastic Mr Fox

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Fantastic Mr Fox, the brilliant 2009 Wes Anderson film based on Roald Dahl's children's novel, is driven by two coming-of-age stories.

The first, and more traditional, follows Mr Fox's 12 year old son Ash. Ash is short, awkward, and prone to theatrical sartorial choices that reinforce his status as an outsider. He is forever comparing himself to his fantastic father and implausibly gifted cousin, Kristofferson. Over the course of the film, Ash learns to make the most of his strengths.

The second coming-of-age story is that of Mr Fox himself. Despite being a husband, father, home owner, and provider, Mr Fox sees himself as a wild animal', a kind of perpetual teenager who continually needs to prove himself to the world.

In the opening scene, Mr Fox and his wife are caught in a fox trap while raiding a squab farm. Mrs Fox reveals that she is pregnant, and Mr Fox agrees to settle into a safer life for the sake of his family. This brings about an internal conflict in Mr Fox. He retains his self-image (a wild animal), which is at odds with the safe domestic life he makes as a father and newspaper columnist.

Fantastic Mr Fox is a furry movie in that it features anthropomorphic characters. I'd also argue that Mr Fox's internal conflict has parallels with the furry experience. His internal conflict is similar to the disconnect of identity experienced by many furies: we present one version of ourselves to the real world but have an internal life where our furry identity looms large.

I don't want to overextend my linguistic gymnastics by stretching for too many parallels between the identity crises in Mr Fox and in furies. However, both we and Mr Fox must find some way to manage our split personalities.

Mr Fox does a poor job of this in the start of the film. He is prone to self-aggrandizement and risky behaviour, as if he is trying to prove his wildness despite his domesticity. He treats his friend, Badger, poorly physically threatening him after being advised against a risky purchase, and cutting him off mid-speech. Mr Fox does so because he feels he must prove himself as the wild, fantastic animal he imagines himself to be.

Mr Fox's crisis is resolved in the best and most flawed scene in the film: the wolf scene.

Just after the climactic action sequence, Mr Fox spies a wolf in the distance. The wolf is a wild animal: quadruped, mute, strong. Mr Fox, despite his self-professed lupophobia, tries to engage the wolf in conversation. The wolf remains silent. The scene ends with the two making a non-verbal connection, acknowledging each other with a raised paw. As the wolf leaves, Mr Fox says to his son and nephew "What a beautiful creature. Wish him luck, boys."

It's a powerful and understated scene. The connection between Mr Fox and the wolf indicates the reconciliation of Fox's splintered identities. The gesture of acceptance shows the domesticated

Mr Fox making peace with his atavistic self. With this acceptance, Mr Fox can find balance between his wild, internal world and domestic, external world. His newspaper column becomes edgier (“Fox on the Prowl”) and his next raid is on a safer target a supermarket.

The gesture between Mr Fox and the wolf is a moment of personal triumph. It’s something we can all strive for.

Unfortunately, the wolf scene is arguably a racist one. The black wolf stands in counterpoint to the civil world of Mr Fox et. al., and is a representation of the wild.

The black wolf is intended to be a metaphor for Mr Fox’s internal atavistic shadow. However there is a history of blackness in cinema, where it is shorthand for mysteriousness and untamed animalism. This is a fundamentally racist association as it degrades blacks as being more like animals (and so less human). The black wolf is pure animal.

And, unfortunately, the key gesture between Mr Fox and the wolf looks a lot like a black power salute.

There is a long history of film using black characters in a racist fashion, even in otherwise excellent films. Consider Morgan Freeman’s benevolent servant in *Driving Miss Daisy*, or Michael Clarke Duncan’s “magical Negro” in *The Green Mile*. Such black characters only exist to act benevolently towards the white main characters, and have little other apparent motivation. Freeman and Duncan, in these films, are playing the stock character of the noble savage. Neither film is intended to be racist, however the characterization of the black characters is anachronistic.

I don’t think that Wes Anderson intended the wolf scene to have any racial connotations. Anderson has form: 2007’s *The Darjeeling Limited* is about the three Whitman brothers (literally, the White Men) who get lost in the Rajasthan desert. The Indians in the film are broadly characterized, but this is a deliberate device to reflect the privilege of the Whitmans and their unfamiliarity with the world outside their bubble. *The Darjeeling Limited* is a direct exploration of whiteness’, arguably a theme carried throughout many of Anderson’s films.

Mr Fox is equally privileged and suffers the condition of being white. He is nattily dressed, speaks in a quasi-formal manner that suggests a traditional British-style education, is fluent in French, and is comfortable with Latin. While none of these things necessarily qualify him as white (he is, after all, a delightful shade of orange), it’s a reasonable assumption to make in the context of Anderson’s other work.

Like the black characters in *The Green Mile* and *Driving Miss Daisy*, I suspect that the black wolf’s cameo will become anachronistic over time. It’ll remain a small criticism of an otherwise excellent film, at least until the world improves to a point where skin colour doesn’t have associational baggage.

I, for one, would be happier if Anderson had taken a page out of the furry book and made his wolf blue. (Neon green bangs optional.)

Chapter 11

September

11.1 Why Language Is Important

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In a recent article, I talked about the importance of language in self-criticism. If you are trying to lose weight, it's useful to use relative terms (*I'm getting thinner*) and counter-productive to use absolute terms (*I'm fat*).

It's helpful to use language that suggests self-improvement, compared to the language of self-hatred. Even though both phrases (*I'm getting thinner* / *I'm fat*) describe the same thought, they imply different things: language affects perspective.

Writing here on [adjective][species], I do my best to use specific and neutral language. But it's difficult, especially when writing about sensitive topics such as sexuality, or fluffy concepts such as "furry".

An example of a sensitive topic: I used the term "paedophile" in my article on cub porn. I suggested that a subset of those furies attracted to cub porn are sexually attracted to children. I called them paedophiles.

It's a strong term. It is regularly used to refer to child molesters, however I meant it to cover anyone with an innate sexual attraction to children. I went on to use the term "gold-star paedophile", which is someone with such an attraction and the good sense not to act on it.

I used these terms because they are used by the psychologists I cited my article. However I knew that free usage of "paedophile" would colour my post, making it difficult to read and potentially enraging. Ideally, there would have been a term with the same definition, without the implied negative connotation, and less cumbersome than "someone who is innately sexually attracted to children".

An example of a fluffy concept: gender and sexual identity. A full 25% of furies consider themselves to be neither completely male nor female, while less than 50% of furies identify as homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual.

This makes data analysis difficult. Here at [a][s], we tend to lump groups into large categories, so that someone identifying as "mostly homosexual" is considered "homosexual". This is a potentially offensive simplification, but it's the best we can do.

In the ultra-PC world of sexual politics, the cover-all term LGBT isn't always considered inclusive enough. This has led to propagation of ludicrous terms like LGBTQIA. While more specific, such terms are not useful: mainstream usage of LGBT includes all people with an unusual gender or sexual identity.

Such limitations of language are one of the biggest challenges of writing for [adjective][species]. There have been very few attempts to discuss the furry community intelligently, which means that there is limited language to draw upon.

A lot of furry analysis occurs in crowd-sourced, informal media such as forums or Twitter, or published in a news-byte format by the likes of Flayrah. This is all great stuff, but it doesn't generate discussion of sufficient depth to create a new lexicon, a foundation on which we can grow complex ideas.

There is little detailed furry analysis. Journalists barely scratch the surface, and the only scientific study (Gerbasi et al) proposed a "species identity disorder", interesting but not really relevant to the furry experience.

Here on [a][s], and in other long-form pieces (such as the occasional LJ article or Flayrah editorial), it's easy to get smothered by linguistic quicksand. Our occasional awkward phrases (like "all people with an unusual gender or sexual identity") and painfully self-referential articles (like, uh, this one) are partly a product of our limited furry lexicon.

This is all, of course, Makyo territory. He has written around the topic of language on several occasions, notably Doxa (exploring the ideas that make up our community) and On Words (discussing the varied interpretations of "furry"). If you've read this far, then I'd recommend a read (or re-read) of both those articles.

I hope that [adjective][species] will help the introduction of new ideas and terms. Language does change within growing communities, notably the appropriation of the word "gay" to provide a non-perjorative alternative to the likes of "queer" or "fruit" or "faggot".

Many of the articles at [a][s] are merely intended to provide disinterested perspective on difficult topics. As we continue – with our growing army of readers and contributors – we can build on those foundations, grow our understanding of furry, and learn more about our community.

11.2 Participation Mystique 3 – On Pronouns

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I seem to be drilling down with this (very spread out) series. I started out with a general overview of participation mystique in the fandom, narrowed it to some specific uses of words, and now I'm focusing specifically on pronouns. I can't say that I have any plans for a fourth iteration, but I'm assuming that it will start going into syllables. Arf, bark, and the like. Pretty good syllables, if you ask me.

Pronouns are already short enough as it is, usually only one syllable. They're some of the most common words that we use, and for good reason: they help us keep our speech and writing concise and varied by letting us use a placeholder instead of a name or a noun. They carry a lot of weight for their relatively small size, however. Weight that, I think, can tell us quite a bit about how some people interact with the fandom, or even identify with their personal characters.

A good place to start here, then, is how a pronoun works behind the scenes. If you were to say: "OtterFace is a river otter. He enjoys wiggling, fish, and his enormous tail," you have stated the subject of the statement as 'OtterFace', and then referred to him twice using 'he' and 'his'. I've mentioned before that one of the ways to look at how language works is by recognizing that the words we use are signs used to convey meaning. When we talk about OtterFace or his glorious tail, we're using signs that is, words on a screen, sounds coming from our mouths, etc. to refer to two things that really, truly exist (or so we assume).

The job of the pronouns specifically is to be set up as a temporary sign that refers back to something earlier in the statement: 'he' and 'his' refer back to 'OtterFace' in the previous example. They're a sort of sign on top of a sign, in one sense; pronouns refer back to a noun that was already used, which in turn refers to the subject. They do have a tendency to wear out over time, however. If I talk about 'him' here, you might understand that I refer to our wiggly otter friend, but once a new paragraph starts, it's usually about time to restate the subject, because him has lost some of its power in referring back to OtterFace.

This is all well and good, really; it helps us keep things flowing in the language that we use. As I said, though, pronouns in many languages do carry a lot of additional weight beyond just being placeholders for a subject. The prime example of this, and the one I want to focus on, is the fact that you now know that OtterFace is male, solely based on my pronoun choice. (pronouns also carry a portion of identity with them). This is part of the burden carried by pronouns: I didn't have to specify that OtterFace was male beyond choosing and using the proper pronouns. Pronouns carry great importance, at least in English, by specifying the gender of the sign they replace, helping us to form a better mental picture of what is being described in words.

And here's where things get a little tricky.

One usually discusses gender with pronouns, but to be honest, “gender” in this case is divided into at least two distinct areas: gender identity and biological sex (three, if you count gender expression). However, asking a transgender person about pronouns will get you an explanation about all the ways in which that relationship between pronoun and gender is fraught. There are a lot of connotations that not everyone is comfortable with when it comes to having some things specified by so short a word, and having the wrong pronoun used when one is dealing with gender identity disorder is just one of those terribly uncomfortable things. The upside, at least in some places in furry, is that you present as your character, which can be of whatever sex you wish, making pronouns all the easier to chose, for those interacting with you.

In fact, due to the fantastical nature of the fandom (that is, of a fantasy nature, though we are fantastic as well), non-binary gender identities have flourished and make up a sizable portion of the population in some locations, far above the 1% of births that show some sort of sexual ambiguity¹. These range through the whole gamut of male and female primary and secondary sexual characteristics, from primarily female to primarily male and everything in between, and various pronouns have been more or less popular in describing various areas on that spectrum.

This article on io9 goes into some of the issues on describing hermaphrodites in terms of male and female, including with pronouns; very much recommended reading. While some who present as a hermaphrodite with their character in the fandom use masculine or feminine pronouns (“male herms”, those who present as primarily male, with both sets of reproductive genitalia, or “c-boys”, males with a vulva and vagina but no penis, both tend to use masculine pronouns, for example), several use either a gender neutral pronoun set, or one that’s specific to hermaphrodites. One of the more common sets, ‘shi/hir/hirs/hirself’, seems to be fairly unique to the fandom, even, and indeed would likely only be able to flourish in a primarily written environment, due to the relative similarity of the words when spoken to ‘she/her/hers/herself’². Others choose pronouns that have shown up elsewhere offline, such as the ‘zie/zir/zirs/zirself’ or other such gender neutral pronouns to represent someone of non-binary gender.

That leads us to non-gendered and neuter pronouns. The difference between those two terms was succinctly put when I asked a crowd online whether they preferred ‘it/it/its/itself’ or Spivak pronouns (‘e/em/eir/emself’, though the nominative is often replaced with ‘ey’, to prevent ambiguity when spoken with ‘he’). When I asked this crowd of furs, there were the response was overwhelmingly ‘it/it/its/itself’. When asked, the three furs who had their gender set to neuter and

¹This according to the (now defunct) Intersex Society of North America, which defines the term “sexual ambiguity” to include genetic issues such as Klinefelter Syndrome which may or may not present beyond simple gynecomastia in many individuals, which hardly fits the furry herm stereotype; the number of births with truly ambiguous primary sexual characteristics is quoted as being much smaller: “Between 0.1% and 0.2% of live births are ambiguous enough to become the subject of specialist medical attention, including surgery to disguise their sexual ambiguity.”

²A resourceful [a][s] reader contacted me several months ago with a brief analysis on how controversial ‘shi/hir/hirs/hirself’ can be. Such pronouns can elicit quite violent responses from some individuals.

used ‘it’ for themselves explained succinctly, “I have some friends that use Spivak pronouns, but they identify more as ‘none’ than specifically ‘neuter’. ‘Neuter’ is a gender, whereas ‘none’ is more of an answer to a question³.” The fandom certainly provides room for the neutrois and the ‘none’s, of course, and the means of interacting online provide a way for that to be expressed as a part of oneself.

So why is this all important to furry? I think that a lot of it has to do with the ways in which we interact through avatars, our personal characters. The ability to partake in gender without necessarily involving biological sex is a definite draw to many. Disconnecting the two and, in some small way, totally presenting as who one feels one should present as in terms of gender is not that far away from presenting as what species one wishes to present as. It’s no surprise, then, that expressing a different gender with a furry character is no surprise to so many; it’s not that far off from what we already do. Additionally, it is a prime example of participation mystique: entangling concepts of gender with the fandom, for some, is another way in which we can base a portion of our existences on our membership to the fandom.

Of course, this isn’t something that necessarily holds true for everyone, or even a majority of furries. It’s not even something that everyone accepts within the fandom. I do think that it is a good example of one of the ways in which we connect with our subculture, and with each other. Something as simple as a pronoun used during interaction with another fur can be a sign of how they have made the fandom part of themselves, just as for others the spiritual aspect, or the artistic aspect, or even the sexual aspect can provide a deeply meaningful tie to something as simple as a subculture with a shared interest in anthropomorphic animals.

³On Wikipedia, Gender-neutral pronouns is an exhaustive list pronouns that are neutral in gender in some way or another, and includes some pretty fascinating information and links besides. English gets quite the table, even.

11.3 In Gratitude to Fred Patten

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Hello!

First of all, I suppose I ought to introduce myself since I'm new on this block. My name is Phil Geusz, and I've been around the fandom more or less since about 1997. I wrote my first novel that year, and haven't spent much time not-writing since. I'm one of those people you hear about for whom the discovery of the furry fandom was a life-changing event, and in my case the change was all for the better. Fifteen years later, I've either published or am in the process of having published twenty-one mostly furry novels and novellas. The fandom has brought me happiness beyond measure and sparked a creativity inside myself that I'd never have unlocked on my own. I'm grateful to you all, and these columns, like the ones I've written for other furry publications, are meant to at least partially serve as a form of repayment. It's wrong to take, take, take and never give.

That taken care of...

As an author, I'm far more aware than most that we live in rapidly changing times. Even a mere decade ago, when I first began attempting to sell my fiction in a serious way, the publishing world (or at least the significant money-making part of it) was ruled by a handful of editors and agents. These individuals served as "gatekeepers" or "herd thinners"; in choosing who and what was published, printed, and then shipped out by the railcar load to the nation's bookstores, they effectively controlled the nation's literary tastes and (much like the record labels) which artists grew rich and famous and which didn't.

Then, however, came the internet. Anyone could put anything on a web page. And nothing was ever the same again.

For the most part, the internet has been a good thing for society as a whole – certainly its been good for our fandom, which in my opinion would at best be a tiny ghost of what it is today without the interconnections the web has given us. So, please don't take what follows as an anti-technological rant. I'm no luddite by any measure! And yet...

...sometimes when I surf the unwashed, unedited, ungrammatical, unspellchecked, unstructured and uncensored recesses of furrydom's fiction websites, I have to admit that I find myself wishing for an old-school gatekeeper or two. I mean, face it. Surgeon's Law informs us that 99% of anything is trash, and this has certainly always held true for me. Yet... How long and how hard must the average fur search in order to find stories that suit them?

The problem, you see, is that the internet is "flat". Everyone has equal access, in the absence of gatekeepers and the like, and therefore everyone's work has equal prominence. Yet... The fact of the matter is that everyone's work doesn't *deserve* equal prominence. It's commonly understood

by pretty near everyone that in order to become a top-flight athlete, for example, endless hours of hard work and coaching are required. When it comes to writing (and in my experience visual art as well, though I claim no expertise there), however... Somehow would-be authors don't want to accept that they need as much coaching and dedication as an athlete in order to perfect their skills. Instead they internet-post what in all honesty is often grossly substandard work, where it ends up just as prominent as the very best of the genre. And so, Joe Furstoryreader must wade through what feels like an endless swamp in search of quality stories.

Please, don't get me wrong here. I'm all in favor of encouraging new writers, and have done more than my share of exactly that over the years. Nor do I have a problem with people being proud of what they've created and wanting to share it – I've not forgotten where I began myself. But back then I desperately needed a writing coach too – I still do, in many ways! – and my work certainly wasn't ready for prime time. All I'm trying to establish here is that there's a crying need in our fandom for individuals willing to read boatloads of furry fiction and then tell the rest of us that work "A" was excellent, "B" sucked, and "C" was somewhere in between. Such individuals are far too rare, especially in the flat, gatekeeperless world of the internet. The ones we *do* have, however, are worth their weight in gold to our fandom, and in my opinion we've done far, far too little to thank them for their often painful efforts.

Fred Patten is such an individual, and my purpose in writing this article is to thank him for the many services he's performed along these lines for our fandom. Not only did he edit the furry fandom's first significant collection of short stories (plus two other more recent ones), he can truly be said to be one of our founding fathers. (He also helped found the anime fandom as well. How many other people can claim such a distinction in two disparate fields?) Even today, though suffering from the effects of a severely debilitating stroke a few years back, Fred continues to pound out well-considered and thoughtful story and book reviews like a machine. Thus, Mr. Patten serves as the modern-day internet equivalent of the old-time magazine editor – a reader looking for good stories need search no further than Fred's bottomless stack of reviews in order to locate the sort of material they seek. In the old world of physical books and paper-publishing, valuable people like Fred were well-known to authors and readers alike and honored and respected accordingly. The "flat" world of the internet, however, isn't so kind. Only in Australia has Mr. Patten and his multiple contributions to furrydom been recognized; so far as I know in the United States and Europe he's practically a nonentity.

And that's a damned shame, or maybe something even worse. It reflects very badly on us indeed.

Every single fur contributes to the furry fandom in one way or another. But some contribute far more than others. Fred Patten has given more to this fandom than any other single individual I can name, yet because his efforts have been focused on criticism in a time and place where the role of

the critic often goes unappreciated, well. . . He's been under-appreciated too. So much so that I'm dedicating my first column here to pointing the fact out, in the hope that someone somewhere will do right by the man while he's still with us to appreciate it.

We furs have a reputation for taking care of each other, and seeing that justice is done. I can only hope that someone who is in a position to offer more than mere words will read this and live up to the best traditions of our fandom.

(Author's note – For the sake of full disclosure...I've never met Fred in person, but have corresponded with him regarding various literary endeavors for roughly a decade or so. It should be noted that he's reviewed many of my works, mostly favorably.)

11.4 My Cat Jeoffry

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Christopher Smart (1722-1771) was an English poet and satirist. His story is one of art, debt, cross-dressing, drama, and cats. Readers of this article should feel free to draw parallels between Smart and furies, real or imagined.

Smart was an artistic youth with a seemingly misguided romantic focus, writing a poem at age four to challenge a rival for the affections of a twelve year-old. He was also delicate, avoiding physical exercise due to asthma attacks, a complaint widely disbelieved by those around him.

He attended Cambridge University, incurring a substantial debt in the process in the hope that this would be covered by his future career. To that end, he accepted several long-term contracts that tied him to Cambridge and prevented him from easily moving to the burgeoning publishing community in London.

He enjoyed some success in this time, winning a scholarship for Latin poetry, and working as a translator for Alexander Pope on an ad hoc basis. However his income was not sufficient for him to discharge his debts.

Smart gained some notoriety for his satirical plays, where he would act some of the female roles himself. This was considered unusual and led to rumours about his sexuality, a concept continued by today's critical interest in Smart's poetry, particularly its perceived gender-bending and phallic imagery.

He moved to London to work in the Grub St publishing scene, a collective of poets, low-end publishers and booksellers. During this time he continued to draw his wages from Cambridge, a ruse that was eventually discovered, cutting Smart off from his main income.

To try to make ends meet, Smart became a prolific writer. He contributed to a variety of magazines on top of his own plays and poetry.

Smart also got caught up in petty personal politics on Grub St, a 1752 equivalent of a flame war. Siding with Henry Fielding against John Hill in a 'paper war', Smart spent a great deal of time contributing to the growing vitriol, culminating in his epic poem *The Hilliad*. While he gained notoriety, such navel-gazing didn't pay the bills, and Smart foundered in growing debt.

To manage his debts, Smart looked for charity amongst his friends. This led to personal problems as Smart became branded a moocher. Desperately, Smart accepted a 99-year contract to single-handedly publish a weekly paper. In 1756, at age 34, he had a breakdown from the stress.

Smart was interred at St Luke's Hospital for Lunatics on Old St. He fell into a religious mania and was pronounced incurable.

During his time in the asylum, Smart wrote his two great works. *A Song to David* was published in 1763 to acclaim that has grown with time, notably through Robert Browning (in the late



Figure 11.1: I visited the long-demolished site of St Luke's Hospital for Lunatics, now replaced with retail and a block of post-war flats. (For those who know London, it's opposite the William Blake pub on Old St, just west of the roundabout.) St Luke's Church (pictured) stands about 100m down the road. Photo by @bastett.

19th century) who ranked Smart alongside Milton and Keats.

Smart was eventually released from the asylum, only to be arrested for debt in 1770. He died in prison in 1771.

In 1939, Smart's *Jubilate Agno* – which includes the canto *For I Will Consider My Cat Jeoffry* – was discovered and published.

Smart sees Jeoffry as godly, an opinion I imagine sat well in Jeoffry's mind. There can be no doubt that Jeoffry was loved by Smart, to the extent that he sees God in Jeoffry's morning ablutions. Nowadays, Jeoffry is Smart's best known work.

The full text of *For I Will Consider My Cat Jeoffry* is below.

For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry.

For he is the servant of the Living God duly and daily serving him.

For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way.

For this is done by wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness.

For then he leaps up to catch the musk, which is the blessing of God upon his prayer.

For he rolls upon prank to work it in.

For having done duty and received blessing he begins to consider himself.

For this he performs in ten degrees.

For first he looks upon his forepaws to see if they are clean.

For secondly he kicks up behind to clear away there.

For thirdly he works it upon stretch with the forepaws extended.
For fourthly he sharpens his paws by wood.
For fifthly he washes himself.
For sixthly he rolls upon wash.
For seventhly he fleas himself, that he may not be interrupted upon the beat.
For eighthly he rubs himself against a post.
For ninthly he looks up for his instructions.
For tenthly he goes in quest of food.
For having consider'd God and himself he will consider his neighbour.
For if he meets another cat he will kiss her in kindness.
For when he takes his prey he plays with it to give it a chance.
For one mouse in seven escapes by his dallying.
For when his day's work is done his business more properly begins.
For he keeps the Lord's watch in the night against the adversary.
For he counteracts the powers of darkness by his electrical skin and glaring eyes.
For he counteracts the Devil, who is death, by brisking about the life.
For in his morning orisons he loves the sun and the sun loves him.
For he is of the tribe of Tiger.
For the Cherub Cat is a term of the Angel Tiger.
For he has the subtlety and hissing of a serpent, which in goodness he suppresses.
For he will not do destruction, if he is well-fed, neither will he spit without provocation.
For he purrs in thankfulness, when God tells him he's a good Cat.
For he is an instrument for the children to learn benevolence upon.
For every house is incomplete without him and a blessing is lacking in the spirit.
For the Lord commanded Moses concerning the cats at the departure of the Children of Israel from Egypt.
For every family had one cat at least in the bag.
For the English Cats are the best in Europe.
For he is the cleanest in the use of his forepaws of any quadruped.
For the dexterity of his defence is an instance of the love of God to him exceedingly.
For he is the quickest to his mark of any creature.
For he is tenacious of his point.
For he is a mixture of gravity and waggery.
For he knows that God is his Saviour.
For there is nothing sweeter than his peace when at rest.

For there is nothing brisker than his life when in motion.
For he is of the Lord's poor and so indeed is he called by benevolence perpetually –
 Poor Jeoffry! poor Jeoffry! the rat has bit thy throat.
For I bless the name of the Lord Jesus that Jeoffry is better.
For the divine spirit comes about his body to sustain it in complete cat.
For his tongue is exceeding pure so that it has in purity what it wants in music.
For he is docile and can learn certain things.
For he can set up with gravity which is patience upon approbation.
For he can fetch and carry, which is patience in employment.
For he can jump over a stick which is patience upon proof positive.
For he can spraggle upon waggle at the word of command.
For he can jump from an eminence into his master's bosom.
For he can catch the cork and toss it again.
For he is hated by the hypocrite and miser.
For the former is afraid of detection.
For the latter refuses the charge.
For he camels his back to bear the first notion of business.
For he is good to think on, if a man would express himself neatly.
For he made a great figure in Egypt for his signal services.
For he killed the Ichneumon-rat very pernicious by land.
For his ears are so acute that they sting again.
For from this proceeds the passing quickness of his attention.
For by stroking of him I have found out electricity.
For I perceived God's light about him both wax and fire.
For the Electrical fire is the spiritual substance, which God sends from heaven to sustain the bodies both of man and beast.
For God has blessed him in the variety of his movements.
For, tho he cannot fly, he is an excellent clamberer.
For his motions upon the face of the earth are more than any other quadruped. For he
 can tread to all the measures upon the music.
For he can swim for life.
For he can creep.

11.5 Our Fursonas Are Happier than We Are

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We furries, or at least most of us, have multiple identities.

Like everyone, we have our outward-facing human identity, named by our parents and constricted by whatever body it happens to be contained within. Our unique outward-facing identity is closely tied to our position in society and is tied to artificial constructs that crystallize our self into an acceptable bureaucratic package, such as our passports, our social security numbers, or our Google Plus accounts.

Furries usually also create one or more fictional identities. We name ourselves, select a combination of human and animal traits to create a new body, and often a new set of personality traits. Some furries, who create an avatar with interests (or physical dimensions) that do not easily gel with the real world, go further and create a fantasy universe.

Our furry identity is a personal creation, a kind of internal ghost accompanying the human that lurks around the real world. In situations where the real world is less intrusive, like corners of the internet or furry gatherings, our furry identities assert themselves and the human – with its arbitrary name, body, and bureaucratic accoutrements – is pushed to the background.

When the furry self is at the forefront, we experience the world in a different way. And, according to recently published data from the Anthropomorphic Research Project (based at the Niagara County Community College in the USA), we experience the world through the lens of an identity that is more mature, psychologically healthier, and happier than our human selves.

The ARP publishes results from two or three surveys each year. At this year's Furry Fiesta they performed psychological profiles and summarized the results against the well-regarded "Big Five" personality traits. Cleverly, they asked the furries to answer the questions twice: once for themselves and once for their fursona.

The biggest personality different between human' and furry' identity is also the most predictable: the fursonas are much more extroverted. This is due to the well-understood mask effect, a phenomenon familiar to anyone who has spent time on the inside of a fursuit.

The mask effect describes how people change their behaviour when behind a mask: they become less self-aware. The best-known experiment in psychological circles is a much-cited 2003 study that has the subject wear a mask, or stand in front of a mirror, and asks questions related to identity (ref). Participants wearing the mask demonstrate depersonalization and deindividuation.

More directly relevant to furries are studies on cosplayers. Researchers believe that people who attend sci-fi conventions in costume are undergoing "self-administered mental health treatment". (You can read more here on [adjective][species] here.)

The mask effect allows people who are normally reserved and risk-averse to trial outgoing and extroverted behaviour. While no studies have looked at furies specifically, the same behaviour can be observed in capering fursuiters. Psychologists believe that this helps shy people learn to feel more like their suited self: happy, generous, and more extroverted.

You can read more about research on cosplayers at the dedicated Psychology Today blog: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-superheroes>.

The mask effect has other benefits beyond helping people overcome shyness: it can also help us mature. The reduction in self-awareness while wearing a mask (or fursuit) allows us to advance scout' different personality traits. A fursuiter might, for example, act more flirtatious than the human inside would normally find comfortable, in a low-risk environment. This effect exists whether the mask is physical or virtual: we experience a similar drop in self-awareness when we socialize online in the guise of an alternate personality: our fursona.

Furries, through their fursona, experiment with many different personal traits. Most strikingly, many furies experiment with sexual identity or gender identity through their furry identity. For example, new furies joining the community notoriously tend to re-evaluate their sexual preference, starting heterosexual. There is strong evidence that this is true: data mining performed by [adjective][species] indicates that about half of heterosexual furies will change their sexual preference within their first five years in the community, usually to gay (Re-Evaluating Your Sexual Preference). We have no similar data for gender identity (numbers are too small for statistical analysis), however it is reasonable to assume that many transsexuals experiment with a differently-gendered furry character as an important learning step toward eventual self-acceptance.

Aside from the mask effect, which explains why our fursonas are more extroverted than our human selves, the ARP data shows that our furry identities are different in other, more subtle ways.

The ARP data showing Big Five personality traits for furies (ref) is as follows:

This data suggests that, perhaps counter-intuitively, our fursonas are a normalizing influence on our personality. This is consistent with psychological theories on roleplaying, where people tend to create a fictional identity that is a positive rolemodel for themselves. This theory, key to some cognitive behavioural therapy methodologies, is usually applied to children roleplaying but also applies to superhero cosplay, and – it seems – to furies as well.

The ARP data also shows that the differences between our human and furry selves are similar to the differences between college age and middle adulthood. That is, our furry selves are also more mature.

There is some logic to this. Data shows that personality is in flux until about age 30. Furies are a young group, with a median age of 22 (ref) so collectively, our personalities are still developing.

Changes in personality during maturation occur largely as we become more self-accepting and less self-centred. It makes sense that our imaginary furry selves are less focussed on our own

Trait	Furry Non-fursona	Furry, Fursona	Established norms
Extroversion	3.4	4.7	4.4
Agreeableness	4.9	5.4	5.2
Conscientiousness	4.7	4.9	5.4
Emotional Stability*	4.6	5.2	4.8
Openness	5.4	5.1	5.4

Figure 11.2: P

ersonality traits

* Minor note: emotional stability data is usually reported as Neuroticism in Big Five personality studies.

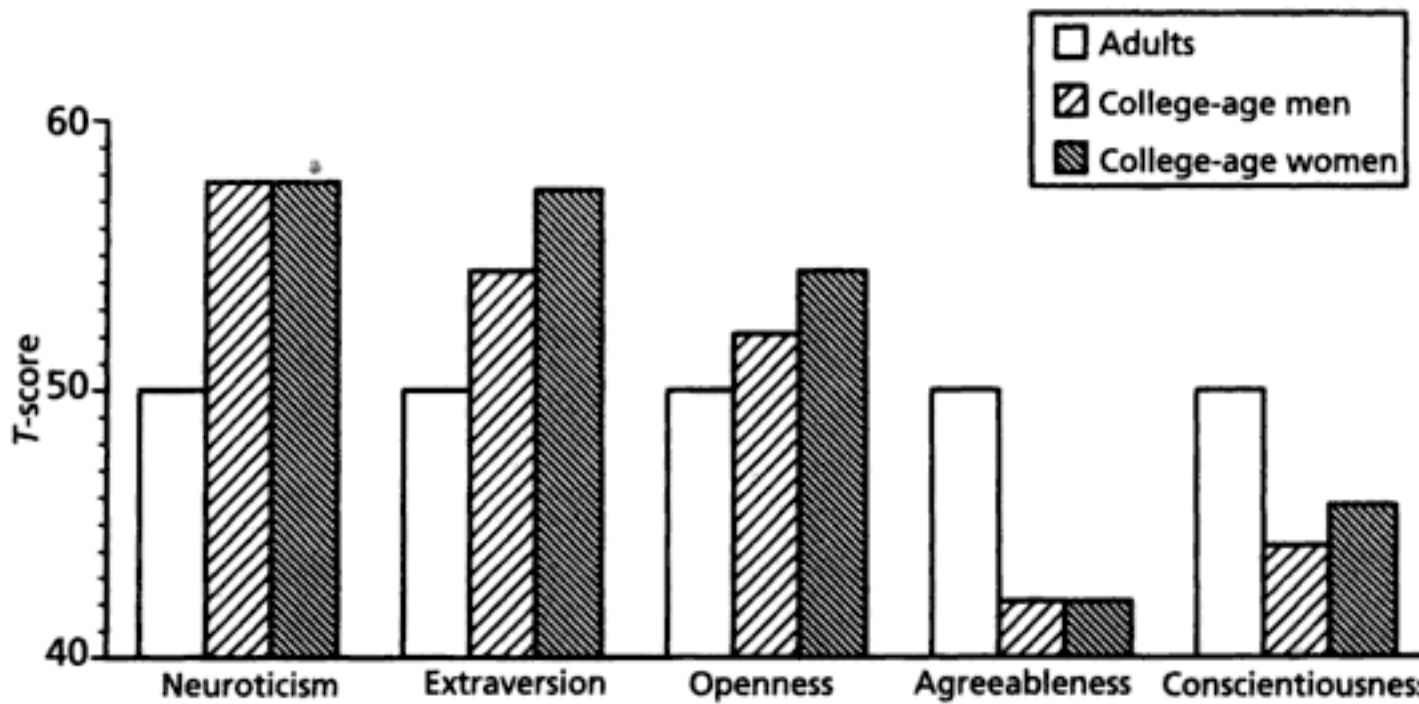


Figure 11.3: Ref Costa & McRae 1992

imperfections.

Personality changes as we age into 30-plus adulthood are also correlated with increased happiness and contentment (ref). There is a large body of research on the topic which shows that, as we mature, we learn to trust ourselves and empathize with other people. Between college age and middle adulthood (30-plus again) this translates into “*increased well-being*” (Mortimer 1928), “*decreased alienation and social criticism*” (Jessor 1983), as we become “*less emotional and better socialized*” (Hann 1986).

Our fursonas display many of these traits. They are forging a path of self-improvement: from them, we become more mature, less divergent from others around us, and – most importantly – happier.

The ARP’s website is here – <https://sites.google.com/site/anthropomorphicresearch/home>. Their most recent publication is a comprehensive analysis of data collected at Anthrocon 2012.

There are two ways in which life can improve: through a change in the outside world, or through personal change. As we mature, we become less self-centred, making it easier for us to self-analyse in a balanced fashion. As we explore our own personalities through our furry identity, we can learn to effect positive change.

It is a sign of maturity to look internally for ways to improve one’s life. We have control over our own actions and our interpretation of the world around us: we do not have control over much of the external world or the people in it.

To put it another way: when exposed to an enraging YouTube comment thread, we can either ignore the comments or engage with them. The more mature approach is to ignore the comments, which brings an immediate increase in happiness as we focus on something else. It is less mature (albeit completely normal) to try to correct the behaviour of the other commenters – as we all know, this is a dark path to frustration and unhappiness.

For another example, I have been exposed recently to a few articles and comic strips titled “How To Treat Your Introvert” (or similar). It’s usually linked by someone who considers themselves to be introverted, in the hope that people will read this advice and accordingly treat them with a greater understanding.

(Language note: this use of the term “introvert” is slightly different from that used by psychologists. It doesn’t easily relate to extroversion as a Big Five personality trait.)

In extremis, such advice depicts a pathologically shy person being harassed by a sociopath. This purports to represent the plight of the introvert: they feel victimized by the outside world, preferring to exist largely inside the safety of their own head.

The advice is doubly misleading. Firstly, everyone feels victimized by the outside world. We all find socializing stressful, and we are all haunted by memories of humiliating social experiences. The advice seems profound because everyone feels that way at least some of the time – horoscopes



Figure 11.4: Ref Sveidt on DeviantArt



Figure 11.5: Ref questionablylate.tumblr.com

are designed to work in the same way. Secondly, the advice implies that introversion is innate; a fixed aspect of personality. It's not.

It's also terrible advice. The intent and spirit of the advice is good – it suggests ways in which we can care for people around us. It's bad advice because the reader is supposed to identify with the introvert, the person portrayed as a powerless victim of the world around them. (Nobody identifies with sociopaths, not even actual sociopaths.) To hope that the world will change to meet the needs of our introvert is to hope to improve the discourse on a YouTube comments thread through sensible diplomacy.

People who feel introverted can improve their life by looking inwards, and considering things they can control. This is the more mature approach.

A better set of advice might be:

- Be empathetic. Spend more time listening to other people; they will relax if they feel their own social needs are being met.

- Socialize online via your fursona. You will feel less self-conscious.
- Stop hanging around with sociopaths.

Looking inwards to effect change will help our introvert find social experiences that are happy, rather than stressful. After all, that's what our fursonas do.

Finding contentment in this world is an endless and difficult task. Happily, we can expect to improve as we mature. Even better, we furries have a happy, healthy rolemodel – our animal-person alter-ego – who can lead the way.

Just ask yourself: *What Would a Furry Do?*

11.6 Subconscious Aspects of the Fandom

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Did you know that I used to read tarot cards? I still have the embarrassingly large collection of decks, books, and other accessories that go along with the practice. I pull them out every now and then to remember the person that I used to be. I used to be intensely focused on the subconscious and all of the ways in which it wound itself through our waking lives. I used to daydream about spending the requisite hours necessary for a 78 card spread using every card in the standard deck, even if I only did it once. At one point, I even vowed to do one reading for myself a day for 78 days in order to write a book about the experience (an idea that crops up with just about every interest I pick up, I should note).

I've talked about change before, and I have even laid bare some of the changes I have gone through personally. Even though my fascination with tarot has waned, I still retain the general interest in the ways in which the subconscious works in our lives, and I can still appreciate the deep symbolism that goes along with it. I would be lying, in fact, if I were to say that there wasn't some subconscious link tying me to the furry fandom. And, having had a few conversations on that point, I think that the same holds true for a lot of us here.

What, then, might be some of the subconscious reasons for wanting to join in a fandom of like minded individuals, spending hours online or sometimes hundreds (or thousands) of dollars just for the chance to interact in person at a convention? What would pull someone to a loose-knit group of individuals with the general theme-in-common of totally digging animals anthropomorphized to some extent, or perhaps humans similarly zoomorphized? It is, of course, one of those questions that has a different answer (or perhaps several) depending on who you ask, but I think that they are likely to fall into several loose categories.

First, though, I think it's beneficial restrict ourselves a little in order to focus better on the task at hand. There are quite a few reasons that someone might wish to join in a subculture, be around close friends, construct a chosen family for themselves; let's set those aside, however, and focus on the reasons that someone might be willing to construct for themselves an avatar through which they may interact with others. While it's certainly not a universal in our fandom, I do think that character creation and interaction are still quite common, and figure large in the ways in which we communicate, even if it is only to purchase art.

One of the reasons that immediately springs to mind for me is escapism. This requires a little bit of explanation on how I really got into the fandom in the first place, though, and I hope you'll forgive the brief digression. Around about the second half of 2000, a lot of things happened at once within my mom's side of the family (my parents having originally gotten divorced when I was quite young), and the tension between my mom and then step-dad grew daily, eventually to

the dissolution of that marriage as well. The first of the divorces happened when I was too young to remember, but the second occurred near the beginning of high school. I had just come out as, at the time, homosexual, as well, and the combined stress led to a strong desire to escape to some sort of place where these issues didn't loom quite so large.

I think that this was a common theme among several of my friends within the fandom at the time, as well. Although, by virtue of being able to even escape onto the Internet to pretend to be animal people, we led rather privileged lives, we all had stresses of a sort, or own realities looming over us, providing the desire to escape into a fantasy world. I've mentioned before the startling banality of a lot of this fantasy in which we took part, with folks hanging out in parks or bars, being students or programmers, and I think that reflects a bit of that escapism: getting away from a hectic life to take part in what your segment of society views as normal. To fantasize about normalcy, even with that element of magical realism inherent in being a fox-kid, shows the need to get away from life as it stands.

Of course, despite the normalcy striven for by the crowd that I hung out with, there are certainly more fantastic elements to the fandom. With character creation and world building, just about anything is possible, anywhere from simple non-binary gender roles to plant-cats and digital-huskies, from vast changes in financial class and social status to vast changes in size, even whole constructed realms with a fleshed out backstory, rules, or laws of physics. Beyond simply being happily normal, fantasy can satisfy out sense of grandeur.

Many individuals have a need to better themselves in any number of ways: to become thinner, to get rich, to win friends or defeat enemies. Fantasy provides one outlet for this. Through the process of character creation, one can construct an avatar that fills this need for grandiosity. By becoming, however temporarily or shallowly, a fantastic entity, we can satisfy some of our mythic desires.

This need to better ourselves needn't be on either extreme, of course. For many, simply the feeling of fulfillment involved in creating the person that we really wish to be is enough. For myself, I think this is of prime importance. Now that I've grown up, left college behind, and moved away from family (thank goodness), furry has taken on less of the escapist overtones and simply become the place where people can strive to be what they wish to be. Much of the psychological reasons for this were covered in JM's previous post on how our fursonas are happier than we are.

This was hammered home recently when I received word of a good friend's passing. Although he and I hadn't had much of a chance to interact in the past few years since he joined the army, prior to that he was someone that I looked up to and trusted in a sort of chosen-family, big-brother way. In fact, there are several people like that still in my life, those friends, usually older than myself, whom I sort of adopted as people to follow back when I was in that escapist mode. Thinking about this after my friend's death originally made me feel a little guilty, a little creepy; it honestly made

me feel like kind of a sad person for having been raised by a bunch of older gay guys pretending to be animal people in an Internet gay bar.

In the end, though, we all grow, change, and mature over time, and I think that I've come out alright. Rather than focusing on living a normal life online, I'm lucky enough to be living something like that in person in my own way, and my interactions with others through an avatar have reflected that. The death affected me deeply due to it being a rather blatant signal of that change, and now I know that I'm using the fandom more to help fulfill my needs to become what I want to be: not a fox person, per se, just my ideal self. This goal of fulfillment is something that I see in a lot of people within the fandom, too. Beyond simply playing an anthropomorphic animal, they are playing what they wish to become.

These are just a few of the important factors of draw to the fandom, of course. Part of the whole reason of [a][s]'s existence in the first place is to try to explore those factors. I had originally thought that it might have lasted for a few articles and then devolved into a current-events site, or maybe into just reviews of all the wonderful creations out there. The cool part about our subculture, however, is that we truly do become part of it, and for all sorts of reasons. These reasons, these draws, these subconscious aspects of our participation all shape the way we interact with each other through our chosen and created avatars, and help shape those avatars in turn on a very fundamental level. I encourage everyone to consider the subconscious aspects of why they are involved with the fandom: that sort of introspection is always quite valuable.

Chapter 12

October

12.1 Furrries and HIV

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HIV is scary.

This article is going to scare some people. Some will find it difficult to read because it makes them feel queasy. Some people won't click the "Continue reading" button due to fear.

Fear is a natural response. All people are naturally risk averse. We prefer to pretend that scary things like HIV don't exist. We prefer to be ignorant. We find the following topics uncomfortable:

- Furrries who are HIV positive.
- The incidence of HIV infection.
- The symptoms you'll experience if you contract HIV.

As Michael Harris, a gay Canadian journalist and author, wrote in 2011:

I live in fear because HIV is a cipher for everything that constrains my sexuality and my potential for happiness.

The furry community is often perceived to be at risk of a HIV outbreak because we are closely sexually interconnected, far more so than a normal social group. There are three main reasons for our close interconnectedness:

- Furrries don't strongly separate along gender or sexual preference lines. So a completely heterosexual furry male (or homosexual female) is likely to have a short route' for infection via a homosexual male.
- The furry community is relatively sexually active. Consider that the average American, aged 15 to 44, has had just five sexual partners (Ref).
- The furry community is fairly incestuous. This is because most furrries socialize within the community where sexual availability is high, and furrries often prefer to have sex (and relationships) with one another.

The best test of furry sexual interconnectedness that I am aware of is the Yiffchart, a social experiment conducted by Tursiae, an Australian furry. In 2007, Tursiae invited Australian furrries to list their furry sexual partners, with collated results presented anonymously in a chart. The charts shows furrries closely clustered together, with few degrees of separation' between any two

datapoints. The results are particularly striking given the large distances between cities in Australia and the voluntary (and therefore incomplete) data collection method.

You can see the Yiffchart here (<http://ofyc.thelair.org/>).

There are some HIV positive furies, too. I had a chat with Yama Roo, who is HIV positive and was happy to be quoted publicly here on [a][s] (thanks Yama). Yama contracted HIV through unprotected sex with a stranger outside of the fandom. As he puts it:

It was after a bad breakup, so I just went out looking for fun.

Yama has found that his HIV-positive status changed his relationships with other furies:

They usually run away when they hear the letters.

Yama's experience probably explains why the furry world has never experienced a significant HIV outbreak: our interconnectedness means that at-risk furies are likely to be identified by the community. Yama's responsible attitude towards disclosure ("*Anyone who knows me knows I'm HIV positive.*" "*I don't even let [furies] flirt with me online without knowing about it.*") is probably matched by the capacity of furies to gossip.

While furry's tight-knit community has provided some protection against HIV transmission to date, furies are placing themselves at risk by failing to practise safe sex.

I talked with Biramaye (@biramaye), an Australian furry, equality campaigner, and paid porn actor. He has noted the reluctance of many furies to use condoms, and thinks that furies should follow the gay community's example and embrace condom usage. As he puts it, there should be "recognition of social responsibility amongst the more promiscuous".

Biramaye's point, that sexually active furies have a responsibility to use condoms, is simple and compelling. The need for change is illustrated by this story from Yama (before he was infected), an example of today's furry world:

... we had a group of [furry] friends we played with. It was only those guys, and we all played bare because of it. One of them had a scare, and we all stopped playing for a while. He went outside of the group and it angered all of us. Still, instead of learning our lesson, we just stopped playing with that person (once we all tested negative for things) and started playing bare with each other again. It was pretty stupid.

Such attitudes are common within furry. Yama's candour is rare (and greatly appreciated), but his sexual experiences are not. As he says:

[Furies] think that as long as they play inside the fandom, they're safe. Hearing HIV makes them realise the reality and is a buzz kill, so they ignore it.

A large proportion of gay men are HIV positive. In major cities in North America (Ref), Western Europe, Australia & New Zealand (Ref), one in five men who have ever had gay sex are HIV positive. Worse, over 40% of these men do not know they are HIV positive (Ref).

This means that, assuming you live in a large western city:

- If you have had gay sex with four men, the chance you have been exposed to HIV is greater than 50%.
- It may statistically be safer to have sex with an HIV-positive man (with a condom) compared with a man who thinks he is negative (also with a condom). Men who are HIV-positive are likely to have sought medical treatment, and therefore have a much lower viral load than those who falsely believe they are negative.

Of course, exposure to HIV which I define as sexual contact with an HIV-positive person does not guarantee transmission. The transmission rate from unprotected anal sex is around 1% to 10% depending on viral load, dropping to close to zero if you use a condom.

If you have contracted HIV there are common physical symptoms which will usually occur together, two to four weeks later:

- A very high fever.
- A very sore throat.
- A whole body maculopapular rash, which is like heat rash or measles.

There are a few other symptoms which are common but not universal as the first three:

- aches and pains
- headache
- mouth ulcers and sores
- abdominal pain
- vomiting and diarrhoea

HIV is, of course, very easy to avoid: always use a condom.

Condom usage among gay men has become commonplace in the wake of the 1980s HIV/AIDS epidemic. Today, condoms are much more likely to be used in homosexual intercourse than heterosexual intercourse, to the point that only around half of new HIV infections result from male-to-male sexual contact (Ref). This is despite the much greater risk of contracting HIV through gay sex, and that's not just because a homosexual sex partner is (much) more likely to be HIV-positive:

- HIV transmission rates are higher for anal sex than for vaginal sex.
- Transmission rates are much higher when the penetrative partner is HIV-positive. This means that HIV transmission from women to men is rare.

Condoms as a normal part of gay sexual contact is reinforced by many facets of gay culture. This includes fantasy representations of gay sex the porn.

Condom usage is depicted in 80% of gay porn scenes, compared with 3% of straight scenes. Gay porn scenes without condom usage are typically marked as being unusual by the term 'bareback', and some gay male audiences regard such scenes as 'viewing death on the screen' (Ref).

Such depictions help make condoms an expected element of gay sexual contact. There is an argument that increased visibility of condoms in furry art would similarly normalize their usage among furries. As Biramaye puts it: "most [furry] art is bareback fantasy".

Yama's experiences also suggest that depictions of furry sexual contact should include condoms more often:

As for the furry fandom, it seems for us majority of the fandom works off of innocence. We came into the fandom young, we have cute characters, and cute words for things. We don't fuck, we yiff. We snuggle, we cuddle, we're very open about the innocence and the cuteness of it. I think a lot of the fandom chooses not to believe in HIV because it destroys that feeling. We all go off to a fantasy land. Furries (in art and stories mostly) don't get HIV. They fuck who they want, and they have fun, and they don't have to worry about consequences.

Most of the fandom is done on the internet, and in the mind. It's an escape, and it has a world of its own. The unfortunate side effect of that is thinking that a mental escape also equals a physical one. We can choose to ignore the social rules of the regular world all we want, that's the mental aspect, but you can't physically remove your body from the rules that govern it. I think that's where things go wrong, and I think that's why most furs "choose" to ignore that STDs even exist.

Furry art, of course, is often set in a world where condom usage would be anachronistic (such as in a medieval setting) or otherwise out of place. However much furry art is 'real world' enough to include condoms. Based on a keyword search of e621.net, I estimate that condoms are depicted in less than 1% of penetrative furry porn although, happily, such depictions show condoms in a positive context: either as a fetish item or as a positive part of the seduction process.

Condoms sometimes appear in the written furry world too: [adjective][species]'s own Kyell Gold uses them at times in his novels, including in the upcoming *Out Of Position 3*.

Yama goes further:

I think [increased depiction of condoms in furry art] would only be a small start. One of the main ways furries interact and see each other is at conventions. I think cons should, for one, hand out condoms. The second thing they should do at conventions is have a safe sex panel. Possibly even have someone who is dealing with HIV who is willing to talk at the panel. I think in person, real life awareness, is the first step to getting the word out. The Internet can be ignored, but if someone who you're talking to has it, and is telling you their stories, it's harder to ignore. You can't just turn them off.

I agree. I started researching this article sceptical of the value of condom depiction in furry art, but become otherwise convinced as I learned more and chatted with other furries Yama and Biramaye in particular. Free condoms are handed out at many sci-fi conventions, a practice that should be emulated at furry conventions. The logic is compelling: normalization of condom usage will reduce HIV transmission rates within the furry community.

Hopefully this article is a small step in the right direction. I would like to encourage you to share this article among your furry friends and social groups: forums, Twitter, FA, whatever. I'm also curious to hear your thoughts and reactions you can comment below or contact me directly at jm@furrynet.com (email/MSN).

12.2 Fursuiting Magic

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A few years back, I had the opportunity during a large convention to converse with a fursuiter whose talents and antics I admired greatly. Long ago, you see, before furry was much of an organized fandom I was a suiter myself. As we spoke, just a few feet away two dogs and some sort of feline were playing gently with a little boy and girl, whose eyes were as big as saucers. All was going well until another suiter – who I’ll very carefully fail to describe – walked up, took his head off, and asked one of the dogs when the F he was going to come back to the room. And that, needless, to say, ended that. In a flash the moment was gone and the offended parents were dragging their screaming kids away.

“There ought to be a law against that,” I muttered.

“Yeah,” my friend replied. “Abuse of magic in the first degree.”

For fursuits are magical, you know. Anyone who’s ever worn one in public understands this, all the way to the innermost depths of their soul. The human mind is built to function via the complex interaction of symbols, and few objects carry more symbolic weight than a suit. Putting one on messes with your head – and those of others – by eliminating or masking all the cultural symbol-sets by which others understand at a glance who you are and how you fit in. Your hairstyle, your clothing, your posture and gait...even your face, the most important identifier of all, is whisked away. No one can even tell for sure if you’re male or female. All the social markers so vital to everyday hominid life are tossed to the winds, leaving all who see you adrift and in a state of vague unease.

The effect is double upon the suiter himself, however. When he looks in the mirror, he greets a total stranger. A blank slate, in other words, whose duty it is for him to fill out and bring to life. The “mask effect” is well known in psychological circles, so I won’t belabor it here. Suffice it to say instead that a good costume, particularly a whole-body one like most fursuits, is both liberating and exhilarating. For my own part, wearing one had the effect of sort of turning up the “contrast” knob on life. Everything became sharper edged, I grew more aware of my surroundings...Every second of every minute burned itself into my memory. I was alive, in short, fully and completely in a manner that I’ve never achieved in any other way. I wasn’t a very good fursuiter – in fact, I rather stank at it and that’s why I gave it up. Yet...those few hours I spent here and there in suit remain among the most intense memories of my life.

These mental/social identity-softening effects lie at the root of a fursuit’s magic, and also explain why it’s so powerful. Nothing affects how we see the universe more profoundly than our viewpoint, and nothing I can think of short of hallucinogens in massive doses does more to alter said viewpoint (on the part of the suiter and bystanders alike) than a fursuit.

This is particularly true of children, whose grasp on reality is still not yet all that firm to begin with. After all, are their TV screens not alive with capering animals who smile and laugh and play? The jump from reality to fantasy is much smaller for them, so that the mere sight of a decently-made fursuit can transport them into a sort of delightful alternate world.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” I can hear my patient readers thinking just about now. “We all know that clowns and such have a special role in society, and that it’s wrong to break the illusion and ruin the magic.” But... As furries, I suspect we’ve grown a bit jaded to the wonder of it all. We tend to forget how powerful our magic is, like the unnamed fursuiter in my opening example, and abuse it with more terrible effects than we know.

Back when I fursuited, the only venues available were kid-related activities. The first major one I “worked” was playing the Easter Bunny at an orphanage for abused little girls. It was a pretty tough gig, because most of the residents were in their teens and thought a guy in a bunnysuit was about the uncoolest thing possible. But one little girl about six or seven years old – I’ll call her “Alice” – met me with wide eyes and asked “Are you a real rabbit?”

“Of course!” I reassured her. Then for the next hour she prattled on and on with me about what it was like to be a bunny while I improvised. “Of course I eat grass! But only cooked grass – I’m a civilized rabbit!” Then the Easter Egg hunt was finally held, and while Alice was off hunting eggs (she won!) the orphanage’s counselors closed in on me en-masse and demanded to know what I’d been talking to her so long and intently about. At first I was angry – it sounded like they were accusing me of something pretty terrible.

“No!” they explained. “It’s not that at all. You see, she was terribly abused about six months ago, and hasn’t said a single word to anyone since.”

When Alice came back with first prize she was still full of chatter, and when I left she was energetically telling her counselors all about me. Half of them were crying.

And so was I.

So... Fursuits are magic of a very special and sacred kind. No one will ever convince me otherwise. Not only that, but they’re potent. Those wearing them carry deep obligations to use their powers responsibly. Far too few seem to understand this, in my book.

And the fursuiter who used the F-word in front of children with his head off in public? He told me to F myself a few minutes later, when I tried to explain my concerns. It’s too bad that every story can’t have a happy ending.

12.3 Talkin' About Our Generation

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This is an edited reprint of an article that first appeared in Anthro #11.

It sometimes feels like I've tried to spend most of the last ten years of my life trying to explain the fast-growing Anthropomorphic Animal, or 'Furry', phenomenon to outsiders. Yet the trend absolutely begs explanation. Attendance at furry-themed events is doubling roughly every three years, fur-fans (or, simply, 'furs') are becoming a highly-visible presence in many online communities, and more and more anthro-themed marketing campaigns appear every day.

So what's behind the sudden explosion? There have always been anthro-themed ad campaigns, as any consumer of breakfast cereals can testify. Practically all of us grew up with Tony the Tiger, Toucan Sam, and Sugar Bear. Nor are anthro characters anything new in entertainment, as attested to by Tom Cat, Jerry Mouse, Pepe le Pew, and Speedy Gonzales. Children have been sleeping with stuffed animals at least since the time of Teddy Roosevelt, and as early as 1922 they were common enough to serve as a powerful literary symbol in the classic story *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Even long before modern times, humanized animal characters occupied an honored place in the human heart; where would Aesop have been without them?

Yet there's clearly a new dynamic at work today. Artists have drawn anthropomorphic creatures before, but never in such mind-boggling variety, or to such an appreciative audience. And, more pertinent to the blog you're currently reading, writers have written tales in which half-animals appear since the very beginning of things. But never before has the usage of such characters been so widespread or executed so skillfully. Never before, in other words, have authors so openly and unashamedly incorporated anthropomorphic characters into works intended for adults, written with an adult level of depth and sophistication. Or, at least, it's never happened frequently enough to be noticeable as an artform in and of itself.

Which brings us right back to our original question. Why now? Why is furry fiction taking off and growing legs today, after lying near-dormant for so long? Why are the adventures of cartoon-like bunnies suddenly acceptable as the stuff of serious novels, instead of for Saturday-morning-only consumption? There are two important and largely unrelated reasons for this, I think.

Everyone knows that children are very open to the power of suggestion. During childhood the human mind develops like nothing else in nature, desperately attempting to gather and incorporate everything it needs in order to master the environment around it. This adaptive process runs far deeper than merely mastering the art of counting to ten and learning that cows go moo-moo. In one key phase of development, for example, infants become obsessed with the human face and will spend hours either staring at the faces of others or else scrawling increasingly human-like

visages on whatever surfaces happen to be handy. During this period the child is among other things learning what is human and what isn't, not just how to read faces but what a face is and what it represents. The child is, in short, defining itself as a member of a group of others like it. Yet it is during this same key developmental period that children are perhaps most exposed to anthropomorphic animal images in the forms of stuffed animals, picture-books, and animated films. Furthermore, the level of exposure has increased dramatically both in volume and 'quality' (via television, DVD player and VCR) over time. Would it be any wonder if, surrounded by more and more anthro images during a critical developmental stage, kids began to blur the lines a little in learning what is human and what is not? Would it take a miracle for a substantial and growing percentage of kids raised in this way to grow up feeling most at home interpreting and understanding the universe through the eyes of half-animal characters? Might children raised in such an environment develop an otherwise inexplicable attraction to anthropomorphic art and fiction as adults? Indeed, wouldn't it be even more surprising if, exposed to such a saturation of anthropomorphic characters at such an impressionable age, said characters didn't come to play an important role in their inner lives?

The second key factor behind the new explosion of interest is, I believe, the Internet. For the first time, people who admire serious anthropomorphic art and literature have been able to find one another and share their creations. The pent-up potential is finally being released, and the result is the veritable explosion you see today in the anthropomorphic arts.

Furry art is still not for everyone. However, it does seem to be for more and more of us every year. Given the stratospheric average IQ among the furs I know and their tendency towards careers in professions such as IT and the sciences, it's fair to say that the cultural impact of anthropomorphic art is not only well out of proportion to the numbers involved but continually rising. Today, for example, ethicists blanch at the idea of merging human and animal characteristics via engineering. But tomorrow, who knows?

The future may be closer than you think. And it just may be brought to you by a guy who likes to look at pictures of horses walking around on two legs...

12.4 How to Win the Game of the Internet

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Life is too short to worry about the Internet.

Don't get me wrong, the Internet is awesome. All my best friends are from the Internet. The Internet helped prompt me into writing and drawing and creative adventures. The Internet is just fantastic.

However, the Internet is also huge and amorphous and weird and can sometimes cause people to do dumb things. The Internet is people throwing thoughts into the void. Thanks to things like Twitter and Facebook and e-mail and IM, some of those thoughts are countered with more thoughts, and so forth ad infinitum. That social network of thoughts and counter-thoughts is the foundation of the Internet.

Thoughts can be written ideas, pieces of art, recorded music, a link to an article or cute puppy GIF. Counter-thoughts (CTs), the reaction to thoughts, which can be in the form of page views, or comments, or replies, or retweets, or follows. For some people, if they do not get those CTs to their thoughts, it means they are failing at the Internet and they must rectify it by any means necessary to win the Game of the Internet.

Spoilers: The Game of the Internet does not exist. All those followers and page views and comments you collect are not points towards anything but some archaic scoreboard in your imagination. If you're going to use your imagination for something, write a story about a cute bunny with an ax.

Yes, getting CTs from people is nice. I've been there.

A long time ago, before I was a northwoods raccoon in Wyoming, I lived in the middle of nowhere in the North, no friends in Real Life, and the Internet was my connection the outside world. There so many new and shiny things there. I loved a movie, there was a group of people on the Internet who also liked that movie. I enjoyed a book series, there was a group of people on the Internet I could discuss it with (you peeps really need to read the Redwall series if you haven't already). The Internet, a magical place at the time, gave me a portal to people who were like me.

I thought the Internet brought justification to my existence. I drew art which I thought was Amazing. I wrote LiveJournal entries that I thought were Poignant. I posted random comments on forums that were Awesome (because random is funny, right?).

Spoilers: I was a dumb kid who didn't know how to socialize.

This went on for a few years. I refreshed every few minutes to check my page views on deviantArt. I wrote LiveJournal entries and hoped for comments. I wrote dozens of forum comments and hoped for replies. This went on until I wrote a entry about how I never got any comments and

poor-pitiful-me. Then, one of my LiveJournal followers (have no idea why they were following me, come to think of it), came out called me a “comment whore”.

This was the bucket of cold water a dumb kid needed at the time. Some might have brushed this off and thought it was someone mean just saying something mean because they were a meanie head. I took it to heart, and reevaluated my stance on the Internet. I looked at how I was acting on the Internet and realized not only was a jerk, but I was miserable too. I wasn't even being myself. I was being a creature who was feeding off counter-thoughts, being a self-entitled jerk to all I interacted with.

That was a turning point in my life on the Internet. I realized that counter-thoughts meant nothing in the grand scheme of life. Comments and replies could be appreciated, but they were not necessary for Internet happiness. As long as I could be myself online and put things online I was happy with, that was enough. I look back at my past contributions and think how funny it was that I drew a killer-burrito, rather than thinking how few comments or views it got (I totally should commission a Mexican Wolf with a killer-burrito at some point).

These days I play a raccoon on the Internet, and though I still have dumb raccoon moments, I try to be a good fluffbutt ringtail. Though, as I've grown older, and entered the furry fandom, I still struggle sometimes with premise of Internet popularity.

Some people think the goal of the Game of the Internet is to be “popular” and in the furry fandom, some percieve the way to be “popular” is to make “popular” friends. Or, as they are known in the furry fandom, “popufurs” (a phrase that annoys me to no end).

Admittedly, I've sent things to people that I regret. I've sent things to people I admire that I really regret. I understand talking to people you admire is tricky. I still put my footpaw in my mouth every single time I go to a furry convention dealer's den. Just remember that supposed popufurs are just Normal Fuzzies. They aren't different than anyone else except they are perceived to be more talented and therefore more popular than you. Most importantly, being friends with them does not make you popular.

It won't change your life to be friends with a supposed popufur. And you're not going to be friends if you try to force yourself into being friends with every single popufur you want to be friends with. Friendships are something that happens when they happen. You can't predict a good friendship. I have met supposedly popufur people who are just really nice people. I have met some who are jerks. I've become friends with a very select few furies, and always ALWAYS based on if they are a good person rather than if they are a popufur. Honestly, you'd be happier interacting with a good-natured wolverine who's obscure in the fandom than forcing yourself to be friend with a jerky platypus because they are a popufur (apologies to any platypui out there).

The friends you have don't make you popular. You, make you popular. You do that by being yourself, doing something you love, keep going forward, and not caring about being popular.

Simple as that.

Popufur or not, just treat furries as furries. Yes, there are jerks on the Internet, but that doesn't give you the right to be a jerk yourself. Just because there are untold distances and a cute wolf avatar between you and the Internet denizens does not give you the right to be a jerk. You may be a jerk and not know it, like I was, but you can still change. Be willing to take criticism. Sometimes it's worth taking into account. I'm not saying take someone seriously who calls you a "stupid stupidhead". I am saying evaluate if there may be some credence to some claims.

Worrying about if certain people respond to certain things in certain ways does nothing. If someone responds: great. But really doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things. The only thing that's gonna happen if you berate someone for not responding is drama. And with drama comes a reputation. And I don't think anyone wants a reputation flavored by drama.

If someone on the Internet does not respond to you it means a few things: either A) they have life and cannot respond to everything B) they can't think of anything to respond to it with or C) they are avoiding you because you kept berating them for not responding to you because of A or B. I like to imagine they are doing D) having a grand adventure away from the computer. (It's hard to get angry at someone not responding because they are trying to steal cookies from Santa's Workshop with the help of a rogue reindeer.)

There are not many people out there who don't respond with the express purpose of wrecking your life.

There is no Game of the Internet, getting counter-thoughts does not justify your existence; just be yourself and be nice, and you might meet some nice people in the process. If you can realize that the Internet doesn't matter that much, you might just be a little happier.

Part III

About the Authors

[adjective][species] Staff

Makyo *hosting; programming; writing; editor-in-chief* – Makyo's been in furry under various names since sometime around 2000, running projects such as [adjective][species], The Furry Survey, and Characters @ Openfurry. She is usually to be found pretending to be an arctic fox and working in the software industry despite her degree in music composition.

JM *horse* – JM is a horse-of-all-trades who was introduced to furry in his native Australia by the excellent group known collectively as the Perthfurs. JM now helps run [adjective][species] from London, where he is most commonly spotted holding a pint and talking nonsense.

Klisoura *survey magic; sounding board; moral support* – Klisoura helps run the Furry Survey, and provides insight on the results for [adjective][species]. His page contains more of his musings, and is hosted on the Soviet Union's TLD, how awesome is that?

Zik *fish procurement strategies* – Zik is an otter who's been dabbling around the furry fandom for nearly a decade. When he isn't doing schoolwork, he spends time raging at videogames as well as hunting down music, art... and fish.

Rabbit *derived from a failed design for a folding bicycle* Rabbit is the author of over twenty published furry novels and novellas as well as numerous columns and articles in other furry venues. Hes a Tennessee auto worker.

Kyell *writer fox extraordinaire* Kyell is a fox, a writer, and a California resident. He likes to write stories of varying lengths, often (but not always) dealing with gay relationships and foxes. You can find information about his stories on his website, and read his blog for thoughts on furry fandom, writing, gay rights, and eagles, and for information on his upcoming books.

Lunostophiles *Cheshire cat* Lu has been in the fandom since he was 14, though Cheshire cat only came about seven years in. He is a creator, both of writing and of fibre arts, and sometimes pretends hes a musician. When he grows up, Lu wants to be a Time Lord, but until then, hes masquerading as an advice columnist and pop culture polyglot.

Shining River *greymuzzle* Shining River lives in the high lands of Utah and began participating in the furry community in 1998. Besides furry art and literature, he is interested in Scottish and Irish culture and Western American folk culture and history. You may see him in public performing with one or two of our local Scottish bagpipe bands.

Guest Contributors

Katzenjammer Katzenjammer is a fiction writer.

Calamari Calamari is a 3rd year Journalism student from Scotland that enjoys drinking excessively and writing when he gets around to it. He pretends he is an anthropomorphic dog and lives in a flat with two fridges. One of them doesn't work.

Geo Holms Geo is an excellent raccoon and creator of Loose Ferrets.

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